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## VOLUME 9, ARTICLE 21

**ARON PINKER,  
INTRUSION OF PTOLEMAIC REALITY ON CULTIC  
PRACTICES IN QOH 4:17**

## INTRUSION OF PTOLEMAIC REALITY ON CULTIC PRACTICES IN QOH 4:17

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### INTRODUCTION

Qohelet 4:17 strikes the reader as being composed of unrelated cola, which are abrupt and incomplete.<sup>1</sup> Zapletal called Qoh 4:17 in his commentary “eine Art crux interpretum.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed this seems to be the case when one reviews the translations and explanations that have been given. The verse reads

שָׁמַר רְגֵלֶיךָ כְּאִשֶּׁר תִּלְדָּ אֶל־בַּיִת הָאֱלֹהִים  
וְקָרֹב לִשְׁמֹעַ מִתַּת הַבְּסִילִים זָבַח  
כִּי־אֵינָם יוֹדְעִים לַעֲשׂוֹת רָע<sup>3</sup>  
רְגֵלֶיךָ קָרִי<sup>4</sup>

While none of the words that are used in the verse present any difficulties we are baffled by the situation referred to, the idea that Qohelet tried to convey, and the grammatical forms that he used.

The unit Qoh 4:17–5:6, to which our verse belongs, is located in the middle of the book and is distinguished by the topics (Temple worship, sacrifices, vows) that it discusses, which are not treated elsewhere in the book.<sup>5</sup> Earlier exegesis considered Qoh

<sup>1</sup> In some English Bibles this verse is 5:1.

<sup>2</sup> V. Zapletal, *Das buch Kobolet kritisch und metrisch untersucht, überstzt und erklärt* (Freiburg: Herder, 1911), 149.

<sup>3</sup> There is disagreement on the subdivision of the verse into cola. The BHS, following the Septuagint, subdivides the verse into three cola, ending the first colon at **לשמע**. Barton, following Siegfried, begins the second colon with **וקרוב** (G.A. Barton, *Book of Ecclesiastes* [ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1908], 124.) Zer-Kavod, following the MT, takes **לשמע וקרוב** as a separate colon (M. Zer-Kavod. *קהלת*. In *חמש מגילות* [Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1973], 29.)

<sup>4</sup> The Qere has the singular **רגלך**, which is supported by the Septuagint, Peshitta, Targum, Vulgate, and about 160 Hebrew MSS. For instance, in the Talmud we find **רגלך** in *b. Ber.* 23a, *y. Ber.* 4d, 14c; *y. Meg.* 71c, and *t. Ber.* (Lieberman) 6.19.

<sup>5</sup> L. Schweinhorst-Schönberger, *Nicht im Menschen gründet das Glück (Koh 2,24)*. Kohelet im Spannungsfeld jüdischer Weisheit und hellenistischer Philosophie (Freiburg: Herder, 1994), 136. Schweinhorst-Schönberger, finds the uniqueness of the unit in the following: (1) the Reader/Listener is for the first time directly addressed; (2) the word **אלהים** is used six times; (3) the unusual theme of religious behavior; and (4) the first occurring demand for fear of God.

4:17–5:6 incongruous with Qohelet’s skepticism, and took it to be an addition by a pious scribe.<sup>6</sup> For instance, Siegfried deletes 4:17–5:1 and McNeile and Podechard delete the entire unit 4:17 to 5:6 as a gloss.<sup>7</sup> Such wholesale deletion is obviously questionable and was correctly rejected by Barton.<sup>8</sup> Currently, a century later, the unit Qoh 4:17–5:6 is considered the pivotal section of the book, yet its meaning remains as baffling as it was.<sup>9</sup>

Not long ago, Fox aptly summed up the current status of Qoh 4:17 by saying: “All the proposals to explain the present text have been unpersuasive, and even so do not arrive at an appropriate

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<sup>6</sup> I.J.J. Spangenberg, “A Century of of Wrestling with Qohelet: The Research History of the Book Illustrated with a Discussion of Qoh 4,17–5,6” in A. Schoors (ed.), *Qohelet in the Context of Wisdom* (BETL, 138, Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1998), 84–85. Spangenberg provides an overview of a century long research effort on Qohelet using paradigm shifts, and illustrates his approach with an analysis of Qoh 4:17–5:6.

<sup>7</sup> D.C. Siegfried, *Prediger und Hoheslied übersetzt und erklärt* (HAT; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1898), 49; A.H. McNeile, *An Introduction to Ecclesiastes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1904), 25; E. Podechard, *L’Ecclesiastes* (Paris: Gabalda, 1912), 142–170. For instance, Podechard (334) says: “Ce développement contraste fortement avec ce qui précède et ce qui suit, et il est impossible de lui trouver un rapport quelconque avec l’ensemble du livre.”

<sup>8</sup> Barton, *Book of Ecclesiastes*, 124. Barton says: “McNeile regards these verses as the work of the Chasid glossator, and Siegfried assigns vvs. 1 and 2 to Q5—a term which covers a mass of glosses. One with so keen an eye for glosses as Haupt has, however, regarded vvs. 1 and 2 as genuine. Really the whole section, except vv 3 [Heb. 2] and 7a [Heb. 6a], is Qohelet’s work. Because he held a Sadducean point of view, he was not prevented from speaking of religion.” Jastrow felt that except of the last four words the entire unit was written by the original author (M. Jastrow, *A Gentle Cynic, Being a Translation of the Book of Koheleth, Commonly Known as Ecclesiastes, Stripped of Later Additions, also its Origin, Growth, and Interpretation*. [Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1919], 217). Gordis observes: “That the passage is authentically Koheleth’s is clear, not only from the vocabulary (בית האלהים, not ביתה, כסיל, למנה) ..., but also from the use of a rhetorical question in 5:5 (cf. 7:16, 17)” (R. Gordis, *Koheleth – The Man and his world, a study of Ecclesiastes* [New York: Schocken Books, 1968], 246)

<sup>9</sup> T. Hieke, “Wie hast du’s mit der Religion? Sprechhandlungen und Wirkintentionen in Kohelet 4,17–5,6” in A. Schoors (ed.) *Qohelet in the Context of Wisdom*, 320. Hieke says: “Daß der Abschnitt Koh 4,17–5,6 zum Grundbestand des Buches gehört, wird heute nicht mehr bestritten.” For instance, it is believed that the unit suggests that Qohelet was not a tradition loyal religious Jew, but a critical sage who remained within the limits of a universal immanence (See D. Michel, “‘Unter der Sonne.’ Zur Immanenz bei Qohelet” in *Qohelet in the Context of Wisdom*, 104–111). Hossfeld argues that Qohelet advocates a religious mediocracy (F.-L. Hossfeld, “Die theologische Relevanz des Buches Qohelet” in L. Schweinhorst-Schönberger (ed.) *Das Buch Kohelet* [BZAW, 254; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1997], 385).

meaning.”<sup>10</sup> Despite the verse’s obvious incoherence and disjoint structure, Fox still felt that “... the essential message is clear: behave carefully in the temple, for obedience to God is better than the sacrifices fools bring. To be sure, obedience is better than anyone’s sacrifice (1 Sam 15:22). Qohelet is warning against misbehavior in the cult, and is only incidentally associating such behavior with fools.”<sup>11</sup> This perception is variously shared by many commentators, though it is difficult to anchor this cultic perspective in the text.

Much exegetical effort was dedicated to the last colon, **כִּי־אִינָם יוֹדְעִים לַעֲשׂוֹת רָע**. The rationale that it presents is not understandable if its subject is **הַכְּסִילִים**, and it does not properly characterize the Kesil (**כְּסִיל**).<sup>12</sup> It would seem that if the **כְּסִילִים** do not know to do evil their sacrifice should be a proper one, and in the wisdom literature they certainly know to do evil. On the other hand it is not obvious what other subject could this colon possibly have. The last colon has been variously emended already by the *Versions*, in an attempt to dilute its clearly positive tenor.<sup>13</sup> We shall see that the other cola also pose significant difficulties.

Certainly, on one level the unit Qoh 4:17–5:6 deals with prudent behavior with regard to making vows in the Temple and proper trepidation toward God. The terms **בֵּית הָאֱלֹהִים**, **זִבַּח**, **זִבַּח הָאֱלֹהִים**, **מִלְאָךְ**, **נָדַר לַאֱלֹהִים**, **אֱלֹהִים בַּשָּׁמַיִם**, **לִפְנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים**, and **הָאֱלֹהִים יִרְאֶה**, as well as an almost exact quote from Deut 23:22–24 in 5:3, provide a high density of cultic terminology for a section consisting of seven verses, naturally suggesting a cultic setting and theme. This framework is also supported by the intertextual similarities between Qoh 4:17–5:6 and the Jacob-Bethel tradition (Gen 28:10–22, 31:13, 35:1, 7, and 14)<sup>14</sup> and the Solomonic tradition (1 Kgs 5–9).<sup>15</sup> From this perspective the unit is made up

<sup>10</sup> M.V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down & A Time to Build Up* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1999), 230.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> I use the term Kesil because I do not believe that ‘fool’ properly describes the **כְּסִיל** in the Book of Qohelet.

<sup>13</sup> Hence the two readings of the Septuagint **οὐκ εἰδότες τοῦ ποιῆσαι κακόν** and **καλόν**, and **אָרוֹם לִיתִיהוֹן יִדְעִין לַמַּעֲבָד בְּהוֹן בֵּין טַב לְבִישׁ** in the Targum. See also the rendering of the Syriac **ܘܟܠܗܘܢ ܠܗ ܘܟܠܗܘܢ ܠܗܘܢ ܠܗܘܢ**.

<sup>14</sup> R. Fidler, “Qoheleth in ‘the House of God’: text and intertext in Qoh 4:17–5:6 (Eng. 5:1–7).” in *HS* 47 (2006), 7–21 and in particular p. 10. Fidler points to the following similarities: **בֵּית אֱלֹהִים** in Gen 28:17 and 22, and similarly in Qoh 4:17; **חִלּוֹם** in Gen 28:12–16, and similarly in Qoh 5:21 and 6a; **שָׁמַר** and **הִלַּךְ** are used in Gen 28:5, and similarly in Qoh 4:17; **שָׁמַיִם** and **אָרֶץ** in Gen 28:12, and similarly in Qoh 5:1bα; **מִלְאָךְ** in Gen 31:11, and similarly in Qoh 5:5; **יִרְאֶה** in Gen 28:17, and similarly in Qoh 5:6; **נָדַר** in Gen 28:20–22 and 31:13, and similarly in Qoh 5:3–4; and, **זִבַּח** in Gen 35:7, and similarly in Qoh 4:17.

<sup>15</sup> L. Perdue, *Wisdom and Creation: The Theology of Wisdom Literature* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 222–223. Perdue finds a natural connection between Qohelet’s warnings and instructions about cultic activity in the

of admonitions along with motive clauses dealing with sacrifice (4:17), prayers (5:1–2), and vows (5:3–6).<sup>16</sup>

Yet, it should be noted that **אלהים** and **מלאך** could have a non-cultic meaning ('Godlike' and 'messenger'). This is also true for **נדר**, ('promise'), **שמים**, ('up, above'), and **זבח**, which can figuratively mean words of personal prayer (**ושלמה פרים שפתינו**), Hos 14:3), vows viewed as votive sacrifices, or a gift as costly as a **זבח**. From this perspective a similar sub-division of the section can be made with somewhat different titles: restraint of promise (4:17), control of expression (5:1–2), and keeping promises (5:3–6). Thus, it is possible that another level, which is entirely non-cultic, coexists with the cultic level enriching the text by its thematic duality and interplay.

In this study we try to show that though the unit Qoh 4:17–5:6 is couched in cultic terms of a visit to the Temple, to make a vow, interpret a dream, and perhaps pray, it also contains allusions to the Ptolemaic reality of spies and informers who helped the administration to exact heavy taxes. In this sense do we have to understand in particular Qoh 4:17, 5:1a, 5:2, and 5:5.

Qohelet warns his audience that when one goes to the Temple he should be aware if he is followed and if who follows him is near to him and listens on to his vow, dream, or prayer in the Temple. He should also be aware of the saying that "the gift of fools is a sacrifice, for they do not know what to do," and not make exaggerated promises. This prudent advice against exaggeration probably reflects the modalities of the oppressive life in the Greek period, which was rife with many spies and informers who exploited extravagant vows and disclosures made in the Temple (or elsewhere) for the extraction of heavy taxes or confiscation of property to the crown, and thus pocketed a third of the property's value.<sup>17</sup>

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Temple and Solomon's speech on God omnipresence in 1 Kgs 8:27–30. There are also obvious intertextual similarities between the two texts. For instance, both texts (1 Kgs 5:15–9:25, 8:12–53, 8:27, 3:5 and Qoh 4:17, 5:1, 2, 6) deal with a temple with sacrifices, hearing, wordy prayer, divine residence in heaven, and a dream. See also H. Tita, "Ist die thematische Einheit Koh 4,17–5,6 eine Anspielung auf Salomoerzählung? Aporien der Religionskritischen Interpretation." *BN* 84 (1996), 92–100.

<sup>16</sup> A. Lauha, *Kohelet*. (BKAT, 19; Neukirchen-Vluy: Neukirchener Verlag, 1978), 97.

<sup>17</sup> V. Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization and the Jews* (New York, NY: Athenaeum, 1999), 142. Tcherikover says: "The crafty and resourceful tax-collector, the powerful and unscrupulous business man, was the spiritual father of the Jewish Hellenizing movement, and throughout the entire brief period of the flourishing of Hellenism in Jerusalem, lust for profit and pursuit of power were among the most pronounced marks of the new movement."

### ANALYSIS

The Temple in Jerusalem traditionally served not only for statutory sacrifices, but many activities that were relevant to the daily lives of the nation and ordinary people occurred there. People often prayed at cultic sites about their personal problems and made there vows. As in Solomon's Temple the importance of animal sacrifices continued also in the Second Temple. However, we witness in the Second Temple a gradual acceptance of prayers in lieu of Temple sacrifices.

Qohelet 4:17 deals with two kinds of individuals: anyone going to the Temple, and the Kesilim who offer animal sacrifices. Some felt that mentioning the זבח of the Kesilim implies that the purpose of going to the Temple was for making a sacrifice. However, except of Qoh 4:17 sacrifices are not mentioned in any of the verses in the unit 4:17–5:6. On the other hand terms associated with speech or vows are used in each of the verses in the unit. The context and the language used in the unit 4:17–5:6 make it reasonable to assume that 4:17 is Qohelet's advice to a person who goes to the Temple to pray and make a vow.

The seemingly simple phrase שמר רגליך (lit. *guard your feet/foot*) has been given a range of meanings from obedience to God's commandments to proper ritual practices. Thus, it was evident to Ginsburg that "by the admonition *keep thy feet* is meant that they should be *straight*, and running in the way of God, commandments: or, in other words, that the individual should be obedient; and that it has no reference whatever to the ancient custom of disalcation when entering upon the performance of religious ordinances (Exod. iii. 6; Josh. v. 15)."<sup>18</sup> On the other hand Gordis understood the phrase as advising "Do not run thoughtlessly and over-frequently to the Temple," something akin to the advice given in Prov 25:17 (הוקר רגלך מבית רעד) with regard to human relations.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> C.D. Ginsburg, *Cobelet, Commonly Called the Book of Ecclesiastes*. (London: Longman, 1861), 335. Ginsburg says: "Like all other terms employed in ordinary life to describe the physical world, the expressions *way*, or *path*, *foot*, and *walking*, have been transferred to our moral life. Hence the way of the Lord, i.e., the path of obedience ordained by and leading to the Lord, wherein the righteous walk, thus also becoming their way (Ps 1:6, 5:9, 18:21, 25:4, 27:11, 119:1, 33, 128:1). Sinners have their way, which runs counter to the commandments of God (Judg 2:19; Job 22:15; Ps. 1:1, 6, 146:9; Prov 2:12, 4:19, 12:26), and leads to misery (Prov 7: 27). Obedience is therefore described as 'running in the way of Gods commandments' (Ps 119:32); and, as the *foot* is the chief instrument in this race, its attitude and movements are used to indicate the moral acts of man."

<sup>19</sup> Gordis, *Man and his World*, 247. Gordis thinks that "Kohleth reflects here the proto-Sadducean upper-class viewpoint, which regards the Temple as essential to the accepted order, and therefore required. ... Yet undue enthusiasm for the Temple, as manifested for example by the Psalmists (27:4 ff.; 42:2 ff.; 84:11), is not 'good form'."

Fox's position is somewhere in between these two, considering the first colon as counseling prudence in the temple generally. He says: "The idiom *šmor ragleyka* (qere: *rglk*, sg.), lit. 'Guard your feet,' means to behave with care (Tur-Sinai); hence: 'tread carefully,' 'be careful what you do.' Compare Ps 119:101 and especially Ps 26:12, where 'my foot stands on level ground' is equivalent to 'and I walk in my innocence' (v. 11); see further Job 23:11; 31:5; and Prov 4:27 ('remove your foot from evil'). ... The basic idea of *šmor ragleyka* is rephrased at the end of this unit by *'et ha'elohim yera* 'fear God.'"<sup>20</sup> This position is in line with that of the Peshitta: "Let your conduct be seemly." Perdue, however, sensed a more ominously context for Qohelet's warning: "Caution ... should characterize one's activity in the cultic realm, for it is the place where destruction, not life sustaining blessing, may occur."<sup>21</sup> Neither of these views has a basis in the text.

The phrase שמר רגליך/רגלך is a *hapax legomenon*. The only other collocations of שמר and רגל are Prov 3:26, 1 Sam 2:9 (11 Prov 2:8?). In both Prov 3:26 and 1 Sam 2:9 it is God who keeps *man's* feet from misadventure, and this does not illuminate what *guard your feet/foot* entails when it is man who does the guarding of his own feet. Ginsburg's view naturally raises the question "Why should one be in particular obedient on the way to the Temple, or in it?" Isn't 'obedience to God' a trait to be practiced at all times? Also Gordis' understanding of שמר רגליך/רגלך cannot be correct. A closer reading of the text shows that the advice שמר רגליך/רגלך is applied to a situation in which one walks to or is already in the Temple. Thus the frequency of this situation is of no relevance. Obviously, Fox's general admonition of "behave yourself in the Temple" is too general and vague for a comparative distinction with a specific act of the Kesil described in the text that follows.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Fox, *A Time to Tear*, 230.

<sup>21</sup> L.G. Perdue, *Wisdom and Cult: A Critical Analysis of the views of Cult in the Wisdom Literatures of Israel and the Ancient Near East* (SBLDS, 30; Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1977), 182. Fidler (12) detects in Qoh 4:17a an 'ironic streak': "Rather than rely on the blessing popularly believed to emanate from the house of God or on the divine protection traditionally extended to its visitors, ... the addressee is better advised to be his own guard, against none other than the dangers and follies lurking in his temple visit." The specific nature of the 'dangers' and 'follies', however, is not explicated.

<sup>22</sup> Fox, *A Time to Tear*, 230. Fox seems aware of this problem. He says: "Qohelet is warning against misbehavior in the cult, and is only incidentally associating such behavior with fools. A similarly superfluous addition of 'fools' appears in Qoh 7:5." Both contentions seem too cavalier. The abrupt וקרוב לשמע and the difficult last colon make any opinion on the role of the Kesil's acts in this verse very tenuous, and the parallelism in 7:4 casts significant doubt on the view that the second colon in 7:5 is superfluous.

Midrash Qohelet Rabba learned from שמר רגליך that a person is not allowed to enter the Temple mount with dust on his feet (ולא יכנס אדם להר הבית... ובאבק שעל רגליו).<sup>23</sup> A similar notion was suggested by Plumptre: “To ‘keep the foot’ was to walk in the right way, the way of reverence and obedience (Ps. cxix. 32, 101). The outward act of putting the shoes off the feet on entering the Temple (Exod. iii. 51 Josh. v. 15), from the earlier times to the present, the custom of the East, was the outward symbol of such a reverential awe.”<sup>24</sup> Qara explained שמר רגליך by “keep away from sin” *before* going to the house of God.<sup>25</sup> Kohen understood the phrase as “watch your habits,” where רגליך is assumed to be a form of רגיל, “used to” (Hos 11:3 and frequently in NH).<sup>26</sup> Jastrow rendered שמר רגליך “observe thy pilgrimages,” a reference to the three festivals (שְׁלֹשׁ רְגָלִים) during the year, when it was customary for those living outside of Jerusalem to pay a visit to the temple.<sup>27</sup> Gordis considers the emendation of רגליך to רגליך, ‘thy feasts,’ as being “untenable.”<sup>28</sup> Tur-Sinai says “It is easy to see that the main difficulties in this verse are: Why should you watch your feet particularly when you go to the house of God? Is it dangerous in Qohelet’s opinion to go to the house of God? And what is the connection between the house of God—and the fools, who אינם יודעים לעשות רע? It is not difficult, in my view, to realize that not about going to the house of God, האלים, does the verse speak here, but it warns: שמר רגליך כאשר תלך אל בית האלים; since about the אווילים, the fools, does it speak here.”<sup>29</sup> Seow does not explain the phrase, apparently assuming its meaning obvious.<sup>30</sup> Hertzberg

<sup>23</sup> See *Qoh. Rab.* on 4:17; see also *y. Ber.* 14c and cf. *y. Ber.* 4.c.

<sup>24</sup> E.H. Plumptre, *Ecclesiastes; or The Preacher, with notes and introduction* (Cambridge: Univ. Press, 1888), 145.

<sup>25</sup> B.R. Einstein, *Josef Kara und sein Kommentar zu Kobolet* (Berlin: Ud. Mampe, 1886), Part B, 21. Qara assumes that the purpose of the visit to the house of God is prayer. In another explanation he uses the *qere* in the sense of רגיל “accustomed,” rendering “don’t become accustomed to go to the Temple bringing sin and trespass offerings.

<sup>26</sup> J. Kohen, *Divrei Chefetz, Commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes* (Vilno: Finn, 1864), 30. See for instance, *b. Ber* 40a, *’Abot* 4:13, etc.

<sup>27</sup> Jastrow, *Cynic*, 216. Jastrow translates: “Observe thy pilgrimages to the house of God but draw nigh to hear, rather than to have fools offer a sacrifice, for they do not know enough to do any harm.” He seems to take ‘thy pilgrimages’= כאשר תלך רגליך, which is odd.

<sup>28</sup> Gordis, *Man and his World*, 247. The emendation has been also adopted by Ehrlich.

<sup>29</sup> N.H. Tur-Sinai, *הלשון והספר* Vol. הספר (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1960), 405–406. This is my translation from Hebrew.

<sup>30</sup> C.-L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*. (AB, 18C; Yale: Yale Univ. Press, 2008), 193. Seow notes the parallels between our verse and a bilingual inscription found at Ugarit, *One who acknowledges no guilt rushes to his god, Without thinking he quickly raises his hands (in prayer) to the god. ... his guilt... A man in ignorance rushes to his god.* (W.G. Lambert [ed.], *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1960], 116, lines 10–13). Perhaps one can surmise that

revocalizes the imperative שִׁמְר as an infinitive שָׁמַר, in line with תת. It is obvious from this partial overview of the exegesis that the difficulty of the phrase שִׁמְר רִגְלִיךָ/רִגְלֶךָ forced commentators into taking untenable positions.

The four solid facts with regard to the phrase שִׁמְר רִגְלִיךָ/רִגְלֶךָ are:

- a) The phrase שִׁמְר רִגְלִיךָ/רִגְלֶךָ is a *hapax legomenon*;
- b) Collocations of שִׁמְר and רִגַל deal with entrapment (or, misadventure);
- c) The phrase שִׁמְר רִגְלִיךָ/רִגְלֶךָ is conditioned on כִּאֲשֶׁר תֵּלֵךְ אֶל בֵּית הָאֱלֹהִים;<sup>31</sup> and,
- d) Commentators were unable to convincingly link the cola in the verse.

This suggests that a new interpretation should be sought exploring the possibility that the first colon alludes to entrapment.

The word קָרֹב in the phrase וְקָרֹב לְשִׁמְעָה can be viewed as an infinitive absolute (*Piel*) or an adjective. Some ancient authorities (Aquila, Peshitta, Vulgate) as well as modern scholars (Coverdale, Hodgson, Rosenmüller, De Wette, Knobel, Hitzig, Elster, Vaihinger, Delitzsch, Wright, Jastrow, Longman, Zer-Kavod, etc.) have taken it as the infinitive absolute substituting for the imperative, or as the infinitive used as a subject (König, Stuart, Barton, Knobel, Delitzsch, Wright, Nowack, Zöckler, Vlock, Haupt, Crenshaw, Schule, Lauha, etc.). However, the infinitive absolute of קָרַב is not attested anywhere else in the Hebrew Bible. Moreover, such an understanding does not agree with the comparative מִתֵּת קָרֹב, is always an *adjective* or is used for *comparison*. Consequently, it seems more proper to consider קָרֹב an adjective (Qara, Ginsburg, Hengstenberg, Plumptre, etc.).<sup>32</sup> For instance, Gordis following Seidel takes קָרֹב as the adjective ‘better.’<sup>33</sup> Fox felt that “*Qarob* apparently means ‘near to God’s favor,’ ‘acceptable.’”<sup>34</sup> Graetz suggested emending וְקָרֹב into לְקָרִיב

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Qohelet advises against rushing to the ‘house of God.’ However, it seems doubtful that Qohelet would be at all concerned with the manner of arrival to the ‘house of God.’

<sup>31</sup> Other figurative phrases that involve feet or walking are not linked to a destination.

<sup>32</sup> Ginsburg, *Cohélet*, 335.

<sup>33</sup> M. Seidel, “Heker Millim.” in *Debir* 1 (1923), 3f. Seidel assigns to the root קָרַב the sense ‘praise, glorify,’ as in Ps 75:2, 119:151, Job 17:12. He interprets the second colon in our verse: “It is more excellent to listen than to offer sacrifice,” in line with 1 Sam 15:22.

<sup>34</sup> Fox, *A Time to Tear*, 230. He says: “The adjective/noun *qarob* is used of one who has an intimate relationship, whether divine (Ps 34:19; 85:10; 119:151) or human (Ps 148:14 [Israel]; Ezek 43:19 [Zadokites]; Lev 10:3 [priests]). Though it is not elsewhere used of actions, in 1 Kgs 8:59 words of prayer are said to be ‘near to the Lord,’ meaning acceptable to him.” The meaning “acceptable” for קָרֹב was adopted by Seow (194). Since ‘acceptable’ has a positive nuance, it obviates the need for adding טוֹב.

(*זֶה אֹפְרֵי*) but does not explain how such corruption might have arisen.<sup>35</sup>

Tita asks: “In V 17a wird für den Aufenthalt im Tempel das ‘Hören’ empfohlen (וְקָרַב לְשִׁמְעָה). Was ist mit dem ‘Hören’ hier konkret gemeint: ‘Gehorchen’ oder einfach nur ‘Zuhören?’”<sup>36</sup> Understanding of *לְשִׁמְעָה* in the phrase *וְקָרַב לְשִׁמְעָה* has been dominated by 1 Sam 15:22, where Samuel says that obedience to God’s commandments is better than bringing sacrifices (הֲנָה שִׁמְעָה מִזֶּבַח טוֹב). The collocation of the words *שִׁמְעָה* and *זָבַח* in both places was seen by many commentators compelling enough for the establishing of the thematic context and interpreting *שִׁמְעָה* as ‘obedience,’ and even for adding the word *טוֹב* (actually or implicitly) to our verse. For instance Barton explains: “The sentiment recalls 1 Sam. 15:22 Am. 5:24, 25 Mi. 6:7. ... On the whole, it is more probable that this verse refers to the well-known contrast between literal sacrifice and obedience.” He renders, *To obey is better than that fools should give sacrifice.*<sup>37</sup>

The fact that Samuel declares *anyone’s* sacrifice to be inferior to obedience while in Qohelet the emphasis is on the sacrifice of the Kesilim,<sup>38</sup> has led to the meanings ‘to hear’ (Stuart, Hengstenberg, Plumtree, Jastrow), ‘give heed’ (Seow), ‘to understand’ (Gordis), ‘to listen’ (Crenshaw, Longman), for *לְשִׁמְעָה*.<sup>39</sup> These meanings for *לְשִׁמְעָה* are consistent with the usage of the verb in the book of Qohelet, where it always means ‘to listen’ or ‘to give heed,’ i.e., it is

However, it is doubtful that *קָרַב* can mean ‘acceptable.’ The meaning ‘accept’ is represented in the Hebrew Bible by *קָבַל*, and the meaning ‘acceptable’ does not seem to occur. In NH the term *מְקוּבָּל*, ‘acceptable,’ does occur (Jastrow, *Dictionary of the Talmud*, 1308).

<sup>35</sup> H. Graetz, *Kohelet קהלת oder der Salomonische Prediger* (Leipzig: Wintersche Verlag, 1870), 81. While the *ו/י* is well attested in the Qere-Ketib system a *ו/ל* confusion cannot be found. Graetz considers 4:17 corrupt and consequently makes a number of emendations to obtain: “Beachte Deine Schritte, so oft Du gehst in den Tempel zu opfern. Zu hören ist besser als das Spenden von Opfern der Thoren; denn sie wissen weder Gutes, noch Böses zu thun.”

<sup>36</sup> Tita, *Ist die thematische Einheit*, 88.

<sup>37</sup> Barton, *Book of Ecclesiastes*, 123.

<sup>38</sup> M.V. Fox, *Ecclesiastes קהלת* (JPS Bible Commentary; Philadelphia: JPS, 2004), 32. Fox comments: “As Samuel said, ‘Surely, obedience is better than sacrifice, compliance than the fat of rams’ (I Sam. 15:22). ‘Obedience’ in both verses is *shama*; literally, ‘hear.’ The word ‘fools’ is, strictly speaking, superfluous, since obedience is better than anyone’s offerings. Koheleth is focusing on what fools do without intending to restrict the principle to their offerings alone.” This highlight the difficulty in taking *שִׁמְעָה* = ‘obedience.’ By making ‘fools’ superfluous Fox loses the subject for the last colon.

<sup>39</sup> Gordis, *Man and his World*, 247. Gordis observes: “Koheleth may well have had I Sam. 15:22 in mind: ‘to obey (*שִׁמְעָה*) is better than sacrifice (*זָבַח*),’ as Seidel suggests, but he is using the traditional passage in a spirit far removed from that of classic Hebrew prophecy.”

used for aural communication, but never ‘to obey’ (1:8, 7:5 [twice], 21, 9:16, 17, 12:13). The only other case where a phrase **לשמע** + (**קרוב**) occurs is Isa 34:1, and there too **לשמע** cannot mean ‘to obey.’ We cannot take **לשמע** to be a typical wisdom *topos* because of the underlying circumstances. Since the individual addressed is in the Temple it is also difficult to imagine that he would make a trip to the Temple for a random priestly lecture on some cultic issue.<sup>40</sup> Thus the various nuanced meanings for **לשמע** still harken back to 1 Sam 15:22 implicitly placing the thematic context of our verse in the cultic domain of ‘obedience.’

The frustration with the phrase **לשמע וקרוב** comes clearly through in the words of Crenshaw: “The second clause may be understood as a continuation of the imperative *šmor* (watch). In this case, *weqarob*, an infinitive absolute, functions as an imperative (and draw near). The admonition then reads: *watch your step ... and draw near to listen*. But the sequel is awkward: fools sacrifice a gift. Perhaps it is better to understand *weqarob* nominally and to assume an ellipsis of *tob* before comparative *min* (cf. 9: 17). Nevertheless, the expression is awkward, especially the use of **זבח** (sacrifice) with *mittet* (gift).”<sup>41</sup> Whybray felt that using **לשמע וקרוב** “Some degree of communication between God and man is thus presupposed.”<sup>42</sup> Kohen suggested **לשמע וקרוב** being another name for God, “near to listen.” Thus, **לשמע וקרוב** **בית האלהים וקרוב** would mean “house of God, one close to listen.”<sup>43</sup> Though the Psalmist uses the phrase “**קרוב** (34:19, 119:151, 145:18, cf. 85:10), **קרוב לשמע** is never used in the suggested sense in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>44</sup> A decade ago, Tita made a valiant effort to de-link our verse from 1 Sam 15:22 by suggesting the interpretation: “*Benähre deinem Fuß – wenn du zum Haus Gottes gehst und herannachst, um zu hören – davor, ein Opfer von Toren zu geben (=ein törichtes Opfer), denn sie haben keine Erkenntnis, indem*

<sup>40</sup> Perdue, *Wisdom and Cult*, 181. Perdue suggests that **לשמע** refers to “listening to priestly instruction in the House of God.” However, if the instruction is on a personal matter the exchange would be one-on-one, and if the instruction is of a routine nature, why would one bother to go to the Temple for such a lecture?

<sup>41</sup> J.L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), 115.

<sup>42</sup> R.N. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes* (OTG; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989), 77f. He says: “... the phrase ‘draw near to listen’ presumably implies that the individual worshipper expects to receive some instruction from God, whether directly as an answer to a prayer or through the medium of the temple priests.”

<sup>43</sup> Kohen, *Divrei Chefetz*, 30. He renders our verse: Watch your habits when you go to the House of God and one close to listen, rather than being as the fools who give peace-offerings (**שלמים**) thinking that they are so far from evil that they do not know how to do evil.

<sup>44</sup> Z. Zevit, *Ancient Israel, a Synthesis of Parallactic Approaches* (New-York: Continuum Int., 2003), 586–610. This is not one of the names in the list of Israelite Gods that Zevit compiled.

*sie Böses tun.*<sup>45</sup> Tita takes שמר רגליך as referring to מתת, which is thematically strange and temporally obscure. His interpretation of the last colon assumes several emendations and takes יודעים = *Erkantis*, which is not attested.

It seems that it would be more desirable to look for an interpretation that takes קרוב as an adjective, disassociates our verse from 1 Sam 15:22 and the meaning ‘obey’ for שמע, and takes וקרוב לשמע as a separate colon.<sup>46</sup>

It is possible that the statement הנה שמע מזבח טוב in 1 Sam 15:22 affected the vocalization of מתת, reading the מ as a comparative מ. The comparative מ, however, forces emendation of the MT to וקרוב לשמע <טוב> מתת, as has been noted by Crenshaw and others.<sup>47</sup> It has been suggested that we have here a case of a “pregnant use of the מן” in which “the attributive idea ... must ... be supplied from the context” (GKC § 133e).<sup>48</sup> However, even if the טוב is assumed an ellipsis, the juxtaposition of an infinitive absolute and a prefixed infinitive construct creates an awkward syntax. The term has been rendered <which is better> than ... should give (Hengstenberg); <is better> than...should give (Barton); than ...giving (Gordis); <is preferable> to a sacrifice that fools give (Crenshaw<sup>49</sup>); than ...to give (Seow); rather than offer (Jastrow, Longman); <und nicht, wie um> ... bringen (Michel); <is better> than to offer (Schule); etc.

Traditional Jewish exegesis (Targum, Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Rashbam, Qara, Sforno, etc.) generally considered מתת a prefixed verb. However, the majority of the *Versions* (Septuagint [ἐπιπέδουσα], Peshitta [מן מוהבתא]) take מתת as the noun מתת, “gift.” Barton thinks that these ancient sources are in error, but does not explain why.<sup>50</sup> Removing the comparative sense from מתת eases the inner tension in the verse,<sup>51</sup> and allows considering

<sup>45</sup> Tita, *Ist die thematische Einheit*, 100. Tita notes: “Da in dem so verstandenen Text keine Anspielung auf 1 Sam 15 vorliegt, fehlt der Hauptansatzpunkt für ein religionskritisches Verständnis.”

<sup>46</sup> Zer-Kavod, *קהלת*, 27. Zer-Kavod takes וקרוב לשמע as a parenthetic sentence, where it is understood that ‘the words of the sages’ are to be listened to as suggested by Raba: הווי קרוב לשמע דברי חכמה (bBerachot 22a).

<sup>47</sup> Graetz, *Kohelet*, 81. For instance, Graetz says: “IV, 17 ist jedenfalls schadhaft, nach לשמע fehlt טוב, wie Samuel I 15, 22.”

<sup>48</sup> Barton, *Book of Qohelet*, 124–125. Barton says: “טוב is to be supplied in thought before this [מתת], as in 9:17.”

<sup>49</sup> Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*. 114–115. Crenshaw’s translation would be of a Hebrew text that reads: שהכסילים נותנים טוב מזבח. He follows, perhaps, the Peshitta, which also changes the order of הכסילים and זבח. It seems that he (p. 115) also entertained the possibility that מתת = “gift.”

<sup>50</sup> Barton, *Book of Ecclesiastes*, 125.

<sup>51</sup> O. Loretz, “Eiliges Gebet, Eid und Gelübde in Ugarit und Israel nach RS15.10 und Qohelet 4,15–5,6; 8:2–3” in R. Albertz (ed.), *Kult Konflikt und Versöhnung: Beiträge zur kultischen Sühne in religiösen, sozialen und politischen Auseinandersetzungen des antiken Mittelmeerraumes* (AOAT, 285;

מתת הכסילים זבח כי-אינם יודעים לעשות רע as an independent unit. The statement “A gift of the fools is זבח, because ...” would then be self contained and parallel in structure the following verse. Indeed, so renders Allgeier, “Die Gabe der Toren is Opfer.”<sup>52</sup>

Commentators are divided as to what does זבח specifically refer.<sup>53</sup> There are basically two opinions: the animal sacrifice, and the feast upon portions of the sacrificed animal. Barton says: “On the whole, it is more probable that this verse refers to the well-known contrast between literal sacrifice and obedience, and that the next verse takes up a new topic, unless we interpret vows as votive sacrifices.”<sup>54</sup> Hengstenberg observes: “That זבח signifies here, as always, ‘slain sacrifices,’ (not sacrifices in general), which are particularly selected from the whole number of sacrifices, is evident from a comparison of 1 Samuel xv. 22, Hosea. vi 6, Psalm xl. 7, where ‘slain sacrifices’ are mentioned along with ‘burnt sacrifices.’ Not of ‘sacrifices’ in general does Koheleth here speak, but of the sacrifices of fools, which were not an outward form expressing the worship which is in spirit and truth, but the contrary thereof, namely, an invention whose purpose was to appease God and to silence the conscience.”<sup>55</sup> On the other hand, in Stuart’s view: “That זבח (in Pause זבח) may and does often mean the *feast* on a part of the victim which is offered, is plain; see Lex. and comp. Prov. 17:1. Is. 22:18. Deut. 33:19. Here, as the *offerers* are plural (fools); and the feast singular, it is probably indicated, that while one victim is sacrificed and feasted on, there is company who sit down at the feast upon it. Such, indeed, was the usage; comp. 1 Sam. 9: 13, 2 K. 1:9, 4:1. If this were not meant, we should expect זבחים in correspondence with הכסילים.”<sup>56</sup>

Some see in 5:5 an indication that the sacrifice was a šgagah-offering. Jastrow suggested that Qohelet expresses here his opposition to animal sacrifices. He says: “If you go to a place of

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Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2001), 109. Loretz says: “Die Anmerkung des Kommentators in Qoh 4,17b, daß es besse sei, beim Gang in dem Tempel die Tora zu Hören als wie ein unwissender Tor zu opfern, unterbricht den Argumentationsgang Qohelets, der in Qoh 4,17a und 5,1 nur ganz allgemein von allzu schnellem und vielem Reden vor Gott warnt.”

<sup>52</sup> A. Allgeier, *Das Buch des Predigers oder Koheleth* (HSAT 6.2; Bonn: Peter Hanstein Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1925), *ad loc.*

<sup>53</sup> Septuagint and Syro-Hexaplar reflect the reading זבחה, “your sacrifice,” probably a dittography of the כ in the following כי. Some commentators have adopted this reading (von Scholz, Zapletal, Podechard, etc.). Peshitta reads זבח הכסילים, reversing the MT order. In the Septuagint’s view it is the person that walks to the Temple who makes the sacrifice, not the fools. It translates: “let thy sacrifice [be] better than the gift of fools.”

<sup>54</sup> Barton, *Book of Ecclesiastes*, 123.

<sup>55</sup> E.W. Hengstenberg, *Commentary on Ecclesiastes, with other treatises* (Philadelphia: Smith, English & Co., 1840), 136.

<sup>56</sup> M. Stuart, *Commentary on Ecclesiastes* (New York: Putnam, 1851), 177.

worship, go to listen to a sermon and not to see the priests offer an animal sacrifice, as though this were pleasing to God. From Koheleth's advanced point of view, animal sacrifice is a silly survival and those who carry it out are fools."<sup>57</sup> It seems that there is no compelling reason for insisting that זָבַח is the 'feast' rather than the 'animal sacrifice.' In particular, the meaning 'animal sacrifice' fits well the reading מִתַּת. It should also be noted that מִתַּת הַכֹּסִילִים זָבַח is proper Hebrew.

We have already noted that the last colon evoked much debate. Taking הַכֹּסִילִים as the subject of the last line creates the untenable notion that the sacrifice of the pure, who do not even know how to do evil, is demeaned. Commentators usually use one of the following four approaches:

- a) take "those who obey" as the subject of the last line, i.e., "they (those who obey, hear) know not to do evil," (Herzfeld, Philippson, Ginsburg),<sup>58</sup> or "the wise" those worthy to be "near and listen to" are the subject (Zer-Kavod);
- b) interpret the last line in a negative way (Vulgate, St. Jerome, Luther, Coverdale, Hodgson, Desvoeux, De Wette, Hengstenberg, Plumptre, Allgeier);
- c) emend the last line so that its positive tenor is diluted (Targum, Septuagint, Peshitta, Zapletal, Siegfried, Podechard, Barton, von Scholz, Kuhn, McNeile, Ginsberg); and,
- d) delete the last colon (Galling).

Fox humbly admits "Since the MT is clear and grammatically feasible; I translate the sentence literally without understanding its point."<sup>59</sup>

Even a cursory overview of the literature indicates that unusually many commentators resorted to emendation of the last line in Qoh 4:17. Emendations of the last line occur already in the *Versions*. The LXX has two readings of רַע יֹדְעִים לַעֲשׂוֹת רַע כִּי־אִינָם, namely οὐκ εἰσὶν εἰδότες τοῦ ποιῆσαι κακόν and καλόν. The Peshitta simply changes 'bad' into 'good', translating "for they know not to do that which is good," and the Targum, has both 'bad' and 'good,' אַרום ליתיהון ידעין למעבד בהון בין טב לביש "for they know not to do good or bad." The Vulgate's *qui nesciunt quid faciant mali*, "for they know not that they do evil," takes the infinitive לַעֲשׂוֹת = "that they do," which is impossible. Rashi goes a step further, explaining "the fool does not understand that he does harm to himself" (אין הכסיל מבין שהוא עושה רע לעצמו). Rashbam says,

<sup>57</sup> Jastrow, 216, note 72. Jastrow considers "for He [i.e., God] has no pleasure in fools," in v. 3, a misplaced gloss. In his view, by הַכֹּסִילִים Qohelet "in most uncomplimentary fashion means the priests."

<sup>58</sup> Ginsburg, *Cohélet*, 335. Ginsburg says: "Those that obey can appear at once before God, as they have not to go and bring a sin-offering first, for they know not how to commit sin."

<sup>59</sup> Fox, *A Time to Tear*, 231.

והרי אינם יודעים כסילים הללו לעשות מעשים טובים  
ועל כן הם מזומנים לעשות רע

“for the fools know not how to do good works, therefore they are liable to do evil.”<sup>60</sup>

He inserts **מעשים טובים ועל כן הם מזומנים** between **יודעים** and **לעשות**. This massive emendation cannot be justified or accepted. A more elegant emendation is that of Ibn Ezra, who inserts just the word **רק** before **לעשות רע**, obtaining “for they know not but to do evil.” Qara (*circa* second part of 11<sup>th</sup> – beginning of 12<sup>th</sup> century) explained “they do not pay attention to refrain from making the transgression” (**אינם שמים על לב מלעשות העבירה**).<sup>61</sup> Ginsburg felt that “an omission or ellipsis of the most important word in the clause, which transforms good into evil, cannot be imagined.”<sup>62</sup> We can add that the form **רק + ל** (prefixed verb) is not attested in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>63</sup>

Some modern commentators (Siegfrid, McNeile, Barton, Podechard, BHS) tried to obtain Ibn Ezra’s meaning “for they know not but to do evil” assuming haplography of the **מ** in the transcription of the original **מלעשות יודעים**.<sup>64</sup> Driver perceived the error as resulting from a misunderstood abbreviation, which was rewritten in full.<sup>65</sup> However, such a meaning for **מן** is not attested in the Hebrew Bible, nor does the form **יודעים + מל** (prefixed verb) occur. Renan obtained the same meaning by inserting **כי אם** after **יודעים**. This emendation is graphically too distant from the MT and results in an impossible Hebrew text, though the form **כי אם + ל** (prefixed verb) occurs in the Hebrew Bible (Am 8:11, Qoh 3:12, 8:15). G. Kuhn emends **לעשות רע** to **לחשות רגע** (*eine Augenblick zu schweigen*), which does not fit the context. Schmidt reads **רַע**, ‘other, else’ (1 Sam 15:28, 28:17, 2 Sam 2:16, 12:11, Prov 18:17) instead of **רַע**.<sup>66</sup> However, the cited sources clearly show that the meaning

<sup>60</sup> S. Japhet and R.B. Salters, *The Commentary of R. Samuel Ben Meir RASHBAM on Qohelet* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1985), 89.

<sup>61</sup> Einstein, *Josef Kara*, Part B, 21.

<sup>62</sup> Ginsburg, *Qohelet*, 336.

<sup>63</sup> This might be the reason why Ibn Ezra mentions two other views (**יש אומרים**).

<sup>64</sup> Einstein, *Josef Kara*, Part B, 21. This emendation occurs already in Qara’s commentary on Qohelet. Einstein suggestion to read **שלעשות** instead of **מלעשות** in the commentary is oblivious of the implied emendation. Qara takes **יודעים = שמים על לב**, which is not attested in the Hebrew Bible.

<sup>65</sup> G.R. Driver, “Once Again Abbreviations.” in *Textus* 4 (1964), 79. He says: “Thus an original **יודע אינם יודע** **מלעשות רע** has been misread **יודעים לעשות רע** (MT) instead of **יודעים מלעשות רע** ‘knowing not otherwise than to do evil.’”

<sup>66</sup> J. Schmidt, “Kohleth 4:17.” in *ZAW* 17 (1940–41), 279–80. Schmidt says: “**רַע** ist hier ... durch »anderer« wiederzugeben und als Neutrum aufzufassen.” He renders the last colon: “Denn sie wissen nicht Anderes zu tun.” Ibn Ezra mentions that some take **רע = רַע = רצון**, ‘will,’

‘*anderes*’ is impossible, for in each case a person is involved and we cannot רַע “*als Neutrum aufzufassen.*” Ginsberg considered emending רַע to עוֹד ‘more.’ Fox notes that the resulting clause, ‘for they do not know how to do anything else,’ would not motivate the advice of v. 17a, because it would diminish the moral responsibility of the fools.<sup>67</sup> Hengstenberg and Allgeirer give the ל in לעשות a conjunctive sense, and Hertzberg gives it a consecutive meaning. Von Scholz deletes the ל and Galling deletes the entire third colon.

The difficulty of the last colon in Qoh 4:17 led to some forced translations. One comes across such renderings as: *zu nichte werden die, die nur Frevel zu üben wissen*, “destroyed shall they be who know not but to do evil” (Kaiser, Nachtigel); *denn sie ferstehen nicht traurig zu sein*, “for they know not how to be sad” (Hitzig and Stuart); *they do not even perceive how to do evil* (Lohfink<sup>68</sup>), *They do not concern themselves about evil-doing* (Ewald), [fools sacrifice] *when (כִּי) they cannot find some evil to do* (Fidler), etc. Most exegetes adopt one of the following translations for the last colon of Qoh 4:17: (1) “they do not know that they do evil” (Septuagint, Vulgate, Rashi, Hengstenberg, Ewald, NKJV, Crenshaw, Longman, Seow, Tita, etc.); (2) “they do not know so that they do evil” (Rashbam, Delitzsch, Euringer, Knobel, Deane, Carrington, Wright, etc.); and, (3) “they do not know how to do evil” (Jastrow, Gordis, Fox, Perry, Spangenberg, etc.). However, the infinitive לעשות cannot grammatically be translated *that they do*, *so that they do*, or *how to do*.

It seems that Qohelet, in line with the ideas expressed in his book, tries to convey the notion of the Kesilim doing something in the cultic setting that is inappropriate, because they lack the proper knowledge. This notion has been aptly captured by the Targum and the Midrashic explanation “the fool does not know to distinguish between a vow and a vow” (הכסיל אינו יודע להפריש בין נדר לנדר). Thus the last colon needs to be emended to give a text that means: [the fools’ gift is an animal sacrifice] because they do not know what to do.

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apparently relying on the Aramaic and Arabic (cf. Ps 139:2, 17). While רַע can mean *another person* with whom one stands in a reciprocal relation, the meaning suggested by Schmidt is well beyond the semantic field of II רַע.

<sup>67</sup> Fox, *A Time to Tear*, 231.

<sup>68</sup> N. Lohfink, *Qobeleth. A Continental Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003), 24. Lohfink says: “... when life is freed from inauthenticity, it is the hidden essence of each moment of normal living. Whoever possesses it, moreover, is one who ‘knows.’ With him every activity is bathed in the light of freedom. Only such a person would be even capable ‘doing evil.’ Fools, if they constantly undertake atonement rituals for ‘oversights,’ would certainly not be in a position to do evil (4:17b which takes its meaning from 5:5).” See Fox’s criticism of Lohfink’s rationale (*A Time to Tear*, 231).

### SOLUTION

Our analysis of a representative sample of exegetical efforts to decipher the meaning of Qoh 4:17 attests to the correctness of Fox's assessment that "All the proposals to explain the present text have been unpersuasive, and even so do not arrive at an appropriate meaning." Fox felt that "An emendation would be in order if that would solve the problem, but none proposed so far is persuasive."<sup>69</sup> In the analysis, we have tentatively identified avenues for new approaches to the resolution of this crux. In the following we make use of these pointers to shape a new approach to Qoh 4:17.

Much of the activity in unit Qoh 4:17–5:6 occurs in *the house of God* (בית האלהים), which could mean the Temple or synagogue. Barton says: "Whether it is to be regarded as temple or synagogue depends upon how we interpret the next clause [*To obey is better than that fools should give sacrifice*]. . . . If this sacrifice is to be taken literally, Qohelet was thinking of the temple; if it is to be interpreted by the following verse as figurative for words, he may have referred to the synagogue."<sup>70</sup> Sukenik observed that "whereas there is archaeological evidence of the existence of synagogues in Egypt as early as the third century B.C., and in Greece as early as the second century B.C., the date of the oldest remains of a synagogue found in Palestine is not earlier than the first century A.D."<sup>71</sup> Philo (1<sup>st</sup> century CE) is the earliest Jewish source to mention it. The expression בית האלהים occurs in Gen 28:17 and 22 in the sense of an awe-inspiring site.<sup>72</sup> In the late biblical books this expression refers to the second temple in Jerusalem (Dan 1:2, Ezra 3:8, 6:22, 8:36, 10:1, 6, 9, 1 Chr 9:11, 13, 26, 2 Chr 34:9, etc.). It is improbable that Qohelet refers in this expression to the synagogue.

Qohelet begins his verse with the *hapax legomenon* שמר רגליך. Since the unit is focused on speech and utterances<sup>73</sup> rather than moving we would have expected שמר פיד (1 Sam 1:12, Mic 7:5), or

<sup>69</sup> Fox, *A Time to Tear*, 231.

<sup>70</sup> Barton, *Book of Ecclesiastes*, 123.

<sup>71</sup> E.L. Sukenik, *Ancient Synagogues in Palestine and Greece* (Schweich Lecture for 1930; London: Humphrey Milford, 1934), 1. Cf. L.L. Grabbe, *History of the Jews and Judaism in the Second Temple Period*, (London/New York: Continuum Int., 2006) vol. 1, 237. The earliest reference to a synagogue is in an inscription found in Shedia (an outskirt of Alexandria, Egypt) from the time of Ptolemy III, Euergetes (247–221 BCE). It is called in Greek *προσευχή* = *οἶκος προσευχῆς*, i.e. "House of Prayer," a term borrowed from pagan usage but unrepresentative of the activities in the synagogue of the Diaspora. Evidence points to teaching and reading of the scriptures, rather than prayer, as the main functions of the synagogue.

<sup>72</sup> J.-J. Lavoie, "Critique culturelle et doute existentiel: étude de Qo 4,17–5,6." *SR* 26 (1997), 162.

<sup>73</sup> Loretz, *Eiliges Gebet*, 103. Loretz says: "Der Abschnitt Qoh 4,17–5,6 handelt vom Schaden, der für den Menschen durch viele Worte vor Gott entstehen kann."

the more general שמר נפשך (Deut 4:9, Job 2:6, Prov 13:3, 21:23, 22:5, Sir 32:23–24), which are attested in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>74</sup> It seems therefore that שמר רגל was cleverly selected to call attention to something else; perhaps it alludes also to one who “watches your feet,” i.e., follows you (רַגְלָךְ). The reality in Qohelet’s days makes it quite likely that the phrase *also* refers here to spying, tailing, or sleuthing, which was a major concern in the Ptolemaic period. The semantic field of the verb רגל includes “spy, go about as explorer,” concepts that are closely related to the noun רַגְל, “foot” and “follow (one’s steps).”

Our verse possibly alludes to the effects of the Hellenistic state ideology, the administration structures, and the taxation organization in Judea, which had been integrated into the Ptolemaic economy quite early in the Hellenistic period. Already the first Ptolemy, opened Koilesyria to the economy and the administration of its empire. This is reflected in such literary sources as the papyruses of the Zenon archive, a release by Ptolemy II Philadelphos in the year 260 BCE of the *Declaration on cattle and slave*, as well as in the Joseph son of Tobias story of Josephus (*Ant.* 12.4.160–184), and the archaeological record of provincial coinage, which was minted on behalf of the government in Alexandria until the time of Ptolemy II (282–246 BCE).<sup>75</sup>

De Jong observes that “The spirit that blew through the Ptolemaic Empire was one of superiority and optimism. A strong creative urge and a competitive mentality characterized the Ptolemaic aristocrats. . . . The same spirit had reached the Ptolemaic dominion of Judea. In the third century, alongside of the ruling priestly class, a new elite appeared that was open to Hellenistic thoughts and customs.”<sup>76</sup> In his view, it is to this audience, imbued with ambitions for power, competitiveness, and material success, that many of Qohelet’s warnings are directed.<sup>77</sup> Naturally, in this

<sup>74</sup> N. Shupak, *Where Can Wisdom Be Found? The Sage’s Language in the Bible and in Ancient Egyptian Literature* (OBO, 130; Freiburg: University Press, 1993). We find in Ancient Egyptian wisdom literature advice commending silent worship and warnings against noisy behavior ‘in the House of God’ in *Anii* 4:1–4 (p. 152), *Papyrus Insinger* 23:10 (p. 159), *Papyrus Chester Beatty* IV 20 verso 5:1–2 (p. 161), etc.

<sup>75</sup> R. Bohlen, “Kohélet in context hellenistische Kultur.” in L. Schweinhorst-Schönberger (ed.) *Das Buch Kohélet*, 257. Bohlen finds in Qoh 5:7–8 a similar Ptolemaic context. He says: “Was Kohélet hier [Qoh 5, 7–8] beobachtet, sind die Auswirkungen der hellenistischen Staatsideologie, der Verwaltungsstrukturen und der Steuerorganisation in der ptolemäischen Provinz ‘Syrien und Phönikien’, in der er lebte.”

<sup>76</sup> S. De Jong, “Qohelet and the Ambitious Spirit of the Ptolemaic Period,” *JSOT* 61 (1994), 90.

<sup>77</sup> Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization*, 142. Tcherikover says: “The crafty and resourceful tax-collector, the powerful and unscrupulous business man, was the spiritual father of the Jewish Hellenizing movement, and throughout the entire brief period of the flourishing of

environment information regarding such ambitions, dreams, and wishes was at a premium, fostering a stratum of informers, spies, sleuths, etc.

Rostovtzeff points out that Qoh 10:20 relates to the ubiquity of spies and informers in Ptolemaic Judea.<sup>78</sup> Pastor notes that spying and informing was a lucrative occupation in those days: “In this connection it is appropriate to recall that the *Rainer Papyrus* provides rewards for informers, who received a third of the value of the property confiscated to the crown. The informers are encouraged to report people who did not honestly declare the size of their herds, or those who keep slaves illegally.”<sup>79</sup> As in 10:20, Qohelet might be advising those who go to the Temple to be aware of spies, informers, or sleuths, ‘shadowing’ them, saying “watch out for those at your foot” (Exod 11:8, Judg 4:10, 8:5, 1 Sam 25:42, Isa 41:3, Hab 3:5, etc.).

The notion of being followed to the Temple naturally extends to **שְׁמַר לְשִׁמְעוּ וְקָרוֹב**. If a person does not identify his sleuths they might be standing next to him in the Temple crowd, and listen to his prayer and vows, an activity typically conducted in the Temple for serious concerns as the case of Hannah attests (1 Sam 1). It is interesting to note that Eli watched her mouth (**וְעָלִי שִׁמַּר אֶת־פִּיהָ**) though we are told that only her lips moved but no sound was heard (1 Sam 1:12–13). Was he a lip-reader? It seems that Kimchi might have thought so, saying “he was watching and studying the motion of her lips what was this long prayer” (**הִיָּה שׁוֹמֵר וּמַעֲיִן אֶת פִּיהָ מֵהָ הִיתָה זֹאת הַתְּפִלָּה הָאֲרוּכָה**). We do not know whether lip-reading was practiced, or whether people voiced their prayers and vows loudly to be heard. It is, however, possible that in the excitement of the setting and predicament things would be said in a manner that was potentially harmful to the supplicant. Indeed, Qoh 5:1 points to the possibility that in turmoil of soul or immersed in hope and dreams a torrent of words could be uttered of great informative value to the nearby listener and ultimately to the administrator, the one above.<sup>80</sup> Anyone going to the Temple should be circumspect.

If this is so **שְׁמַר רִגְלֶךָ כְּאִשֶׁר תֵּלֵךְ אֶל־בַּיִת הָאֱלֹהִים וְקָרוֹב לְשִׁמְעוּ**, *Watch your follower when you go to the House of God or if near to listen*, is

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Hellenism in Jerusalem, lust for profit and pursuit of power were among the most pronounced marks of the new movement.”

<sup>78</sup> M.I. Rostovtzeff, *The Social and Economic History of the Hellenistic World (I-III)* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941), 350.

<sup>79</sup> J. Pastor, *Land and Economy in Ancient Palestine* (New York: Rutledge, 1997), 36.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.* No less dangerous than economic information, was expression of national aspirations and hope for regime change. There was in Judea a general weariness in face of repeated regimentation by the Ptolemaic administration, antagonism to the oppressive regime, and hope for its change.

then a well formulated, self-contained, and meaningful sentence.<sup>81</sup> Moreover, this division of Qoh 4:17 creates two metrically more balanced sentences (8:7), than the cantillation signs of the MT (11:4). The fact that the Kesilim make animal sacrifices is unrelated to the situation described in the first sentence or the warning that it contains. Thus, the **מ** in **מתת** cannot be a comparative **מ**, and the remaining part of Qoh 4:17 has to be taken as an independent statement, breaking the **זבח** - **שמע** link suggested by Samuel's comparison (1 Sam 15:22) or Jeremiah's words (Jer 7:22–23), which probably affected Masoretic vocalization.

We noted that most of the *Versions* read **מתת**, “gift.” The construct form **מתת** is attested in Qoh 3:13 and 5:18, and it occurs also in Ezek 46:5, 11, and Prov 25:14. The noun **מתת** is attested in 1 Kgs 13:7. On the other hand, the comparative verbal form **מתת** occurs only once elsewhere (Deut 28:55). The observation “a gift of Kesilim is an animal sacrifice” may allude to the fact that the Kesil, not being versed in the Torah laws of the sacrifice ritual, always vows the most costly and often extravagant offering of an animal. Qohelet implies here that the wise should use his knowledge and be more nuanced.<sup>82</sup> This observation might also suggest that animal sacrifices are for the Kesilim who are unaware that prayer is already replacing sacrifices. The wise should not follow the example of the Kesilim making extravagant vows, but should be circumspect in the current social and political reality.

We have seen that many felt **כי-אינם יודעים לעשות רע** should be the explanation for the act of the Kesilim, and that it should reflect the Kesil's lack of knowledge. This can be obtained by reading **לעשות מה לעשות** **כי-אינם יודעים** **מה לעשות**, “for they know not what to do,” instead of **כי-אינם יודעים לעשות** **מה לעשות**. It is easy to see that **מ**, an abbreviation of **מה**, could have dropped out by haplography. Dropping the **ה** in abbreviations was common practice.<sup>83</sup> The phrase **לעשות מה** occurs a number of times in the Hebrew Bible (2 Kgs 4:13–14, Isa 5:4, Zech 2:4, Esth 1:15, 6:6, Neh 2:12, 2 Chr 25:9). This leaves the word **רע**. We suggest that **רע** resulted from a **ד/ר** confusion and the word **דע**, “know,” belongs to the next

<sup>81</sup> When the **ו** connects alternative cases it could mean *or if* (Exod 20:10, 17, 21:16, 17, Lev 21:14, 22:23–24, Prov 29:9, Job 31:13, 16, 26, etc.).

<sup>82</sup> A.Sh. Artom, **בן-סירא** (Tel-Aviv: Yavneh, 1967), 127. For instance, **נוצר תורה מרבה קרבנות זובח שלמים שומר מצוה . גומל חסד מקריב סלת ועשה צדקה זובח תודה** (35:1–2). He might be expressing the opinion of the intellectuals who saw more worthy substitutes for sacrifices.

<sup>83</sup> G.R. Driver, “Once Again Abbreviations.” in *Textus* 4 (1964), 78–79. Driver mentions the following relevant examples: in Isa 6:13 **במ'** was misread as **בם** for **במה** (1 QIS<sup>a</sup>); in 2 Chr 10:25 **במ'** was misread **בהם** for **במה** (LXX: **ועלדא**); in Prov 12:27 **אדמ'** and **יקר'** were misread **אדם** and **יקר** for **אדמה** and **יקרה** (Eitan in *HUCA* 14 [1939] 6); in Prov 30:14 **מאדמ'** was misread **מאדם** for **מאדמה** (|| **מארץ** ||); in Lam 1:9 **עני'** was misread **עני** (Vulgate); etc.

verse.<sup>84</sup> The word **דע** is used by Qohelet in 11:9, and a number of times elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible (Gen 20:7, 1 Sam 20:7, 24:12, Jer 15:15, Job 5:27, 1 Chr 28:9, 1 Kgs 20:22, Ps 139:23, Job 11:6).

The emended text can be understood on two levels: cultic and non-cultic.

**שמר רגליך כאשר תלך אל-בית האלהים וקרוב לשמע**

Cultic level: *Watch your step when you go to the House of God and near to listen*

Non-cultic level: *Watch your follower when you go to the House of God or if near to listen.*

**<מתת> הכסילים זבח כִּי־אינם**

**יודעים <מה> לעשות [ר] <ד>ע**

Cultic level: *A gift of fools is an animal sacrifice, for they know not what to do.*

Non-cultic level: *A gift of fools is an animal sacrifice, for they know not what to do. {The last word, **ע<ד>[ר]**, is attached to the next verse}.*

The cultic explanation is more general and indefinite, while the non-cultic interpretation is quite concrete. Both interpretations de-link the verse from 1 Sam 15:22 and describe the Kesilim in wisdom concepts characteristic to Qohelet (2:14, 5:2, 10:15). The second part of the verse on both levels makes the observation that the Kesilim because of lack of knowledge opt for the maximal

<sup>84</sup> The **ד/ר** confusion is well attested in the HB. Already Kimchi (1160–1235) in his commentary on 1 Chr 1:7 noted that: “Since the **ד** and **ר** are similar in appearance, and among the readers of the genealogies which were written in ancient times, some read a **ד** and some read a **ר**, some names were preserved for posterity in two forms with either a **ד** or a **ר**.” Radak explains that Scripture preserved both traditions by recording these names one way in certain locations and the other way in others. For instance, Deuel in Num 1:14, 7:42, 7:47, 10:20 but Reuel in Num 2:14; Dodanim in Gen 10:4 but Rodanim in 1 Chr 1:7, 6; Rivlah in 2 Kgs, Jer 7 but Divlah in Eze 16:14; and, Rifat in Gen 10:3 but Difat in 1 Chr 1:6. However, the confusion is also attested in the Ketib-Qere apparatus. For instance, 2 Sam 13:37 **עמיחור** (K) but **עמיהוד** (Q); 2 Kgs 16: **וארומים** (K) but **ואדומים** (Q); Ps 19:19, Prov 19:19 **גרל** (K) but **גדל** (Q); Jer 2:2 **אעבוד** (K) but **אעבור** (Q); Jer 31:39 **השרמות** (K) but **השדמות** (Q); Ezra 8:14 **וזבוד** (K) but **וזכור** (Q); Josh 15:52 **ודומה** but **ורומה** in some MSS (Tanach Koren (1983), Pocket Edition, 11 end); and 2 Sam 8 (many), 1Chr 18 (many) **הדרעור** – **הדרעור** in some MSS (Tanach Koren (1983), Pocket Edition, 12 end). Also, in Hab 3:12 the Septuagint reads “thou wilt bring low” (**ὀλιγωρώσεις**), probably reading **תצער** instead of **תצעד**; Hab 3:13 the Septuagint translates **יסוד** as “bands or bonds” (**δεσμούς**), implying a reading **יסור** or **אסור**; Hab 3:16 the Septuagint translates **יגודנו** as “of my sojourning” (**יגורנו**); etc.

cultic gift.<sup>85</sup> This implies that the wise *could* and *should* be more nuanced. Perhaps, on the cultic level ‘*could*’ would be stressed and on the non-cultic level ‘*should*’ would be stressed. In the Ptolemaic reality those who make exorbitant gifts are fools. They would be observed and more severely taxed, and might lose all their possessions when unable to meet the demands of the tax collector.

The verse clearly exhibits intrusion of the oppressive Ptolemaic reality into the private domain of man and God, and the holy is profaned by the greed of exploitation. In the place where man should be able to freely commune with God he is forced to be controlled and circumspect.

### CONTEXT

The intrusion of the social reality in the Ptolemaic period is also reflected in the remaining verses of the unit Qoh 4:17–5:6.

#### QOH 5:1

[ר] <ד>ע אֶל־תְּבַהֵל עַל־פִּיךָ וּלְבָבְךָ אֶל־יִמְהַר לְהוֹצִיא דְבַר לִפְנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים  
כִּי הָאֱלֹהִים בְּשָׁמַיִם וְאַתָּה עַל־הָאָרֶץ עַל־כֵּן יִהְיוּ דְבָרֶיךָ מְעֻטִּים

Cultic level: *Know, do not be hasty with your mouth, and your heart should not rush to bring forth a matter before God, For God is in heaven and you are on earth, therefore your words should be few.*

Non-cultic level: *Know, do not be hasty with your mouth, and your heart should not rush to bring forth a matter before the Magistrate, for the Magistrate is in heaven and you are on earth, therefore your words should be few.*

At the cultic level the verse has been assumed as referring to prayer, speaking to God, or repetition of certain ‘power laden’ formulae, and as in most wisdom instructions some restraint is urged.<sup>86</sup> The cultic sense is somewhat inconvenient, because it

<sup>85</sup> M. Haran, “Temple and Community in Ancient Israel” in M.V. Fox (ed.) *Temple and Society* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1988), 22. Haran observes that Solomon, at the inauguration of the temple that he build, describes its function as a place of prayer and does not even mention sacrifices (1 Kgs 8:22–53). He says: “In the temple, however, prayer was considered a gesture of secondary order. There it was a substitute for sacrifice, a kind of ‘offering of the poor’; a visitor to the temple was ideally expected to bring an offering to the Lord, but if he came empty-handed he was at least supposed to offer a prayer, which could be a sort of substitute. Such an understanding of prayer as being secondary to sacrifice finds explicit expression in the Book of Psalms, the collection of Jerusalem Temple prayers.”

<sup>86</sup> T. Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 151. Longman says: “Qohelet advises people to approach God in prayer only rarely, and then only briefly, as if the danger is taking too much of God’s precious time.” However, prayer was rare and usually short because people had to rely on their memory. Oesterley

suggests that God does not know what is in a man's heart (Jer 11:20, 20:12, Ps 44:22, 7:10, Prov 15:11, 24:12, 17:3, 1 Chr 29:19) and His abode is in heaven rather than earth and heaven (Josh 2:11, Ps 139:8, 89:12, Isa 66:1, cf. Isa 55:9, Ps 115:16). Moreover, the phrase referring to the heart seems superfluous, the heart uncharacteristically acting as the mouth. Finally, the fact that God is in heaven and man on earth is not an obvious reason for man to be parsimonious with his words. On the other hand the non-cultic sense is rather obvious if we understand *Magistrate is in heaven* metaphorically as being "up" in the administrative hierarchy and thus powerful (see 5:7). Anything that one says or reveals could be used against him by the rulers. The more one says the more material does he provide, those intent on his exploitation, for using against him.

**QOH 5:2**

כי בא החלום ברב ענין וקול כסיל ברב דברים

Cultic level: *For dreams come with much preoccupation and the voice of the fool with many words.*

Non-cultic level: *For dreams come with much preoccupation and the voice of the fool with many words.*

While the translation of this proverb, evoked by יהיו דבריך מעטים, is the same for both levels is the same, the implied referents are different. On the cultic level החלום might be an actual dream, which the visitor to the Temple wants the priests to interpret.<sup>87</sup> He is cautioned by the quoted proverb to tell the gist of the dream and not be like the fools who tell all the details.<sup>88</sup> On the non-cultic level החלום might be one's hope, scheme, or fantasy. In this case, one would be a fool to talk too much, and "the Devil is in the details." The cultic understanding breaks the thematic flow, while the non-cultic understanding maintains it.<sup>89</sup>

**QOH 5:3**

כאשר תדר לאלהים נדר אל־תאחר לשלמו

כי אין חפץ בכסילים את אשר־תדר שלם

(214) notes that even the synagogue was used mainly for teaching and reading of the Scriptures.

<sup>87</sup> Perdue, *Wisdom and Cult*, 183. Perdue believes that the visitor to the Temple had "a terrifying dream which he has taken as a divine warning" (Job 4:12–13, 33:14–15, Sir 34:1–8) that requires interpretation by a priest.

<sup>88</sup> T.A. Perry, *Dialogues with Kohelet, The Book of Ecclesiastes* (University Park: University Press, 1993), 103. Perry finds it "difficult to explain the introduction of dreams into this context, unless it is dragged in through quotation of a popular proverb in the loquaciousness of fools."

<sup>89</sup> Only in Qoh 5:2 and 6a are dreams discussed. This led a number of commentators to the conclusion that these verses are late gloss. See Podechard, *L'Ecclesiaste*, 337f.; F. Hitzig, *Der Prediger Salomo's* (Kurzgefasstes exegetisches Handbuch zum Alten Testament, 7; Leipzig: Weidmann, 1847), 160; E. Glasser, *Le Procès du Bonheur per Qohelet* (Lectio Divina, 21; Paris: Cerf, 1970), 84.

Cultic level: *When you make a vow to God, do not be slack to fulfill it, for there is no pleasure in fools. That which you vow, pay!*

Non-cultic level: *When you make a promise to the Magistrate, do not be slack to fulfill it, for there is no pleasure in fools. That which you promise, pay!*

The cultic sense is understandable in light of Deut 23:22. However, the phrase **אִין חִפֵּץ בְּכִסִּילִים** suggests that not fulfilling a vow is a ‘folly’ rather than a ‘transgression,’ though Deut 23:22 clearly considers not paying a vow being a **חֵטָא**. Moreover, not fulfilling a vow suggests that it is intended to test God (Sir 18:22–23), which is a transgression (Deut 6:17). It seems therefore that Qohelet intentionally defers here to the non-cultic sense by his choice of the non-cultic wisdom term **כִּסִּילִים**. As the Tobiads story of Josephus (*Ant.* 12.4.160–184) indicates not fulfilling one’s promises was foolish and carried grave consequences.

**QOH 5:4**

**טוב אשר לא־תדר משתדור ולא תשלם**

Cultic level: *Better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not fulfill.*

Non-cultic level: *Better that you should not promise than that you should promise and not fulfill.*

The cultic sense is understandable in light of Deut 23:22. Not paying a vow is a **חֵטָא**, and not making a vow obviates this possibility. The non-cultic sense probably alludes to the unfavorable calculus of over-obligation. Inability to meet an obligation resulted in punitive costs that were often ruinous. In particular were liable to over-obligation and its consequences the farmers in Judea who had an uncertain income from their fields. As we shall see in a subsequent verse, a promise that was made had to be honored and there was no consideration of unanticipated eventualities.

**QOH 5:5<sup>90</sup>**

**אל־תתן את־פִּיךָ לחֵטִיא את־בִּשְׂרֶךָ  
וּאל־תֹּאמַר לִפְנֵי הַמְּלֹאֵךְ כִּי שִׁגְגָה הִיא  
לְמָה יִקְצַף הָאֱלֹהִים עַל־קוֹלְךָ וְחָבַל אֶת־מַעֲשֵׂה יָדֶיךָ  
לְמָה יִקְצַף הָאֱלֹהִים עַל־קוֹלְךָ**

Cultic level: *Do not let your mouth to make your body transgress. And do not say before the messenger that it is an error.<sup>91</sup> Why should God [have to] be angry at your voice and destroy the work of your hand.*

<sup>90</sup> R.B. Salters, “Notes on the History of the Interpretation of Koh 5<sub>s</sub>,” *ZAW* 90 (1978), 95. Salters reviews the earlier exegesis on Qoh 5:5, focusing on the phrase **לִפְנֵי הַמְּלֹאֵךְ**.

<sup>91</sup> The meaning of **הַמְּלֹאֵךְ** in Qohelet was the subject of much deliberation at least since the time of the Septuagint. If our two level understanding is correct, it would strengthen the support for the originality of the MT. Rashi’s explanation of the term as a “collector of

Non-cultic level: *Do not let your mouth make yourself miss.<sup>92</sup>  
And do not say before the messenger that it is an error.  
Why should the Magistrate be angry at your utterance  
and hold in pledge your handiwork?*

On the cultic level the verse deals with vows made in the Temple, in private or before a priest. The sin causing organ is the mouth. However, neither it's uttering the vow nor the claim that it was a *שגגה* is a sin,<sup>93</sup> and in either case the following colon poses a problem. It is inconceivable that the 'messenger' is an angel or a temple official charged with collecting vow payments.<sup>94</sup> One may well doubt that Qohelet would use the technical term *מלאך* for a priest in such an abrupt manner.<sup>95</sup> It has been also suggested that the 'messenger' is a priest (Mal 2:7) before whom a confession is made.<sup>96</sup> It seems as if Qohelet chose the unusual term *מלאך* for its convenient use at the non-cultic level. At the non-cultic level we have a clear situation, which Qohelet urges not to succumb to. A person makes a promise that he cannot keep. A messenger (*מלאך*) arrives to collect the promised payment. The debtor claims that the promise was based on an error, or overly rosy estimates. The Magistrates becomes angry at such claims and orders seizing the debtor's assets, or confiscating them. In the Ptolemaic period this was a rather common occurrence, which Qohelet probably

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promises" ("an agent (*שליח*) who comes to claim from you the alms which you promised in public") would well fit the *Sitz im Leben* of tax collection rather than the synagogue milieu that Rashi had in mind.

<sup>92</sup> The word *לְהַטִּיֵּא* = *לְהַחֲטִיֵּא*, the *Hiphil* infinitive of *חטא*, is literally "to make miss the mark" and by extension "to cause to sin." The two meanings aptly fit the suggested two levels, and so would Rashbam's understanding of the term, "bring guilt upon." The meaning "to bring punishment (upon)" is inconsistent with the context.

<sup>93</sup> Fidler, Qoheleth, in 'the House of God,' 15. Fidler says: "This is difficult, because saying that something 'was an error' is hardly more sinful than making a vow." Her translation "And do not say 'Before me is the angel, since this was an error'" (p. 17) is thematically forced, in particular because of the article in *המלאך*.

<sup>94</sup> F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes* (trans. M.E. Yastón; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973, rep. of 1877 ed.), 210. Delitzsch felt that: "With the author of the Book of Qohelet the messenger is already, without any name of God being added, a priestly title not to be misunderstood." While many adopted this understanding of the term, it remained rather nebulous.

<sup>95</sup> A. Rofé, "The Wisdom Formula 'Do Not Say ... and the Angel in Qohelet 5,5'" in J.C. Exum and H.G.M. Williamson (eds) *Reading from Right to Left: Essays in the Hebrew Bible in Honor of David J.A. Clines* (JSOTSup, 373; London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003), 369–370. He renders 5:5 thus: "... And do not say: 'The angel (goes) before me' – because this is a blunder; why should God be angered by your talk and destroy your possessions?"

<sup>96</sup> R.N. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes* (NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 96.

addresses also in 4:1. The coherence of the non-cultic narrative and the tone of certainty in the last colon suggest that the non-cultic level was in this case at the fore.

**QOH 5:6<sup>97</sup>**

כי ברב חלמות והבלים ודברים [הרבה] <רהב> כי אתהאלהים ירא

Cultic level: *For in most dreams and nonsense and speech there is pride, surely Fear God!*

Non-cultic level: *For in most dreams and nonsense and speech there is Rahab [to consider], surely fear the Ruler!*

The concluding statement on the cultic level advises to make sure that one is not captivated by the arrogance of one's dreams, nonsensical beliefs, and speech, but fears God (12:13). At this level we read רהב = "pride" (Ps 90:10). This reading requires deletion of the second ה in הרבה and metathesis of ה and ר in הרב, which can be considered minor emendations.<sup>98</sup> It is easy to imagine that a scribe coming across the rare noun רהב changed it to something akin to רב in 5:2. On the non-cultic level, Qohelet perhaps hoped that his educated audience would associate רהב with Egypt (Isa 30:7, Ps 87:4), the seat of the Ptolemaic Kingdom. He warns that in most dreams, exaggerations, and talk one has to remember the Ptolemaic ruler and fear him. Note that the unvocalized text lends itself to two different readings.

In balance, it seems that for Qohelet the non-cultic level, dealing with the Ptolemaic reality, was the more important than a repetition of well known traditional dicta, and he made some textual choices to accommodate it. The unusual number of אלהים

<sup>97</sup> Spangenberg, *A Century of Wrestling with Qohelet*, 87. It has been generally recognized that the first colon is incomplete or corrupt. Whatever the case it must have existed already in the time of the earliest Versions, since they do not offer an alternate reading. Spangenberg observes: "Although the possibility of an ellipsis has been dismissed, it still seems a viable option." He reads twice הבלים, translating: "For as many dreams are senseless, so much talking is senseless too. Zer-Kavod (29) suggests completion of the hemistich with אל תתן לבך (7:21) or אל תבהל על פיך (5:1); Galling adds הבל, rendering: "Nichtigkeitkeit ist bei vielen Träumen und völlige Nichtigkeitkeit bei vielen Worten!" (Galling, K. *Der Prediger* (HAT, 18; Tübingen: Mohr [1940] 100); Loretz (108) adds ענין after ברב, translating: "Denn: Bei viel Geschäften sind Träume und Eitelkeiten und Worte in Menge!"

<sup>98</sup> Adding a ה to a word is typical of post-exilic scriptures. See for instance, Qoh 6:10 שהתקף (Ketib) but שתקף (Qere); Qoh 10:3 כשהסכל (K) but כשסכל (Q); Qoh 11:1 הכנפים (K) but כנפים (Q); Prov 8:17 אהביה (K) but אהבי (Q); Prov 27:10 ורעה (K) but ורע (Q); Job 1:15–17, 19, אצלט for אמלט; Neh 2:1, 6, 9, אתנה for אתן; Neh 2:13 אצא for אצא; Qoh 7:24 מה שהיה ==> משהיה in the Septuagint and Peshitta. There are many cases of a added or deleted ה in the Hebrew Bible. Thus, it is possible that רהב was originally written with an extra at the end.

in the unit stems from this term being so convenient for his purpose of speaking on two levels. We clearly see that Qoh 4:17 is in thematic and structural agreement with its context, and sets the framework for the understanding of the entire unit.

### CONCLUSION

The situation described in Qoh 4:15, as attested by a Ras Shamra document, reflecting a typical cultic reality:

*One, who of sin does nothing know, hurries to his gods:  
He does not long deliberate, raises most hurriedly his hands to the gods.  
Many are his sins - (now) perhaps more than ever before,  
the man knows nothing therefrom, therefore he hurries to his gods (RS 15.10, 10–13).*

The background of this wisdom saying was the ancient Near Eastern view that all man sin. This understanding makes it illogical to rush to the gods bringing sacrifices and making hurried vows that cannot be paid.<sup>99</sup> Qohelet expresses a similar view on the cultic level.

Our analysis of Qoh 4:17–5:6 also demonstrates the intrusion of warnings and advice useful for coping with the Ptolemaic reality into a seemingly cultic sense. Qohelet is interested in shielding his audience from the consequences of carelessly divulging personal information and thereby bringing ruin upon their selves. Qohelet conveys to his audience two distinct messages, in the cultic and non-cultic domain, by exploiting the dual meaning of keywords and employing some unique terms.

If we accept the position that biblical wisdom literature was not concerned with the cultus,<sup>100</sup> and note that the cultic content in our unit essentially repeats well known *dicta* and practices, it is

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<sup>99</sup> Loretz, “Eiliges Gebet,” 114. Loretz say: “Den Hintergrund des Weisheitsspruches bildet die altorientalische Anschauung, daß noch nie ein Mensch ohne Sünde geboren wurde. Aus dieser sündhaften Selbsteinschätzung heraus werde es verständlich, wenn ein Bewohner des Alten Orients davor warne, ohne vorbereitende Sühneleistung bei seiner Gottheit vorstellig zu werden und eiligst zu den ‘Göttern seine Hände’ zu erheben. Denn dadurch erreiche er allenfalls das Gegenteil von dem, was er sich wunsche: Statt die Gottheit zur Zuwendung zu bewegen und ihm in seiner Lage behilflich zu sein, drohe ihm nun sogar ein leichtfertig selbstverschuldetes Unheil.”

<sup>100</sup> H.D. Preuss, *Old Testament Theology*, (Westminster: John Knox, 2003), 2:250. Preuss notes that: “The questions about the cultus do not play a great role in the Old Testament wisdom literature. Since the sages were occupied especially with matters of everyday ethics and were oriented to the secular community, they did not take into consideration the cultic congregation.”

difficult to see what the purpose of this unit was in the Book of Qohelet. It is difficult to assume that Qohelet rehashes old lore with minor additions to refresh the memory of his audience. Such a purpose would not warrant the inclusion of the unit in the book.

Some commentators saw in Qoh 4:17–5:6 the author's concise statement of his position *vis-à-vis* the cult and God.<sup>101</sup> In the 'minor additions' they detected a major religious revolution, a deprecation of main cultic acts (sacrifice, prayer, and vows) and well established cultic superstitions (dreams and angels).<sup>102</sup> For instance, Lavoie says: "...this text is extraordinarily relevant to our day because it presents itself as a critique of pious fools who believe that it is possible to mollify or manipulate God by performing religious rituals."<sup>103</sup> However, it is doubtful that our unit presents a paradigmatic change in attitude toward the cult. Perdue's research clearly shows that ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature does not reject the value and validity of the cultic sphere, "much of the sapiential literature in the ancient Near East deals with cultic matters in substantive, not merely incidental, ways."<sup>104</sup> A similar conclusion is reached by Hieke, who says: "Für Kohelet müssen das religiöse Tun und die innere Gottesvorstellung einander entsprechen. In religiösen Belangen soll sich ein weiser Mensch

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<sup>101</sup> Hieke, *Wie hast du's*, 320. Hieke says: "Wie es der ungewöhnliche Weisheitslehrer Kohelet mit Gott und mit der Religion halt, zeigt sich in 4,17–5,6, wo er ausdrücklich und konkret über religiöse Handlungen spricht."

<sup>102</sup> Tita, *Ist die thematische Einheit*, 99–100. Tita says: "Im Gesamtzusammenhang der skeptischen Haltung Kohelets und wegen der vielen Warnungen in 4,7–5,6 sieht die Exegese in diesem Kapitel meist den Ausdruck einer Religionskritik, die die üblichen Formen der Gottesverehrung relativiert oder ganz ablehnt." The main argument for a religion-critical interpretation of the unit rests on the conjecture that **טוב** is ellipsed in Qoh 4:17. However, this is debatable. See also Lohfink, N. "Der Bibel skeptische Hintertur. Versuch, den Ort des Buchs Kohelet neu zu bestimmen," *Stimmen der Zeit* 198 (1980) 17–21. Lohfink and others saw in the unit a criticism of religion.

<sup>103</sup> Lavoie, *Critique culturelle*, 150. Lavoie believes that "Qoh. 4:17–5:6 is an unglossed text, clearly delimited and structured around five themes whose theology corresponds to that of the entire book."

<sup>104</sup> Perdue, *Wisdom and Cult*, 355. In Perdue's view the wise were motivated to participate in cultic activities because of (1) desire to enjoy the beneficence which comes to those who have observed the cultic laws and rules; (2) enjoy the blessings derived from orderly existence; (3) belief that cultic devotion enhanced the chance for divine aid in deliverance from the powers of evil; (4) desire to avoid the destructive wrath of the gods if cultically negligent; (5) desire to satisfy social conscience (priests and the poor received their sustenance from the sacrifices and offerings given to the cult); (6) belief that such is the desire of the deity; and, (7) desire to praise and to give thanks to the gods of creation, order, and retribution.

nicht anders verhalten als im Alltag, woe r sich auch von seinem Überlegungen, Erfahrungen und Weltvorstellungen leiten läßt."<sup>105</sup>

The quest of the Wise man for understanding his relationship with creation (the phenomena of the natural world), society (persons, social groups, institutions), and deity (god or gods of creation, order, and retribution), naturally included the cult. Purdue says: "One of the most important concerns of the wise in speaking to the matters of cultic religion and the sapiential participation within its realm was to instruct their adherents in the proper, sagacious decorum within the cultic sphere, and, as we have demonstrated, the standards for wise behavior within the cult are exactly those which have been established for wise behavior in the various compartments of world order, including the court, social institutions, professions, etc."<sup>106</sup> It seems that Qohelet exploited this similarity of behavior in the two domains to convey his dual teachings and warnings.

Why didn't Qohelet present his non-cultic teachings and warnings directly? Was Qohelet afraid of being accused of sedition, or hampering the administration's operations, and therefore chose the subterfuge of cultic context to provide some practical advice in the difficult times of the Ptolemaic regime? Obviously, we can only speculate regarding the answers to these questions. It is possible that he could have been accused of hampering the work of the informers, who in the eyes of the administration were only trying to find out the truth. If Qohelet was a rich man, as the opening two chapters describe him, he had much to lose. Indeed, a person of his stature would have been a prime target for any possible blame that could result in the confiscation of his wealth. Such an act would have been very profitable to the crown and to the informer.

The fact that centuries of exegetic effort did not detect the two levels of instruction attests to Qohelet's cleverness and to the skewed perspective that results from a neglect of the *Sitz im Leben*. Perhaps, when the text was disseminated the non-cultic level was much more obvious in the reality of the day. Perhaps the seemingly balanced treatment of the two levels was intentional, to eliminate the possibility of an accusing argument. Only a scholarly analysis of the text by the members of his audience could, perhaps, reveal that

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<sup>105</sup> Hieke, *Wie hast du's*, 337.

<sup>106</sup> Purdue, *Wisdom and Cult*, 355. In Purdue's view the wise were motivated to participate in cultic activities because of (1) desire to enjoy the beneficence which comes to those who have observed the cultic laws and rules; (2) enjoy the blessings derived from orderly existence; (3) belief that cultic devotion enhanced the chance for divine aid in deliverance from the powers of evil; (4) desire to avoid the destructive wrath of the gods if cultically negligent; (5) desire to satisfy social conscience (priests and the poor received their sustenance from the sacrifices and offerings given to the cult); (6) belief that such is the desire of the deity; and, (7) desire to praise and to give thanks to the gods of creation, order, and retribution.

he took some extra step to ensure that the message in the non-cultic level is properly understood.<sup>107</sup> Finally, considering the risks that Qohelet took, the advantages that his warnings offered must have been worth it. Qohelet probably witnessed or heard of cases of Ptolemaic oppression that prompted him to take this action despite its obvious risks.

In his overview of the approaches to Qoh 4:17–5:6 in the last century, Spangenberg raises the question whether one can still make any contribution to the interpretation to this unit. He asks: “Is there a road less traveled?” His conclusion is “... that the historical-critical paradigm still dominates the research and interpretation of Qohelet. Thus further research calls for a literary and rhetorical analysis.”<sup>108</sup> We hope that we have identified yet another road. Our analysis shows that consideration of the historical social milieu can still provide significant insights into the meaning of the verses and situation described in the unit Qoh 4:17–5:6.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Qohelet’s audience would be keyed by the untypical for Qohelet cultic theme and unusual vocabulary.

<sup>108</sup> Spangenberg, *A Century of Wrestling with Qohelet*, 84.

<sup>109</sup> I am indebted to Prof. T.A. Perry for his critical reading of this paper.