

## A Specific Application of the Proverb in Ecclesiastes 1:15

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### 1. Introduction

**1.1** The obscurity of Ecclesiastes 1:15 has caused many interpreters to stumble over the question of its application and contribution to Qohelet's message. The verse speaks of a certain entity that is "crooked" and lacking and emphasizes Qohelet's inability to rectify these perceived deficiencies.

מֵעֵת לֹא יִוּכַל לְתַקֵּן	[The] crooked cannot be straightened,
וְחִסְרוֹן לֹא יִוּכַל לְהִמְנוֹת	and the deficiency cannot be numbered (Eccl 1:15).

The obscurity of the verse stems from the fact that it, like most aphorisms, is an abstract saying that loses its significance when interpreted apart from specific situations that supply a requisite subject matter. The subjects in both lines are adjectival nouns; they do not identify the subjects, but only denote their qualitative aspects. We are thus left with the question: what, according to verse 15, is crooked and deficient?

**1.2** In this article, I propose that the verse depicts the frustration of the author as he observes the many injustices in the world. In particular, I relate the proverb of 1:15 to the subject matter that immediately follows the verse with its expanded commentary in 2:12-17: Qohelet's search for an advantage to wisdom (1:16-18). The proverb describes the results of his quest; the world is crooked and bereft of any permanent advantage for the wise. My identification of a situation that fits the descriptive content of Ecclesiastes 1:15 is based on the existence of a literary structure surrounding the proverb (1:13-17 + 18), a structure which finds the proverb of 1:15 as its focus. Prior to presenting the details of this structure, I hope to clarify the need to identify a particular application of 1:15 in a specific situation with a brief summary of recent scholarship on the problems with the verse.

### 2. Recent Views on the Interpretation of Ecclesiastes 1:15

**2.1** A survey of recent scholarship on the book of Ecclesiastes finds scholars seeking to identify the subject of the proverb in 1:15. Some resist a thorough exploration of the implications of the verse by

maintaining a broad and non-specific subject matter for the verse. J. L. Crenshaw understands the verse to be an ancient aphorism quoted to denote the permanence of divine decrees.<sup>1</sup> For Crenshaw, the statement stands to reinforce the fact that it is impossible to improve human circumstances. A. Lauha admits that the operative arena for the proverb is unclear and, like Crenshaw, designates its contribution as a general statement about human impotence.<sup>2</sup> R. E. Murphy too recommends a broad interpretation for 1:15 encompassing the physical and the spiritual realms.<sup>3</sup> Murphy further sees the proverb as a justification for the **הַבְּלִי**-judgment on the deeds under the sun in verse 14. M. V. Fox opts for a similar link and sees the proverb as a restatement of the **הַבְּלִי**-judgment in 1:14.<sup>4</sup> Most recently, C. L. Seow has joined the ranks of scholars who relate the proverb to the quest of the preceding verses.<sup>5</sup> Like Crenshaw, he thinks that the aphorism reinforces the thought that the matters of the world are beyond any human corrective ability. Although I am not in disagreement with the application of the proverb to the general undertaking of 1:13-14, Qohelet's stated intention to explore the world's events does little to explain the proverb of 1:15. The scope of the task as designated by **כָּל-אֲשֶׁר נַעֲשֶׂה תַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם** is too general and broad to indicate a specific entity in need of correction and completion. The programmatic statement of 1:13 is as ambiguous as the proverb of verse 15.

**2.2** More specific explanations of the proverb strive to supply a concrete subject for the verse. H.W. Hertzberg proposes that 1:15 refers to the inability of humans to attain wisdom; as such, the missing element in verse 15b would refer to wisdom's absence.<sup>6</sup> But Hertzberg's interpretation relies on the substitution of wisdom (**חָכְמָה**) for 'all deeds under heaven' (**כָּל-אֲשֶׁר נַעֲשֶׂה תַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם**) as the object of Qohelet's inquiry in 1:13a. Such a reading of 1:13a is doubtful<sup>7</sup> and the search for a suitable explanation for the proverb, once again, falls on the ambiguity of Qohelet's inspection of everything under heaven. Kurt Galling thinks that the cryptic proverb originally referred to the crooked back of an old man; consequently, the missing element of the second line refers to a loss in height.<sup>8</sup> According to Galling, the proverb stands as a metaphorical statement denoting the inevitability and incomprehensible nature of death. Although death is an expressed concern for Qohelet (2:16; 3:19; 5:14; 9:3, 10; 12:6-8), it does not feature as a subject matter in the immediate vicinity of 1:15. W. Zimmerli sees the aphorism as a stab at the fool's lack of learning.<sup>9</sup> However, a pointed remark about the fool's deficiencies seems out of place here. In 1:13-18, Qohelet deals with the inexorable task of observing the world's events with the aid of wisdom (1:13), and

later on, with an experiment in wisdom and folly (1:17) which ends in grief (1:18). Nowhere in 1:13-18 does 'folly' or the 'fool' appear as an independent subject matter with which the reader may associate the ambiguous proverb. Zimmerli's proposition lacks the prerequisite systematic narrowing of focus on the fool to the exclusion of other subject matter in 1:13-18; without the 'fool' as a ready and prominent subject, one can hardly assume such a specific reference in 1:15.

**2.3** In my view, this brief review of scholarship on the interpretation of 1:15 reveals two areas that require further exploration and/or clarification.

(i) Those who recommend a general interpretation for 1:15 are correct; the preceding verses (1:13-14) cast a wide net with the programmatic statement of purpose to examine all events under the heavens. Indeed a brief moment of reflection would produce a myriad of things in the world in need of straightening and completion. However, the precise implications of the proverb within a specific situation remain largely unexplored. Does Qohelet provide any specific examples of crooked things in need of correction? I believe he does.

(ii) Those who do attempt to apply the proverb to a specific situation often have recourse to subject matter outside the surrounding material of the verse. The absence of an immediate link (whether thematic or by proximity) renders these applications somewhat tenuous.

### **3. The Surrounding Material of Ecclesiastes 1:13-17 + 18: A Literary Structural Unity**

**3.1** I suggest that the proverb has a double reference. Firstly, it refers to the divinely appointed task of discovering the work that has been done under heaven (1:13-14). Secondly, the proverb also refers to, a specific variant of the above task, the quest to understand wisdom, madness, and folly (1:16-17). I believe this to be true for two reasons:

(i) The proverb is enclosed by thematic inclusio; the common elements of Qohelet's two parallel tasks of 1:13-18 surround the proverb. The prominence of **הַבְּמָדָה** is expressed in 1:13 and emphasized by hyperbolic exaggeration in 1:16b: Qohelet recounts the vast amount of wisdom that he has accumulated. The descriptions of both tasks also end with a similar conclusion that **הַבְּמָדָה** is insufficient for either task; similar phrases are employed as analogies for both tasks (**רַעֲיוֹן רֹחַ/רַעֲיוֹת רֹחַ**). Formally, 1:13-14 begins with a statement of what the task is and then goes on to narrate Qohelet's involvement (1:14). This order is reversed in 1:16-17; Qohelet first describes the rigours of multiplying wisdom and then states his

intention "to know wisdom" (1:17a). When 1:13-14 and 1:16-17 are placed together, the sequence forms a chiasmus. The structure of 1:13-17 leaves the impression of two related tasks (vss. 13-14 and 16-17), with some common elements, that point to the proverb of 1:15 as the focus of the unit.

וְנִתְּתִי אֶת־לְבִי לְדַרוֹשׁ וְלִתְּוֹר בְּחִכְמָה	Qohelet states the task,
עַל כָּל־אֲשֶׁר נַעֲשֶׂה תַחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם	
הוּא עֲנִיָּן רַע נִתֵּן אֱלֹהִים לְבַנֵּי הָאָדָם	
לְעֲנוּת בּוֹ (1:13)	
רִאִיתִי אֶת־כָּל־הַמַּעֲשִׂים	and then proceeds to describe part of its process.
שֶׁנַּעֲשׂוּ תַחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם	
וְהִנֵּה הַכֹּל הַכֹּל וְרַעוּת רֹוח (1:14)	
דִּבַּרְתִּי אֲנִי עִם־לְבִי לֵאמֹר	He describes his accomplishment of multiplying
אֲנִי הִנֵּה הִגְדַּלְתִּי וְהוֹסַפְתִּי חִכְמָה	wisdom through the process of the task,
עַל כָּל־אֲשֶׁר־הָיָה לִפְנֵי עַל־יְרוּשָׁלַם	
וְלְבִי רָאָה הַרְבֵּה חִכְמָה וְדַעַת (1:16)	
וְאִתָּנָה לְבִי לְדַעַת חִכְמָה	and then restates the task with a narrowing of its
וְדַעַת הוֹלְלוֹת וְשִׁכְלוֹת	focus to the contemplation of wisdom, madness,
יְדַעַתִּי שָׁגִם־נָה הוּא רַעִיוֹן רֹוח (1:17)	and folly.

Although verse 18 stands outside the general scheme outlined above, its elaboration on the theme of wisdom and folly leaves little doubt that it should be a part of the unit.<sup>10</sup>

(ii) A partial repetition of the proverb of 1:15 in 7:13 unambiguously refers to the "work of God"

(מַעֲשֵׂה הָאֱלֹהִים) which is synonymous to תַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם שֶׁנַּעֲשׂוּ (7:13 therefore makes a clear association between the proverb and, at least, one of the tasks described in 1:13-18.

#### 4. The Ambiguity of the First Task 1:13-14

##### 4.1

וְנָתַתִּי אֶת־לְבִי לְדַרוֹשׁ וְלִתּוֹר בַּחֲכָמָה	I gave my heart to seek and to explore by wisdom
עַל כָּל־אֲשֶׁר נַעֲשָׂה תַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם	everything that is done under the heavens.
הוּא עֲנִיָּן רַע נָתַן אֱלֹהִים לְבְנֵי הָאָדָם	That is the evil toil God gave to humanity
לְעֲנוֹת בּוֹ : (1:13)	to labour with (1:13).
רָאִיתִי אֶת־כָּל־הַמַּעֲשִׂים	I saw all the deeds
שֶׁנַּעֲשׂוּ תַּחַת הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ	which were done under the sun
וְהִנֵּה הַכֹּל הַכֹּל וְרַעוּת רֹוח (1:14)	and behold, everything is a chasing of the wind

The initial sub-unit of 1:13-14 does not help to clarify the descriptive content of 1:15 because of the ambiguity of its undertaking. The author introduces his task with a reflective stance employing the usage of first-person endings in the two verbs which denote investigation (וְנָתַתִּי.....לְדַרוֹשׁ) and perception (רָאִיתִי). The heart (לֵב) which is the seat of understanding in biblical Hebrew (Prov 15:32; 19:8) is given over to the task of investigating all that is done under the heavens.<sup>12</sup>

**4.2** The object of investigation, כָּל־אֲשֶׁר נַעֲשָׂה תַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם, is rephrased in 1:14 as כָּל־הַמַּעֲשִׂים שֶׁנַּעֲשׂוּ תַּחַת הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ; both phrases depict large and general categories. The field of investigation is also designated as 'divine activity'; this is evident from 8:17 where Qohelet uses כָּל־מַעֲשֵׂה הָאֱלֹהִים and הַמַּעֲשֵׂה אֲשֶׁר נַעֲשָׂה תַּחַת הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ interchangeably. Furthermore, 3:11 concurs with 8:17 by designating the comprehension of divine activity as the toil (עֲנִיָּן) given to humans

**4.3** The description of the undertaking in 1:13-14 is very broad and lacking in specific detail. What precisely are the 'deeds of the world' and what is the nature of an inspection of every event under the sun? As long as these questions remain unanswered, one simply cannot determine how the descriptions of 1:15 apply to the quest of 1:13-14.<sup>13</sup> We therefore turn to the other task (vss. 16-18) of 1:13-18 for an explanation of the proverb in 1:15.

## 5. The Second Task: 1:16-17 + 18

**5.1** The second task of the literary unit (1:13-17 + 18) is a contemplation of wisdom and folly.

דְּבַרְתִּי אֲנִי עִם־לְבִי לֵאמֹר	I said in my heart,
אֲנִי הִנֵּה הִגְדַּלְתִּי וְהוֹסַפְתִּי חִכְמָה	"behold, I have magnified and multiplied wisdom
עַל כָּל־אֲשֶׁר־הָיָה לִפְנֵי עַל־יְרוּשָׁלַם	[more than] all who were before me in Jerusalem.
וְלְבִי רָאָה הַרְבֵּה חִכְמָה וְדַעַת (1:16)	And my heart has seen much wisdom and knowledge
וְאֶתַּנַּה לְבִי לְדַעַת חִכְמָה	I gave my heart to know wisdom,
וְדַעַת הוֹלָלוֹת וְשִׁכְלוֹת	and to know madness and folly.
יָדַעְתִּי שְׁגִם־זֶה הוּא רַעִיוֹן רוּחַ (1:17)	I realized that this also is a chasing of the wind
כִּי בְרַב חִכְמָה רַב־כָּעֵס	For in much wisdom is much sorrow,
וְיֹסִיף דַּעַת יֹסִיף מְכָאוֹב : (1:18)	and to multiply knowledge is to multiply pain.

Like 1:13-14, 1:16-18 employs generous usage of first-person verbs: דְּבַרְתִּי; הִגְדַּלְתִּי; הוֹסַפְתִּי;

וְאֶתַּנַּה; יָדַעְתִּי. The emphasis on Qohelet as the subject of experience is also reinforced by the emphatic use of the first-person pronoun (אֲנִי) in 1:16<sup>14</sup> in 1:16. The use of the verbs "I magnified" and "I multiplied" to depict Qohelet's quest for wisdom lends exaggeration to his efforts.

**5.2** There is a shift from the observation of external phenomena (כָּל־אֲשֶׁר נַעֲשָׂה תַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם) to the investigation of Qohelet's epistemological premises in 1:16-18. In 1:13, חִכְמָה is the standard by which all deeds are evaluated; but in 1:17, it is חִכְמָה and its antonymic counterpart, שִׁכְלוֹת, that constitute the focus of Qohelet's interest. Qohelet's contemplative gaze in 1:17 has shifted to the hermeneutical parameters which governed his quest in 1:13.<sup>15</sup>

**5.3** The presence of the phrase רַעִיוֹן רוּחַ in 1:17b is reminiscent of 1:14b. Likewise, שְׁגִם־זֶה looks back to 1:14 which designates the task there as a "chasing of the wind". The particle וְ<sup>16</sup> creates a second category of action that also fits the analogy of a "chasing of the wind"; in 1:17, the phrase refers to Qohelet's self-immersion in wisdom and folly. It is therefore clear that 1:13-18 outlines a dual nature to

Qohelet's inquiry; the first is to understand the events of the world, and the second is to know wisdom, madness and folly.<sup>17</sup>

**5.4** The passage draws to a close with a synonymously parallel couplet describing the failure of wisdom (1:18): much wisdom brings much sorrow and increasing knowledge brings increasing pain.

**5.5** Hitherto, the experimental venture into "wisdom", "madness", and "folly" has cast little light on the significance of the proverb of 1:15 to this particular situation. What sort of a problem do the above three qualities present to Qohelet and why does the multiplication of knowledge lead only to more sorrow? What is crooked and deficient about the pursuit of wisdom and folly? The expanded description of Qohelet's task to understand wisdom and folly in 2:12-17 provides an answer to these questions.

## 6. The Quest to Know Wisdom and Folly and the Link with 2:12-17

**6.1** The exact details of Qohelet's contemplation of wisdom and folly come into focus in 2:12-17.

וּפָנִיתִי אֲנִי לְרֵאוֹת חֲכָמָה	I turned to consider wisdom,
וְהוֹלָלוֹת וְסִכְלוֹת	madness, and folly.
כִּי מִהֵאָדָם שִׁיבוּ אַחֲרֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ	Indeed, what can the man who comes after the king [do],
אֵת אֲשֶׁר־כָּבַר עָשׂוּ הוּא (2:12)	but what they have already done.
וְרָאִיתִי אֲנִי שֶׁיֵּשׁ יִתְרוֹן	I saw that there is an advantage
לְחֲכָמָה מִן־הַסִּכְלוֹת	for wisdom over folly,
כִּי־יִתְרוֹן הָאוֹר מִן־הַחֹשֶׁךְ (2:13)	like [the] advantage of light over darkness
הַחֲכָם עֵינָיו בְּרֹאשׁוֹ	The wise one [has] eyes in his head,
וְהַכְּסִיל בַּחֹשֶׁךְ הוֹלֵךְ	but the fool walks in darkness.
וַיַּדְעֵתִי גַם־אֲנִי שֶׁמִּקְרָה אֶחָד	But I also know that one lot
יִקְרָה אֶת־כֻּלָּם : (2:14)	befalls both [/all].
וַאֲמַרְתִּי אֲנִי בְלִבִּי	I said in my heart,
כַּמִּקְרָה הַכְּסִיל גַם־אֲנִי יִקְרָנִי	"the lot of the fool will also befall me.

וְלָמָּה חִכְמָתִי אֲנִי אֲזִי יוֹתֵר	Why have I been so extremely wise?"
וְדִבַּרְתִּי בְּלִבִּי שֶׁ גַם־זֶה הֶבֶל (2:15)	I spoke in my heart that this is also a vanity
כִּי אֵין זְכוּרֹן לְחָכָם עִם־הַכְּסִיל לְעוֹלָם	For there is no remembrance for the wise one as with the fool in the distant future;
בְּשִׁבְרֵי הַיָּמִים הַבָּאִים הַכֹּל נִשְׁכַּח	in the coming days all shall be forgotten.
וְאִיךָ יָמוּת הַחָכָם עִם־הַכְּסִיל (2:16)	How the wise one, as with the fool, shall perish
וְשָׂנֵאתִי אֶת־הַחַיִּים	I hated life,
כִּי רַע עָלַי הַמַּעֲשֵׂה שֶׁנַּעֲשָׂה תַּחַת הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ	for the deeds which were done under the sun were troublesome to me;
כִּי־הַכֹּל הֶבֶל וְרַעוּת רוּחַ (2:17)	for everything was futility and a chasing of the wind

The relation between 1:17-18 and 2:12-17 is apparent in two factors.

(i) The programmatic statement of 2:12a is reminiscent of 1:17. There is an almost identical repetition of the phraseology and syntax of 1:17a in 2:12a:

וְאֶתְנֶה לְבִי לְדַעַת חִכְמָה	I gave my heart to know wisdom,
וְדַעַת הוֹלָלוֹת וְשִׁכְלוֹת (1:17a)	and to know madness and folly.
וּפָנִיתִי אֲנִי לְרֵאוֹת חִכְמָה	I turned to consider wisdom,
וְהוֹלָלוֹת וְשִׁכְלוֹת (2:12a)	madness, and folly.

Verse 2:12a maintains the sequence חִכְמָה וְהוֹלָלוֹת וְשִׁכְלוֹת. On the other hand, Qohelet replaces 1:17a's דַּעַת לְבִי לְדַעַת חִכְמָה with וּפָנִיתִי אֲנִי לְרֵאוֹת חִכְמָה in 2:12a. However the general meaning of a surrender of the interactive consciousness to the experimental consideration of "wisdom, madness and folly" remains constant in both verses. The similarity between 1:17a and 2:12a is quite unmistakable.



(ii) The concluding comment of 2:17 echoes Qohelet's sentiments in 1:17b and 1:18.

(1:17) וַדַּעְתִּי שֶׁגַם־זֶה הוּא רְעִיוֹן רוּחַ	I realized that this also is a chasing of the wind
כִּי בְרַב חִכְמָה רַב־כָּעַס	For in much wisdom is much sorrow,
וַיִּוְסֶיף דַּעַת יִוְסֶיף מְכָאוֹב (1:18)	and to multiply knowledge is to multiply pain.
וְשָׂנְאתִי אֶת־הַחַיִּים	I hated life,
כִּי רַע עָלַי הַמַּעֲשֵׂה שֶׁנַּעֲשָׂה תַּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ	for the deeds which were done under the sun were troublesome to me;
כִּי־הַכֹּל הִבָּל וְרַעוּת רוּחַ (2:17)	for everything was futility and a chasing of the wind

Besides the use of parallel phrases (רַעוּת רוּחַ//רְעִיוֹן רוּחַ) to qualify the deeds of the world (2:17) and the experiment with wisdom and folly (1:17), both passages emphasize the quality of vexation. In 1:18, "wisdom" and "knowledge" bring "sorrow" and "pain". Similarly, the consideration of wisdom in 2:12-17 only leads to the conclusion that <sup>18</sup>הַמַּעֲשֵׂה שֶׁנַּעֲשָׂה תַּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ is futile and troublesome to Qohelet.

**6.3** 1:17-18 encapsulates the introduction and the conclusion of the task in 2:12-17. The similarities suggest that 2:12-17 is a larger unit expanding on the description of the task mentioned in 1:17-18. In 2:12-17, the consideration of wisdom and folly meets with the problem that one fate befalls both the wise and the foolish (2:13-14a). 2:13-14a raises the problem by assuming wisdom's excellence which 2:14b-16 challenges with the counterpoint that the commonality of death cancels any certain advantage the wise may claim. Viewed as a catalogue of comparison clauses, the first conservative sub-unit presents three statements asserting wisdom's superiority over folly. Two statements lay claim to the excellence of wisdom and a third is a clause providing an analogy for that superiority:

וְרָאִיתִי אֲנִי שֶׁיֵּשׁ יתרון	I saw that there is an advantage
לְחֵכְמָה מִן־הַסְּבִלּוֹת	for wisdom over folly,
הַחֲכָם עֵינָיו בְּרֹאשׁוֹ	The wise one [has] eyes in his head,
וְהַכְּסִיל בְּחֹשֶׁךְ הוֹלֵךְ	but the fool walks in darkness.
כִּי־יתרון הָאֹרֶךְ מִן־הַחֹשֶׁךְ	...like [the] advantage of light over darkness.

The latter sub-unit of verses 14b-16 is more pessimistic in its outlook and responds with four contradictory statements of comparison. Where the former sub-unit affirms an advantage (יֵּתְרוֹן) for the wise, the latter negates the perception of any such advantage with its reflections on the common human fate.

וַיַּדְעֵתִי גַם־אֲנִי שֶׁמִּקְרָה אֶחָד	But I also know that one lot
יִקְרָה אֶת־כֻּלָּם (2:14)	befalls both [/all].
וְאָמַרְתִּי אֲנִי בִלְבָבִי	I said in my heart,
בְּמִקְרָה הַכְּסִיל גַם־אֲנִי יִקְרַנִּי (2:15)	"the lot of the fool will also befall me.
כִּי אֵין זְכוּרֹן לְחֲכָם עִם־הַכְּסִיל לְעוֹלָם	For there is no remembrance for the wise one as with the fool in the distant future;
וְאֵיךְ יָמוּת הַחֲכָם עִם־הַכְּסִיל (2:16)	How the wise one, as with the fool, shall perish

The clash is also evident in the choice of the connecting phrase between the two contending views of 2:13-14a and 2:14b-16: <sup>19</sup>וַיַּדְעֵתִי גַם־אֲנִי. Two opposite perspectives on the value of wisdom contend for Qohelet's allegiance.

**6.4** Qohelet's inability to find any advantage for the wise over the foolish leads to the removal of any reason to practice wisdom. His observation of a common lot for all humans provokes a question concerning the efficacy of wisdom (2:15), which Qohelet then rounds off with an extended restatement of humanity's common fate.

וְאָמַרְתִּי אֲנִי בַלְבִּי	I said in my heart,
(2:15a) כַּמְקַרְהָ הַכֹּסֵל גַּם־אֲנִי יִקְרַנִּי	"the lot of the fool will also befall me.
(2:15b) וְלָמָּה חִכְמַתִּי אֲנִי אֲזִי יוֹתֵר	Why have I been so extremely wise?"
וְדִבַּרְתִּי בַלְבִּי שֶׁגַם־זֶה הֶבֶל	I spoke in my heart that this is also a vanity
כִּי אֵין זְכוּרֹן לְחָכְמָה עִם־הַכֹּסֵל לְעוֹלָם	For there is no remembrance for the wise one as with the fool in the distant future;
בְּשִׁכְחָר הַיָּמִים הַבָּאִים הַכֹּל נִשְׁכַּח	in the coming days all shall be forgotten.
וְאֵיךְ יָמוּת הַחָכָם עִם־הַכֹּסֵל (2:15c-6)	How the wise one, as with the fool, shall perish

Two statements about the futility of being wise encircle a pointed rhetorical question. The two statements (2:15a and 2:15c-16) are marked by similar thematic content. While the latter statement is devoted to the representation of generic categories (the foolish and the wise), the former is more concerned with Qohelet's own plight as a wise man; וְאֵיךְ יָמוּת הַחָכָם עִם־הַכֹּסֵל.<sup>20</sup> A similar introductory phrase precedes each pessimistic observation; וְדִבַּרְתִּי בַלְבִּי/וְאָמַרְתִּי אֲנִי בַלְבִּי. In both instances, Qohelet converses with his 'heart'. The question which raises doubt about wisdom's desirability is couched in a reflective moment on the commonality of human expiration. The observation that the wise and the foolish meet the same end (2:16b) leads directly into Qohelet's statement of disgust and futility (2:17), which, as already shown, is similar to his concluding remarks about the quest to know wisdom, madness, and folly in 1:17b-18.

**6.5** The expansion of 2:12-17 on the experiment with wisdom and folly presents two antithetic world-views (vss. 13-14a and 14b-16). The latter challenges the hierarchical structure of preference in the former by raising the very issue of contention between the disparate views; the question of a tangible advantage/benefit (יִתְרוֹן) for the practitioners of wisdom. The search for an advantage to being wise (2:14b-16) is a direct consequence of the experiment with wisdom and folly and the main preoccupation of

2:12-17. The identification of any such advantage would be a remedy to the situation in 2:14b-16, an answer to Qohelet's question in 2:15b, and an affirmation of the conservative perspective in 2:13-14a. The absence of an appropriate consequence for the practice of wisdom signals the failure of the quest which causes grief to Qohelet (2:17; 1:17b-18).

**6.6** At last, we find a specific situation in 1:16-18 (with its longer thematic expansion in 2:12-17) to fit the descriptive construction of the proverb in 1:15. The crooked, which cannot be straightened, may refer to the failure of the events under the sun, or perhaps wisdom, to yield a profit/advantage for the wise (2:17). Consequently, the advantage (חֵסֶד וְרֵוַח) which Qohelet so desperately seeks in 2:15-16 is the deficiency that escapes his calculation (1:15). The double occurrence of לֹא יִשְׁתַּיֵּם בְּכֹל in 1:15 aptly emphasizes Qohelet's inability to redress the problem of the breakdown in the mechanism of justice which leads to feelings of futility and vexation (1:17b-18; 2:17).

**6.7** The thematic expansion of 1:16-18 in 2:12-17 explains the nature of the quest to know "wisdom, madness, and folly". It is a task which seeks to explain the distinction between the wise and the foolish by discerning the different consequences for each party. In clearly defining the task and describing its failure, 2:12-17 provides the necessary environment for the abstract proverb of 1:15 to operate in a meaningful manner.

## **7. The Contribution of 1:15 to Overall Meaning in 1:12-18**

**7.1** What remains unexamined at this point is the semantic increment that the proverb offers to our understanding of Qohelet's quests in 1:16-18 and 1:13-14. If the events of 1:16-18 provide the situational environment within which the proverb may operate, then how, in turn, does the proverb enhance Qohelet's description of his task?

**7.2** An implication in the word-choices of 1:15, "crooked" (מִשְׁתַּיֵּם) and "deficiency" (חֵסֶד וְרֵוַח), together with their accompanying infinitive constructs is that Qohelet yearns for some restitutive measure to effect the imbalances he perceives. The implication in his evaluation of things being "crooked" and deficient is that there exists, in his mind, an ideal state (real or conceptual) where these imbalances are addressed. A glance at the grammar and syntax of 1:15 reveals Qohelet's reliance on such an ideal for his evaluation of the world.

מַעֲוֹת לֹא יִכָּל לְתַקֵּן	[The] crooked cannot be straightened,
וְחִסְרוֹן לֹא יִכָּל לְהִמְנוֹת	and the deficiency cannot be numbered (1:15).

**7.3** The verse consists of two parallel lines that are syntactically similar. The subject of the first line is represented by a *Pual* participial form of עָוָה;<sup>21</sup> its grammatical parallel in the second line is a nominal derivative of חָסַר.<sup>22</sup> Semantically, the subjects of both lines suggest the need for some form of rectification; for the first, it is correction (מַעֲוֹת), and the second, completion (חִסְרוֹן). This deficiency is picked up by the infinitive construct in each line. In the first line the *Kal* infinitive לְתַקֵּן stands as a corresponding syntactic entity poised to address the 'crookedness' of מַעֲוֹת. The parallel infinitive construct in the second line is the *Niphal* form of לְהִמְנוֹת: מְנַתְּ לְהִמְנוֹת. Like its counterpart in the first line, לְהִמְנוֹת has a similar syntactic function to address the need in חִסְרוֹן. The double occurrence of לֹא יִכָּל interrupts the projected course of action in each line by negating the possibility of its accomplishment. The overall suggestion of the two parallel lines is a need for an effective rectifying addition of some sort which the author feels unable to accomplish.<sup>23</sup>

**7.4** The deficiencies in the events of the world suggested by the proverb of 1:15 are only visible through the interpretative 'grid' which is Qohelet's consciousness.<sup>24</sup> The identification of such a preconceived idealistic notion within Qohelet's hermeneutic explains and brings together several outstanding features noted in the examination of 1:13-14 and 1:16-18. In both passages, there is a preponderance of first-person verb endings and first-person possessive suffixes. The complementary prominence of the 'heart' (לֵב) in the investigative processes of both passages adds to the overall impression of a preponderant subjective consciousness in the described tasks. With emphatic recurrence, the allusion to Qohelet's subjective consciousness forms the prerequisite interactive base for his emotional and judgmental outbursts which are interspersed in the observations of 1:13-18. For Qohelet, the task of deciphering divine intention in all that happens beneath the sun is not just impossible, but irksome (1:13b) and vain (1:14b).

Moreover, pain and sorrow (1:18) accompany Qohelet's scorn (2:16-17) for a world that reveals no distinction between the foolish and the wise.

**7.5** The repeated allusion to Qohelet's perceptive consciousness finds its function within the hermeneutic of desired restitution as suggested by 1:15. In fact, the literary unit of 1:13-18, as a whole, points to the fact that Qohelet's epistemological preconceptions are an essential part of the investigative process. Without the inclusion of his epistemological preconceptions, the pejorative nuance in every judgmental exclamation (and as the close reading has shown, there are many) loses its experiential subjective source.<sup>25</sup>

### **8. Conclusion: From the General to the Specific, and Back Again**

The search for a specific application of the proverb in 1:15 has brought us full circle. In seeking to identify a crooked thing in need of straightening, we are forced to come to terms with the author's subjective sentiments about a particular issue. But the isolation of such a subjective interpretative interjection in an ambiguous aphorism fosters a certain amount of disengagement between the interpretative content of 1:15 and the variety of situations where the proverb may apply. The effect of the literary structure in 1:13-18 is to highlight a family resemblance in a range of phenomena under the sun: a unity of deficiency and inequity in a situational variety. As such, the ambiguity of the proverb functions, at once, to maintain its fluidity from one specific scenario to another, and to emphasize the one essential quality readers should notice among the various situations. Amidst the ensuing 'flip-flopping' between the general and the specific, the reader receives the author's communication of the essential emotion that characterizes his examination of all the world's events: the feeling of impotence amidst yearning for restitution.

### **Abstract:**

The article seeks to apply the interpretative content of Ecclesiastes 1:15 within a specific situation. The quest to do so uncovers a surrounding literary structure (1:13-18) that describes two parallel tasks. With specific reference to one of the tasks (1:16-17 + 18) and its thematic expansion in 2:12-17, the article understands the proverb of 1:15 to describe a crooked world which is without any permanent reward for the wise. The article also proposes that the proverb depicts the strong presence of a subjective idealism in the evaluation of the world's events.

<sup>1</sup>*Ecclesiastes: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987) 74.

<sup>2</sup>*Qohelet* (BKAT 29; Neukirchener-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1978) 46-7.

<sup>3</sup>*Ecclesiastes* (WBC 23a; Dallas: Word Books, 1992) 13.

<sup>4</sup>*Qohelet and his Contradictions* (JSOTSup 71; Sheffield: Almond, 1989) 176.

<sup>5</sup>*Ecclesiastes* (AB 18c; New York: Doubleday, 1997) 147.

<sup>6</sup>*Der Prediger* (KAT 17/4; Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1963) 83.

<sup>7</sup>Hertzberg's inclusion of *בְּהַכְמָה* as an object of *לְדַרֵּשׁ* and *לְתוֹר* in 1:13a is unlikely. The preposition *בְּ* has no function as an accusative object marker in biblical Hebrew. Elsewhere in the book, *הַכְמָה* occurs as an accusative object without the preposition (1:17; 8:16; 7:25). An occurrence of *בְּהַכְמָה* with the preposition *בְּ* in 2:3 shows the combination functioning in an instrumental capacity. There is nothing to suggest that Qohelet departs from biblical norms in the usage of the preposition *בְּ*.

<sup>8</sup>"Der Prediger" in *Die fünf Megilloth* (HAT 18; 2nd ed; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1969) 88.

<sup>9</sup>*Das Buch des Predigers Salomo* (ATD 16; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1962) 153.

<sup>10</sup>Similarly, 1:12 stands outside the prescribed structure for 1:13-17. However, the self-introduction of verse 12 leads naturally into Qohelet's description of his activities. The verse marks 1:12-18 as a new unit and distinguishes it from the preceding material on the incessant cycles of nature (1:3-11) by narrowing the focus to Qohelet's own preoccupation. As such, verse 12 should be considered a part of the following unit.

<sup>11</sup>Fox; 1989, p. 175. Fox points out that when Qohelet looks back to the programmatic statement of 1:13-14 in 8:17, he identifies *הַמְעֵשָׂה הַשְּׁמַיִת* with *הַמְעֵשָׂה אֲשֶׁר נַעֲשָׂה תַּחַת הַשָּׁמַשׁ*. According to Fox, the former phrase cannot be distinguished from *הַמְעֵשָׂה אֲשֶׁר נַעֲשָׂה תַּחַת הַשָּׁמַשׁ* in 1:14; it would thus follow that the "deeds...done under the sun" in 1:14 do not only designate human deeds. Fox goes on to mention that "all the works of God" (8:17) is a direct syntactic substitution for "all the deeds which are done under the sun" in 1:14. Moreover, both 8:17 and 1:13-14 are similar in context; both passages comment on the examination of the world's events with the aid of wisdom. It therefore seems that Qohelet uses both phrases, "all the deeds which have been done under the sun" and "everything which is done under the heavens", interchangeably with "all the works of God".

<sup>12</sup>R. Gordis has indicated, with reference to Proverbs 15:32, 19:8, and Ecclesiastes 10:3, that the mention of the 'heart' (לֵב) occurs here in 1:13a as a synonym for 'understanding' (*Qoheleth, the Man and His World* [3rd ed; New York: Schocken, 1968] 209). Qohelet ascribes a host of functions for the 'heart' in the book. He gives his 'heart' to observe and to know wisdom (1:16, 17; 7:25; 8:16). The 'heart' experiences pleasure (2:3a, 10; 5:19; 7:4b) and sorrow (11:10a), and acts as a repository for knowledge (7:22; 8:5). In 9:1, Qohelet exposes his 'heart' to the fact that humans cannot know anything about divine disposition towards them. In 10:2, the human 'heart' is the seat of individual volition; the heart of the wise goes one way and the heart of the foolish another. The various roles which Qohelet gives to the 'heart' indicates the existence of a conscious interactive core in the 'heart' that reacts to, and regulates the incoming data through the senses. The prominence of the 'heart' in the investigative process of 1:13, and later in 1:16-17, strongly indicates a reflective method which includes the participation of a cognitive/interactive consciousness on the part of Qohelet. As such, the prominence of the 'heart' (לֵב) complements the repeated use of first-person verbs in 1:13-14. Cf. H. W. Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974) 46-51.

<sup>13</sup>The inadequacy of 1:13-14 as an event that immediately explains the proverb of 1:15 does not render it unsuitable as an available situation where the description of the aphorism may apply. The ambiguity of the task in 1:13-14 can be resolved with reference to specific situations subsumed under the general appellation of 'deeds under the sun/heaven'. The reading of 2:12-17 will show that the quest to know wisdom and folly qualifies as a specific 'deed' under the sun. It is therefore possible to pursue and to find a variety of events subsumed under the general programmatic statement of 1:13-14 which can accommodate the descriptive construction of the proverb (1:15). For the sake of brevity, I have limited myself to exploring one situation which occurs as the other parallel undertaking in 1:13-17. In following the 'lead' in the second available set of circumstances (vss. 16-17 + 18), I bypass the ambiguity of the phrase, "all the deeds which were done under the sun", and move towards one specific 'deed' that concerns Qohelet.

<sup>14</sup>T. Muraoka points out that most of the verbal phrases that incorporate the use of the pronoun are those of "meditating", "reflecting", and "perceiving" (*Emphatic Words and Structures in Biblical Hebrew* [Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1985] 49). The recurring "I" in Ecclesiastes is symbolic of the "introspective meditation" which Qohelet undertakes as he observes the world around him.

<sup>15</sup>This shift in focus becomes clear when we compare the two verses:

וְנָתַתִּי אֶת־לְבִי לְדַרוֹשׁ וְלִתּוֹר בְּחִכְמָה	I gave my heart to seek and to explore by wisdom
עַל כָּל־אֲשֶׁר נַעֲשָׂה תַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם (1:13a)	everything that is done under the heavens.
וְאֶתְנֶה לְבִי לְדַעַת חִכְמָה	I gave my heart to know wisdom,
וְדַעַת הוֹלָלוֹת וְשִׁכְלוֹת (1:17a)	and to know madness and folly.



In 1:13a, Qohelet applies his mind "to seek" (לְדַרֵּשׁ) and "to explore" (וְלִתְּוֹר) all activity "under the heavens". In 1:17a, חִכְמָה replaces כָּל־אֲשֶׁר נַעֲשָׂה תַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם as one of the accusative objects and becomes the focus of Qohelet's inquiry. The shift may be observed in the transition of חִכְמָה from the grammatical role of indirect object (instrument) in 1:13a, to the role of accusative object in 1:17a. The change of the object of interest to "wisdom" is also reflected in Qohelet's statements that he "magnified" and "multiplied" wisdom (1:16a); his mind came to see "much wisdom" (1:16b). חִכְמָה is the repeated accusative object in 1:16. Hence, Qohelet's premise for his investigation in 1:13-14 is itself under scrutiny in 1:16-17

<sup>16</sup>See Muraoka, *Emphatic Words*, 143-6, for a full treatment of the additive function in וְגַם.

<sup>17</sup>The following section on 2:12-17 will show that the two 'tasks' of 1:12-18 are related; the latter (1:16-18) is a specific variant of the activity under the sun which Qohelet examines.

<sup>18</sup>The conclusion of the attempt to find an advantage to being wise with the remark that the "deeds which were done under the sun" (הַמַּעֲשֵׂה שֶׁנַּעֲשָׂה תַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם) are odious clarifies the relationship between the two parallel tasks of 1:13-18. In 2:17, the 'deeds under the sun' are hateful because they yield no benefit for the wise. Thus the examination of "all the deeds which were done under the sun" (1:13-14) may be understood as a search for a just recompense for the wise and the foolish. But the implications in the use of this phrase are wider. In 2:18-23, the particular 'deed' under scrutiny is the accumulation of profit from labour. Consequently, an attempt to understand the 'deeds under the sun' within the context of 2:18-23 constitutes a search for a lasting benefit for physical toil. In the case of 3:16, the 'deed' which Qohelet qualifies as an activity "under the sun" is injustice; under those particular circumstances, the quest would entail an attempt to find a reward for righteousness and an ultimate punishment for the wicked. The quest to explore "everything which is done under the heavens" in 1:13 is a general programmatic statement which would have various implications in the various situations in the book. The other task of 1:13-18 which is to understand wisdom and folly is a particular expression of Qohelet's broader undertaking. Therefore, the movement from the task of 1:13-14 to the task of 1:16-18 is a movement from the general to the specific. The reversal of this movement may be seen between 2:12-16 and 2:17; there, the consideration of wisdom and folly concludes with the observation that the deeds of the world are grievous to look at.

<sup>19</sup>The evidence of contention lies in the presence of the adverbial particle וְגַם (also). T. Muraoka states that the primary function of the particle is additive (1985, p. 143); וְגַם has the effect of an additional nuance in Gen. 27:33, 31:15, 46:4, Deut. 2:15, Ps. 132:12, and Job 2:10 *inter alia* (1985, p.145). The particle's presence in an introductory phrase for a contradictory view in 2:14b indicates an 'other' perspective that shares Qohelet's attention; "but I *also* know...". The very force of the particle (which may also be seen in

the English equivalent, 'also') in 2:14 is to, at once, indicate separation between one point of view and another, and their inclusion within the subject's general perception. When a 'new' addition contradicts a previous perspective, the result is a torn perspective awaiting resolution

<sup>20</sup>The fact that 2:15a also represents the binary pair, the wise and the foolish, is attested by the following rhetorical question of 2:15b; וְלִמָּוֶה הִכְבַּמְתִּי אֲנִי אִם יִרְתֶּר. In verse 15b, Qohelet affirms that he has conducted himself in the ways of wisdom. Hence the representation of himself as the recipient of the same fate as the fool in verse 15a is a synonymous parallelism to the generic category of the wise in verse 15c.

<sup>21</sup>NKBL 804a; DBHE 553a; BDB 736b.

<sup>22</sup>For a summary of the various attested nuances of the noun form see Charles F. Whitley, *Qoheleth* (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1979) 14.

<sup>23</sup>In summarizing J. Derrida's position on the interrelationship of semantic signifiers in language, Jonathan Culler speaks of the importance of recognizing the specific significance of a word/sound within the complex matrix which is the conceptual universe (see *Structuralism and Since: From Levi Strauss to Derrida* [ed. John Sturrock; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979] 154-80). According to Culler, "signification depends on difference: contrasts" (p. 164). He offers the example of 'food' whose conceptual delineation depends on the existence of an other category which comprises 'non-food' items. Each conceptual element in language is therefore part of a complex mass of "syntheses" and "referrals" which both link each element and sustain their boundaries (p. 164). In a similar way, "crooked" (בִּטְעוּת) and "deficiency" (חִסְרוֹן) in 1:15 are defined with reference respectively to 'straight' and 'completeness'. Qohelet does not allow this veiled reference to 'straight' and 'completeness' to pass unnoticed; he indicates the presence of both as idealic projections of his perceptive consciousness by mentioning his futile efforts "to straighten" (לְתַקֵּן) the "crooked" and "to number" (לְהִמְנִיחַ) the "deficiency" (1:15). Like cross-referencing entities in a unit of thought, the adjective and its accompanying infinitive construct in each parallel unit in the couplet (1:15) represent the polarity between present reality and Qohelet's idealism.

<sup>24</sup>It is through such an observation of the latent reference to an idealistic state that leads M. V. Fox to conclude that Qohelet does not merely observe phenomena and report what he sees; his own preconceptions are in constant interaction with the data that comes through his senses (Fox, 1989, p. 93).

<sup>25</sup>The 'seriousness' of Qohelet's *a priori* preconceptions comes across in exhortative statements for the practice of wisdom in spite of the absence of any tangible reward for the wise. M. V. Fox perceives an underlying assumption in 1:11 that it is imperative to know that there is nothing new under the sun even though that truth may be disturbing (1989, p. 117). Along similar lines, R. E. Murphy finds an "implicit

positive evaluation" of wisdom in Qohelet's lament that both the wise and the foolish meet the same end in 2:16 ('Qoheleth's "quarrel" with the Fathers' in *From Faith to Faith* [ed. D. Y. Hadidian; Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1979] 237). It is in Qohelet's imperatives to achieve wisdom in the face of futility that the assumption of wisdom's excellence moves from being mere subjective preference to the 'seriousness' of a mandatory requirement for humanity. Further examples of this phenomenon include 7:1-6 and 9:10. Both examples promote and praise wisdom while acknowledging the anathema to wisdom's advantage: death. In these passages, the excellence of wisdom constitutes an inalienable component in Qohelet's epistemological make-up without any apparent justification.