‘You do not know what disaster may happen in the land’: echoes of Israel’s city-laments in Qohelet’s closing poem

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[*Preface*: I would especially welcome discussion of the following points:

- the likelihood of historical interest on the part of the author of Ecclesiastes, considered on the book’s own terms and also in the context of other Second-Temple Jewish writing, both wisdom and other genres;
- the relevance of the biblical city-laments as a comparison for Qohlet 12
- the impact and reception of the fall of Jerusalem in later literature
- ‘collective memory’ as a possible way of thinking about one kind of intertextuality in biblical literature.]

The biblical book of Ecclesiastes, and its author who goes by the Hebrew pseudonym Qohelet, are famous for saying that there is nothing new under the sun, and in the literary tradition of the modern West that has been taken as the motto of a book that is universal in scope, Greek in its thought, and floating completely free from the Jewish particularism and the historical concerns of the rest of the Bible. I want to suggest that that way of seeing this book – as philosophical, universal and non-historical – may be a familiarisation of something a bit stranger. Instead, I would argue that ‘nothing new under the sun’ is in fact a historical deduction made by Qohelet on the basis of long-range historical observation: he despairs of history because history repeats itself and because history is forgotten, but both of these are historiographic conclusions, made through his study of his nation’s historical traditions.

The particular example I’d like to consider is the famous poem which closes the book: from ancient times this has been read as a meditation on growing old and dying, and those thematic concerns are obviously present here: at 11:9 “Rejoice, young man, while you are young” and at 12:1 “in the days of your youth” imply a contrast with old

age, the "days of trouble" on which the poem focusses. And following old age, the approach of life's end is part of the poem's anxiety: 12:5's "eternal home" is the grave,[1] and in 12:7 the return of dust to dust and the spirit to God are established allusions to death.[2] While old age and death are spoken of on the surface, though, readers have always found this poem over-fraught with meaning: the images initially set out as a correlative for the ideas come to predominate, as the backdrop takes over. In this paper I will pursue the possibility that the power of those correlative images lies in their literary history: Qohelet's ruined house and silenced streets bring with them a memory of the urban disaster which is perhaps at the centre of the Hebrew Bible, the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians in 587 BC. I suggest that even if the primary sense of this poem is about old age, it would have been impossible in this book's period to speak of strong men shaking in a wrecked city with the lights going out and the mourners starting to sing without immediately evoking a literary memory of the disaster which was becoming the template on which every subsequent destruction of Jerusalem was described throughout antiquity. Qohelet speaks about future bad luck in terms reminiscent of the Bible's way of speaking about past national disaster, made familiar by the city-lament forms we find attested in the Hebrew literary tradition.

The biblical city-lament genre is attested by one complete example (the book of Lamentations) and many modulated traces in prophetic oracles against the nations or against Israel and Judah, and in some psalms, and the foundational modern studies of the genre are those of Delbert Hillers and F.W. Dobbs-Allsopp.[3] Certainly there are many central city-lament traits missing from Qohelet's poem, such as the personification of the city, the issue of God's agency, the direct address to the deity, or the question of the city's sin and restoration, but the resemblances particularly at the level of scenery and atmosphere are marked enough to for us to suppose that the book of Ecclesiastes, while

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[1] See Seow, p.364, for the widespread Semitic and Egyptian parallels to this expression for the grave, and Krüger p.203 for specifics of Punic and Palmyrene evidence. Fox p.329 cites John F. Healey, 'Death in West Semitic Texts: Ugarit and Nabataea' in Stuart Campbell and Anthony Green, *The Archaeology of Death in the Ancient Near East* (Oxford: 1995), pp.188-91, for evidence in Nabatean, Syriac, and Palmyrene inscriptions.

[2] Gen. 2:7, 3:19.

[3] Hillers, *Lamentations*, Anchor Bible Commentary (1992); Dobbs-Allsopp, *Weep, O Daughter of Zion: A Study of the City-Lament Genre in the Hebrew Bible*, Biblica et Orientalia 44 (Rome: Editrice Pontifico Istituto Biblico, 1993).

being a very different type of literature, does draw on city-lament material as part of its literary heritage and stylistic vocabulary. Generically, these works are completely different, but since Qohelet elsewhere assimilates motifs and ways of speaking from other genres (law, prophecy, history), so too in this case coincidence of genre is less important than the presence of the same language in establishing a general relationship.

I will examine a series of correspondences between motifs in the biblical city-lament tradition and in Ecclesiastes' closing poem; of the biblical parallels, many are from the book of Lamentations, and those from prophetic books are all taken from passages which specifically address the downfall of a city, so the comparison is kept to this particular tradition. Not all of the prophetic city-laments are about Jerusalem, but I have nevertheless included passages such as Isaiah 15-16's lament over Moab; by Qohelet's time, lamentation over Jerusalem had become the classic exemplar to which the literary resources of the genre would naturally be assimilated, so it makes sense simply to consider the biblical city-lament tradition as a whole.

1. Urban landscape

The scene Qohelet creates sounds less like a single house or an estate and more like a city. The writer places events in a public setting of streets and squares, with the roads of 12:5 and the marketplace, the שׁוּק, of v.4 and v.6; although the well of v.6 and the mills of v.4 might belong to a large house, they are perhaps more naturally the shared public spaces that sustain a community.[4] The double "doors on the street" of v.4 are perhaps the gates leading into the bazaar, or the city gates.[5] In a list of terms used in Proverbs for a city backdrop, R.N. Whybray mentions among other things doors, streets, squares, high ground, private houses, windows, bustle, an anonymous crowd, and wayfarers along the

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[4] Seow points out that in the Aramaic papyri from Saqqara, טחנת refers to commercial mills (J.B. Segal, *Aramaic Texts from North Saqqâra* (London: Egypt Exploration Society, 1983), No.20.5).

[5] With Seow, taking the dual this way; Crenshaw too observes that houses had only one door. Fox maintains that not only city-gates but some houses and great buildings had double doors; however, his examples of Josh. 2:19 and Job 31:32 are both construct forms, so it is impossible to tell whether they are dual or plural, and his example of 2 Ki. 18:16 has the form דַּלְתוֹת

roads as marks of an urban setting; we find all of these in our passage.[6] Even if the house is a single house, the description has a typical quality: the plural women looking through windows could be many women at one window, but we are just as likely to visualize many houses, each with its own watcher. The scene created is of a whole way of life.

This gaze directed at the city is obviously at the heart of what makes a city-lament: for example, in Isa. 15 and 16 we find that oracle over Moab which Delbert Hillers calls "a lament turned inside out" (p.38), and there we read "in the streets they bind on sackcloth; on the housetops and in the squares everyone wails and melts in tears" (v.3), like Qohelet's mourners in the streets and "terrors in the road". Dobbs-Allsopp speaks of the "predominance of geography" in that Isaiah oracle as a signal of the presence of the city-lament mode.[7] Jer. 9:19 is formally called a dirge, a קִינָה (v.19), which the women of Jerusalem are to teach to their daughters, and it sings of what is done in the streets and the squares; Amos 5:16 has the motif of city streets and squares as a space for mourning in a predicted lament for Israel, and Jer. 48:38 has mourning in the squares in a lament for Moab. Topographically, the landscape of Ecclesiastes 12 also owes something to the book of Lamentations. In both, scenery is a way of expressing loss, as the minds of both poets keep returning to the city roads and streets: even in the parts of Lamentations where the city is not formally personified, this gathering of feeling around the architectural realia of Jerusalem suggests that something of what the Lamentations poet loves and laments about the city inheres in its physical fabric. The outrage in Lamentations is that these things happened in the streets of Jerusalem itself: so, there the vignettes of citizens fainting and dying and mourning are strung out along a repeated refrain of "in the streets of the city", "in the squares of the city" (2:11,12,19; cf. 4:1,5,14,18). Three mentions of the city streets in these few verses of Qohelet convey that same attachment to a material place and that same sense of the unfitness of mourning in familiar streets.

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[6] 'City life in Proverbs 1-9', in A. Diesel et al., eds., *'Jedes Ding hat seine Zeit...': Studien zur israelitischen und altorientalischen Weisheit* (FS Diethelm Michel), (Berlin; New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1996), p.246.
[7] *Weep, O Daughter of Zion*, p.101-2.

2. Desertion

In Qohelet's city the doors to the marketplace have been closed (12:4), the numbers of women grinding grain have dwindled (v.3), and the well which is normally a meeting-place has become a scene of desolation (v.6). Everywhere is empty. Famously, the book of Lamentations begins that way – "How deserted is the city once full of people", 1:1 – and also ends that way, with Mount Zion desolate and jackals wandering over it (5:18). Qohelet's shut-up city finds antecedents in city-laments elsewhere in the Bible: in the book of Isaiah, the dirge of chapter 32 predicts desertion for Jerusalem, v.14 ("For the palace will be forsaken, the populous city deserted"). In Jer. 13, before a lament cry of "Woe to you, O Jerusalem!" (v.27), Jeremiah weeps over the towns of the Negeb which are shut up, סֻגְּרוּ (v.19), with the same word as Qohelet's shut doors; we find the word again used of Isaiah's desolate city of chaos in Isa. 24:10, which is certainly influenced by lament language – there "every house is shut up so that no-one can enter" (סָגֹר כָּל־בַּיִת מִבּוֹא).[8]

Following on from the closed street-doors of v.4, Ecc. 12:5 also suggests that travellers have become too timid to venture on the dangerous roads ("When one is afraid of heights, and terrors are in the road", *NRSV*).[9] This recalls the generic city-lament motif of no-one passing through – אֵין עֹבֵר or מִבְּלִי־אִישׁ עֹבֵר – found in, for instance, Zech. 7:14, describing the 'empty land' of the Exile, or in Jeremiah 9:9, which calls itself a קִינָה.[10] The place of this no-wayfarers motif in the vocabulary of desertion belonging to city-lament is also attested by Jer. 6:25: "Do not go out into the field, or walk on the road; for the enemy has a sword, terror is on every side", immediately followed by the lament language of "O my poor people, put on sackcloth, and roll in ashes; make mourning as for an only child, most bitter lamentation". Another marker of desertion in Qohelet's city

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[8] There may be further instances of the shut-up house as a leitmotif of urban destruction in Rev. 6:15-16, where people flee to barricade themselves inside, and perhaps similarly Amos 5:19: John Jarick finds these echoes behind Gregory Thaumaturgos' apocalyptic reading of Qohelet in this verse ('An 'Allegory of Age' as Apocalypse', p.21).

[9] Keeping MT here rather than either revocalising with LXX to read 'see' rather than 'fear', or adopting Fox's repointing to מִגֹּבַהּ 'what is on high' to achieve a reference to God (p.327).

[10] J.F.A. Sawyer ('Ruined House', p.528) suggests that the חַתְחַתִּים in Qohelet's road are in fact 'obstacles', as in later Hebrew; if this is correct, it still evokes the 'no-one passing through' motif, though Sawyer goes on to extend the meaning to 'ruins by the roadside'.

scene is the rising voice of the bird in v.4:[11] encroaching birds of different kinds (hooting birds, screech owls, birds of prey) are a standard motif in descriptions of urban desolation, together with jackals, foxes, thorns and thistles as they take over human habitations. The particular kind of desertion in Qohelet's city, then, is part of the literary afterlife of the Hebrew Bible's earlier city-laments which continues down to eighteenth-century picturesque ideas of urban ruin.

3. Silenced agriculture

In Qohelet's scene agricultural life has dwindled, and silence has descended in place of normal working noises: the women have ceased labouring at the mills (v.3), so that "the sound of the grinding is low", v.4,[12] and with it the sound of song, as "all the daughters of song are brought low".[13] Many commentators compare Jer. 25:10 for its silencing of mills and snuffing-out of light; this is the classic expression of the end to agriculture and consequent silencing of song which is a central topos of city-lament: "And I will banish from them the sound of mirth and the sound of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the sound of millstones and the light of the lamp" (repeated with variations in 7:34, 16:9, 25:10, 33:11). Silenced agriculture is a standard of prophetic judgement over cities,[14] but it has more specifically lament affinities too: for instance, the lament in Jer. 9:10 has an end to farming and the noise of cattle, and in Amos 5:16 the farmers leave their work to join the professional mourners, so that, v.17, "in all the vineyards there shall be wailing". In Isa. 15-16's lament over Moab, the vines and fields fail; the presses are still and the vineyard songs and vintage-shouts are silenced (16:8-10).

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[11] Understanding the construction either as *lamed* before the subject as occasionally in LBH (*JM* 125.l) or an asseverative *lamed*, perhaps as in Ecc. 9:4 (Seow, p.358); or with לְקוֹל as an infinitive, 'the bird rises to voice' (so Fox p.325).

[12] It makes little difference whether Qohelet's millers are silenced because they are few or because people are few, so that demand shrinks (so Crenshaw, p.186 and Gilbert, p.104, construing the verb as impersonal); either way, agriculture is slowing and population shrinking.

[13] I take the "daughters of song" to be singing women rather than birds. Seow's proposed parallel of יַעֲנָה בְּנוֹת as "a euphemism for birds associated with death and mourning" is not persuasive: it is not obvious why a euphemism is needed, and those birds are anyway not primarily associated with mourning. The usual sense of בַּת/בֶּן-X is someone who does something; so here, the women are singers. It is as a parallel to this construction that Dahood's often-cited comparison with Ugaritic *bnt hll snnt* is useful.

[14] For instance, Krüger points out the end to singing which is part of the judgement on Tyre in Ezek. 26:13; this is common ground between prophetic eschatology and lament.

Qohelet's women who stop their milling are comparable to the reversal at Lam. 5:13, where, anomalously, young men do the work of grinding, so that silence follows: as the 'daughters of song' are brought low in Ecclesiastes, so too the young men leave their music in Lam. 5:14.

4. Representative population

In Ecc. 12:3, the merismus of ages and social classes - from guards to patricians, from mill women to ladies of leisure - is a trope which city-lament uses to register catastrophe at every level: for example, in Lamentations 5 we read, "Women are raped in Zion, virgins in the towns of Judah. Princes are hung up by their hands; no respect is shown to the elders... The old men have left the city gate, the young men their music" (5:11-14). In Lam. 1:4 we meet priests and maidens; in 1:18 young women and young men, corresponding to each other and as a pair to the priests and elders in the following verse; in 2:21 youth and elder, young women and young men. Lamentations 4 achieves something of the same effect by holding up one group after another as representatives of the universal suffering, though there all of a similar social background. The repeatable function of this motif is attested by its reversal in an *undoing* of the curse on the city in Zech. 8:4-5, where old men and women, young boys and girls are restored to the city streets. The number and the range of people and occupations in Qohelet's poem registers fear and loss at every level of society by exactly the same poetic technique: as well as the working men and noble men, working women and noble women of v.3, there are singers in v.4, and mourners and perhaps travellers in v.5. Thus the blighted city which this writer constructs for his readers is a typical one, familiar from their own national lament traditions.

5. Kontrastmotiv

A further city-lament characteristic here is the *Kontrastmotiv* identified by Kraus in his study of Lamentations – there, famously, "How the gold has grown dim, how the pure gold is changed! The sacred stones lie scattered at the head of every street" (4:1) or

"How lonely sits the city that once was full of people! How like a widow she has become, she that was great among the nations!" (1:1). Hillers calls these reversals of fortune "the 'then and now' pattern, common in Lamentations (beginning at 1:1) and a staple element in funeral songs".[15] We can discern this in Ecclesiastes also, if we acknowledge that in its classic uses one side of the contrast is often implicit rather than explicit: many images in Qohelet's poem turn on an implied contrast, such as extinguished lights, closed doors, weakened strong men, broken vessels.

We could in fact compare Ecc. 12:6 closely with the *Kontrastmotiv* of Lam. 4:1, since smashed vessels in a ruined city are part of a familiar biblical scene of urban desolation, which pivots on the contrast with former splendour. Qohelet has a snapped silver cord, a crushed golden bowl, a broken pitcher and a smashed wheel,[16] and while the mechanics of what happens to each object may not be certain, the final image of a heap of fragments is clear and typical. The destruction of vessels in scenes of urban collapse is widespread, such as in Jer. 13:12-14, where the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem are wine-jars whom Yahweh will smash together without pity; 19:10-11, where Jeremiah is commanded to enact the same visual symbol with a jug; 22:28, where Jehoiachin is a despised pot hurled out and cast away; and 48:12, where the smashed vessels of Moab are part of a city-lament scene. A further possibility is Jer. 25:34, referring to Judah's elders, and here as in Ecclesiastes the vessels are precious.[17] The significance of all these is not so much in the metaphor of human life as a vessel which some of them employ, but in the pictorial use of smashed vessels in a ruined city as part of the typical scene of urban devastation, like that which Qohelet creates here. The *Kontrastmotiv* of the city-lament tradition relies on exactly this kind of captured instant to

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15 Hillers, *Lamentations*, p.147; see also p.18; and Kraus, *Klagelieder*, pp.10-11, 75; Westermann, *Klagelieder*, p.16 and 165-6; H. Jahnow, *Das hebräische Leichenlied im Rahmen der Völkerdichtung* (BZAW 36; Giessen: A Töpelmann, 1923), pp.99, 179-180; and Dobbs-Allsopp, *Weep, O Daughter of Zion*, p.38ff.

16 The first two objects, חֶבֶל הַכֶּסֶף and גֻּלַּת הַזָּהָב, seem to be some sort of lamp or lampstand - either reading with *BHQ* יִנָּתֵק 'tear apart' for the first verb, to suggest an oil-bowl falling from a broken lamp-chain (corrupted to the Qere ירתק and thence to the Ketib רחקי), or with Seow keeping the Qere but understanding it as Jewish Aramaic 'to knock'; thus smashed/struck with a hard blow.

17 Though Holladay emends the vessels of כְּכְלֵי חֶמְדָּה to כַּאֲלֵי, 'pillars', Lundbom keeps MT, and also cites Nahum 2:10 for precious vessels looted in a ruined city.

make its contrast, functioning like the temporal freeze-frame of a still life.[18]

6. Darkness

The darkening of sun, light, moon and stars and the coming of the clouds in Ecc. 12:2 has given rise to many comparisons with prophetic eschatology, where there is darkness at noon on the Day of Yahweh, and grown men writhe and tremble as they do in Qohelet's v.3; Gregory Thaumaturgos in fact replaces the days of trouble in 12:1 with ἡ τοῦ Θεοῦ μεγάλη ἡμήρα καὶ φοβερά, 'the great and terrible day of God'.[19] Several commentators have proposed borrowings from the image-stock of prophetic eschatology here.[20] So for Lohfink in v.2, "The reader would be reminded of the prophetic, and possibly already the apocalyptic, topos of end-time catastrophes" (p.139). For comparison with Ecclesiastes Michael Fox draws out the eschatological motifs of darkness, silence, terror, clouds, cessation of normal sounds, inactivity, depopulation, swallowing-up of social distinctions in disaster, and men quaking, writhing and twisting.

However, all these comparisons with prophetic eschatology may obscure the heritage of lament in Qohelet's poem: many of these things are just as characteristic of city-lament as of the Day of Yahweh topos. It may be that scholarship on this poem has tended to assimilate all Qohelet's echoes of traditions held in common to the pole of eschatology, and so has tended to obscure the closer affinities of the poem to city-lament. Obviously lament draws on prophetic material – you lament because the prophesied threat has happened – and therefore prophetic warnings of coming disaster and laments over past disaster share many of the same motifs, which have a wider currency in ancient

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[18] Cf. Timothy K. Beal: "The most obvious sense here is of an abandoned occupation site. Indeed, images of smashing and breaking are common in biblical literature, especially in prophetic visions of urban ruin… the image here is somewhat like that of a ghost town – the aftermath of a city of chaos" (p.301).
[19] J. Jarick, *Gregory Thaumaturgos' Paraphrase*, p.289; see also his 'An 'Allegory of Age' as Apocalypse (Ecclesiastes 12:1-7)', *Colloquium: The Australian and New Zealand Theological Review* 22 (1990).
[20] Predominantly Fox (following Taylor) and Lohfink; Murphy accepts the suggestion, and Seow and Krüger develop it further along eschatological lines. See too Seow's article 'Qohelet's Eschatological Poem', *JBL* 118 (1999) in which he argues that "The poet now portrays the demise of human life in entirely eschatological terms" (p.212). For specific parallels Fox adduces, among other passages, Joel 2:2a, 6, 10b; Zeph. 1:15, Jer. 30:6; Amos 5:18-20; Isa. 13:7ff. As well as some of these passages, Seow compares Isa. 5:30; Ezek. 32:7-8; Amos 8:9; Micah 3:6; Joel 3:4, 4:15; Zeph. 1:14-15; Matt. 24:29; Mark 13:24-25; Luke 23:45; Acts 2:20. Krüger adds in this connection Jer. 13:16.

Near Eastern treaty-curses.[21] Later prophetic and apocalyptic eschatology draws on earlier biblical city-lament, so the eschatological tradition can easily subsume the city-lament tradition.[22] Nevertheless, taken on its own terms Qohelet's poem is closer to the lament mode than to forward-looking eschatology. Much is lacking here from the Day of Yahweh cluster of motifs: there is no wrath, no fire and smoke; no battle, blood, trumpets, havoc.[23] Instead, the gathering darkness of Ecc. 12:2 is best read in the context of the this-worldly despair of Qohelet's ruined city, not the other-worldly expectation of forward-looking eschatology.

Darkness is in fact equally proper to city-lament ("he has driven and brought me into darkness without any light"; "he has made me sit in darkness like the dead of long ago", Lam. 3:2, 6), and many of the motifs which commentators take as signs of eschatological leanings in Qohelet's poem are equally traceable to city-lament influence. Strong men are convulsed in the lament over Moab of Isa.15:4 ("therefore the loins of Moab quiver; his soul trembles", *NRSV*), as in Ecc. 12:3: that conventional description of the reception of bad news is also a lament motif in several places in Jeremiah.[24] But the main arguments against seeing here "strong echoes of 'the apocalyptic topos of end-time catastrophes'",[25] arise from the emotional register of the poem, which I will examine now.

7. Elegiac perspective

The mood in Qohelet's city is not quite panic, as it would be in prophetic eschatology. In v.1, "the years draw near when you say 'I take no pleasure in them' " is disillusion setting in over time rather than reaction to a crisis, and v.8 concludes the passage with the

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[21] For references see Holladay, *Jeremiah*, p.248; also D. Hillers, *Treaty-Curses and the Old Testament Prophets* (Biblica et Orientalia 16; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1964).
[22] We see this in Isa. 24, and in apocalyptic proper in Rev. 18:22-23
[23] Krüger finds that the eschatological expectations created by 12:2-5aα are scaled down by a movement from cosmic to individual categories in 12:5aβ-7; while this may not be the deliberate critical deconstruction of apocalyptic eschatology that Krüger proposes, his reading of a drop in the eschatological temperature of the passage is a true observation: the whole eschatological schema is not present here.
[24] Dobbs-Allsopp, *Weep, O Daughter of Zion* p.138: Jer. 4:19-21, 8:18-23, 10:19-21; he compares it with similar language in Lamentations, Lam. 1:20, 2:11.
[25] Krüger, p.203, quoting Lohfink.

author's characteristic world-weariness, not with the end of the world. Not everything in these verses belongs to the approach or to the instant of final disaster on the Day of Yahweh; other strands suggest a less urgent, more reflective look taken at a certain distance from the disaster - readers have always found here a tone of regret and even nostalgia, suggestive of a backwardly-cast glance at the city.[26] The loss of pleasure and the mourners going about the streets in v.5 are obviously features of city-lament: for instance, we could compare either Lam. 5:15, "The joy of our hearts has ceased; our dancing has been turned to mourning", or for the most intense expression of the backward look of loss in prophetic city-lament, the language of Isaiah's lament over Moab ("Therefore let Moab wail, let everyone wail for Moab. Mourn, utterly stricken, for the raisin-cakes of Kir-hareseth… I weep with the weeping of Jazer for the vines of Sibmah; I drench you with my tears, O Heshbon and Elealeh" – see 15:2-3; 16:7, 10-11). These comparisons modify the impression of suddenness which some readers find in Qohelet's tableau: for Seow, the grinding stops because there is sudden death, and he compares the women suddenly taken from their grinding at the eschaton in Matt.24:40-41 and Lk. 17:34-35. But the silenced mills may belong not to the eschatological instant but to the backward look at the ruins of the post-disaster world.

This elegiac perspective is partly created by the focus on old age. The passing of youth is an elegiac theme, but youth and age are more than just a theme at the close of the book of Qohelet: the implied authorial voice here itself speaks from a perspective of old age and experience. The discovery in 11:10 that "youth and the dawn of life are vanity" is a discovery only made once these have passed; the fictional conceit of address to a young man ("Rejoice, young man", 11:9) is part of the rhetorical stance of the wise old sage, and in this closing chapter of the book the persona of that sage has a more pronounced presence – straight after these verses we are explicitly reminded that we have been listening to a wise man, 12:9.

In keeping with this age-to-youth elegiac stance, the disaster itself sounds experienced. That perspective is achieved here by the temporal frame of the passage:

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[26] There is certainly a backward look in some prophetic eschatology - for example Isa. 24:7-12, which is similar in many ways to Ecc. 12 - but that itself is part of the heritage of lament in later prophetic eschatology; Isa 24 owes much to city-lament.

although the three "until" clauses introduced by עַד אֲשֶׁר לֹא create a future reference, those future events are cast in narrative forms which give the events a story-like, almost witnessed quality, rather than an abstract contingency. Claus Westermann observed that the classical lament is "another way of formulating an announcement of judgement"[27] – that is, even when the event has not yet happened, the rhetorical perspective of a dirge is that of an observer looking back. In exactly the same way, even though Qohelet's picture of a ruined city falls within the formally forward-looking "until" phrases, those hypothetical clauses are curiously lengthened and filled with narrative content so that the envisaged disaster sounds already experienced. The contrast between human actions and the instantiation of smaller objects strengthens the impression of witnessed rather than hypothetical events: at v.5, the three circumstantial clauses (almond-tree, grasshopper and caper-berry) step outside the action of the narrative tense-forms and focus on the backdrop of nature, and whether these represent nature flourishing in contrast to man[28] or nature withering in symmetry with mankind,[29] they nevertheless belong much more to a scene being observed than to a future which is only imagined; Michael Fox uses the analogy of cinematography for this whole passage.

In this treatment of what is felt as past experience, Qohelet's poem has something in common with the book of Lamentations. It was N. Gottwald who gave currency to the observation that "the designation of the Day of the Lord as past is absolutely unique to the Book of Lamentations";[30] the point of view there is that of someone who has been through the siege and fall of the city, and this passage in Ecclesiastes has its closest literary affinities with that point of view.

These seven motifs in Qohelet's poem, then, together draw it into the pattern of biblical dirges over fallen cities, especially Jerusalem, which was made normative by the book of Lamentations and which grew over time to become the standardised way of

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[27] Claus Westermann, *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech*, tr. Hugh Clayton White (London: Lutterworth Press, 1967), p.202.
[28] With Krüger p.203, Fox p.328, Schwienhorst-Schönberger *Nicht im Menschen* p.229, Sawyer, 'Ruined House' p.529, and Loretz p.191.
[29] With Seow and Gordis.
30 N. Gottwald, *Studies in the Book of Lamentations*, p.84.

speaking of national disaster in Second-Temple Judaism.

Finding all these memories of city-lament language here in Ecclesiastes is not strange when when we look closely at the nature of the threat which has given rise to this advice to a young man to rejoice and to remember. If one aspect of Qohelet's complaint is historical calamity, then that would be appropriately expressed in language that is coloured by the Hebrew Bible's paradigmatic calamity of the fall of Jerusalem. I suggest that historical accident is indeed in view at the beginning of chapter 12, because the opening of the whole meditation in chapter 11 recommended risk-taking on the grounds that history is full of sudden reverses - 11:2, "you do not know what disaster may happen on the earth / in the land", and there follow a number of examples of the inscrutability and suddenness of events (cloudburst, falling trees). Death is certainly in Qohelet's focus in the poem of Chapter 12, but the time-frame is longer than individual death: in 11:8 the days of darkness will be many; in 12:1 there will be days and years of trouble and no pleasure. Days of darkness and days of trouble elsewhere in Qohelet are experienced in this life rather than after death, and they arrive not through old age, but through the changes and chances of events: so in 7:14 the day of trouble is part of present experience, or at 5:16 there are those who eat in darkness all their days because of riches lost in a sudden collapse. In fact the contrast in verses like 12:1 is not so much between youth and old age as between youth and trouble, in the coming dark days. Those terms darkness (חֹשֶׁךְ,, Lam. 3:2, 3:6) and trouble (רָעָה, Lam. 1:21) for the Lamentations poet are ways of describing the experience of national catastrophe. For Jeremiah, that phrase יוֹם רָעָה, 'day of trouble', in Qoh. 12:1 has a technical historical sense: in Jer. 17:17-18 and 51:2 the יוֹם רָעָה is the day of the fall of a city, Jerusalem in the earlier chapter and Babylon in the later chapter.[31] So the argument of Qohelet 12 is something like: youth has to be enjoyed because if a man lives long enough he will see troubles, of the kind mentioned in vv. 2-7, scenes which, in the linguistic milieu of this book and its readers, have associations of their shared national catastrophe and its literary afterlife in their laments. When Qohelet

31 Cited by Seow. This chimes in with Krüger's suggestive idea that the dark days of 11:8 are those that an old man looks back on (p.196). Krüger also argues against understanding 12:1b as a reference to the bad days of old age: as he points out, that would introduce a tension with the injunction in 11:8 to rejoice in all of one's years. For him too, the bad days of 12:1 are bad days that come with ongoing life, but are not the specific pains of physical aging (p.198, p.204).

speaks of trouble in an individual life, the language which comes immediately to hand for him brings with it memories of the great trouble in his and his readers' common literary history.

Finally, the proposal to see city-lament language in the closing poem also fits well with its position within the whole book. The disintegration of a city with its arts and livelihoods here is an undoing of the creation of the king's palace and domains with its servants and singers in the royal boast of Chapter 2; it is as if we are invited to witness the collapse and decay of that splendid establishment. Verbal echoes between the two passages draw them into comparison, and invite us to see the ruined city of Chapter 12 as the Jerusalem of 1:1 and 1:12, so that it is aptly spoken of in the language of Israel's city-laments. The set-piece royal boast began at 2:4 with the building of houses and vineyards, so the burgeoning landscape we were there introduced to was a city landscape like that in the desolate picture of chapter 12. The gardens, parks, fruit trees and flocks which flourished in 2:5-7 find a negative counterpart in the failing agriculture and disordered vegetation of the closing poem (12:6); pools irrigated the king's gardens in 2:6, whereas water seems to have dried up or failed at the spring and the well of 12:6. The king of 2:7-8 boasted of his many menservants, maidservants, and singers male and female; the singing-women are silenced in 12:4, and the men and maids of the house are faltering in their work, 12:3. The city of 2:8 was a store-house for silver, gold and precious things; silver and gold are spoiled along with common vessels at 12:6. Commentators have shown how both of these literary constructions also weave allusions to Genesis into their fabric, and the difference in their use of creation traditions crystallizes the difference in their two conceptions: the first is a little Paradise, albeit an ironic one, while the second is a Fall.[32] The second picture is like Dorian Gray's portrait to the first: all is crumbling and decaying.

In the closing poem as so often in Ecclesiastes, the surface trouble is individual but the language is haunted by national troubles. All of this strengthens the possibility that the author writes under the influence of his own national literature and national

[32] Arian Verheij sees Eden in 2:4-6, comparing Gen. 1 and 2 for the language of planting, a garden, trees of all fruit, watering, sprouting and making, in his 'Paradise Retried: On Qohelet 2:4-6', *JSOT* 50 (1991).

history: he writes about the fall of a city in language which by this period is 'marked' for his readers as belonging, in the closest instance, to the growing body of tradition about the fall of Jerusalem. A phrase of Maurice Halbwachs' is suggestive for the importance of the city backdrop to Qohelet's closing poem: "We ask how recollections are to be located. And we answer: with the help of landmarks that we always carry within ourselves" – the ruins of Jerusalem, carried within the collective memory of Qohelet and his readers, are here a landmark that acts as the location for recollection. Certainly the closing admonitions to the book in chapter 12 lament the inevitability of death and of trouble in life, but they do so in language evocative of the programmatic troubles of the nation.