THE LAND ISSUE AND QOHELETH

by

ADRIAN JACOBS

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Abstract

This mini-dissertation is an investigation into wealth and poverty, land and class issues. These issues are very topical in the current South African political debate. The land issue, especially, is and will for the foreseeable future remain, a contentious issue especially on the African soil (cf. for instance the Zimbabwe situation, Khoi-San land claims). The question asked is, can the Bible make a valuable contribution to solving these problems?

This study investigates whether Qoheleth can make a meaningful contribution to issues such as wealth and poverty, class and land. The book Qoheleth was chosen for its apparent “revolutionary” stance against traditional wisdom. In wisdom literature and tradition, the sages are known to situate themselves between the wealthy and the poor. Forming part of the protest phase of development of wisdom thought, it was necessary to evaluate Qoheleth to determine on whose side he is on, the haves or have-nots? Does he also protest against economic injustice? An ideological appreciation of Qoheleth was done to determine this.

It was found that Qoheleth reinscribes the *status quo* of his time in terms of established hierarchies. He disappoints on the issue of the haves and the have-nots and does not provide a way out of social injustice. He certainly is not much of a voice for the have-nots. Qoheleth’s apparent “revolutionary” stance is rather an intellectual reaction against the doctrine of retribution, but not in a political or social sense. The Old Testament prophets might be far more useful in addressing current issues on social injustice.
Opsomming

Hierdie skripsie fokus op kwessies van rykdom en armoede, grond (-besit) en klassisme. Hierdie kwessies staan almal in die brandpunt van die huidige Suid-Afrikaanse politieke debat. Grondbesit is en gaan in die toekoms steeds ‘n kontensieuse saak bly op die Afrika-kontinent (vgl byvoorbeeld die Zimbabwe-situasie, die Khoi-San grondeise). Die vraag wat gevra word is, kan die Bybel ‘n bydrae maak tot die oplossing van hierdie难题e? Hierdie studie ondersoek of Prediker wel ‘n sinvolle bydrae te maak het oor kwessies soos rykdom en armoede, klas en grondbesit.

Die boek Prediker is gekies omdat dit oënskynlik “revolusionêr” vertoon in sy reaksie teen tradisionele wysheid. Die wysgere in die wysheidsliteratuur en tradisie is bekend daarvoor dat hulle nie kant kies vir die rykes of armes nie. As deel van die protesfase van die ontwikkeling van wysheidsdenke, was dit nodig om te bepaal aan wie se kant Prediker staan, die besitters of besitloses? Protesteer hy ook teen ekonomiese onreg? ‘n Ideologiese waardering van Prediker is gedoen om dit te bepaal.

Uit die studie het dit geblyk dat Prediker die status quo van sy dag in terme van die gevestigde hiërargieë, reïnskribeer. Hy stel teleur wanneer dit kom by die besitters en besitloses en bied nie ‘n oplossing vir sosiale onreg aan nie. Hy is nie veel van ‘n stem vir die besitloses nie. Prediker se “revolusionêre” indruk wat hy skep is eerder intellektueel van aard en gemik teen die vergeldingsdogma, maar nie in ‘n sosiale of politieke sin nie. Die Ou-Testamentiese profete hou veel meer belofte in om huidige kwessies van sosiale onreg aan te spreek.
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Chapter One

Methodological Orientation

1.1. Introduction

Land, and especially land ownership, is a very important subject at the present time. National and international news headlines have been dominated by subjects connected with land issues. International news headlines bombard us with scenes of war and bloodshed and the fight for land. Ethnic groups have fought bloody wars in the quest to own or even regain land. Examples of this are the century old skirmishes between Israel and the Palestinians for ownership of the West Bank and Palestine in particular. In Africa, civil wars have resulted in the displacement of numerous people from their country. Furthermore, the loss of land and displacement from their countries has been accompanied by much bloodshed for most people.

Land restitution has become the focal point of political debates in several countries including South Africa where the Land Restitution Act has been hotly debated. Land restitution has to do with the handing back of land to those who are deemed the rightful owners of the land who are those indigenous groups of people who were forcibly removed from the land by those who came to settle there. A case in point would be the Khoi-San of the Kalahari who have had territories that once belonged to them returned. Most of these land restitution cases are shadowed negatively by racial division. However, the question that needs to be asked is, who are the rightful owners of the land? Or, are there owners of the land? Can the Bible perhaps help?

Mosala (1991:20) states that to define an individual’s place within society is to raise the issue of land and economics, which are closely related and interdependent. Because of these closely related realities, there exist two distinct entities: the landowners and the landless. Landowners (“haves”) are those individuals who have the financial resources to
own land. Landless individuals ("have-nots") are those who do not have land because of poverty or even because of displacement.

1.2. The Problem

The following questions highlight the problem that I want to investigate in this study:

- What impact does institutionalised classism have on the land debate?
- Who is the rightful owner of the land?
- Does Protest Wisdom, and especially Qoheleth, have any meaningful contribution to make to the land debate?
- With regard to institutionalised classism, that is the "haves" and the "have-nots", which side seems to be more favoured by Qoheleth?
- With regard to my own ideological stance and views on land issues, poverty and wealth, what subjective position is taken in regard to the "haves" or "have-nots"?

The problem that is under investigation in this study is land. Certain questions were raised but even these barely scratch the surface of this immense problem. Land plays an integral role in the economy as well as the national identification of any country. Therefore the problems that are associated with land and accompanying injustice make this a contentious topic. The problems are clear: land ownership, restitution for land lost, land redistribution, land claims as well as the infamous land grabs that are reported in international news. This study proposes to investigate this problem by touching on these questions and providing an Old Testament (Protest) wisdom response to the issues raised.

It must also be mentioned that the major problem with land issues is the distinction between landowners and the landless. Let it also be said that such class distinction is
prevalent in every society and has been so since ancient times. Class distinction is often institutionalised and therefore appears to be impregnable. Between these two classes is a deepening divide that has split many nations. This is therefore not only a study on land issues, as the title indicates, but class differences as well because landowners oppress the landless on numerous occasions. Poverty and wealth and related issues will also come into focus.

This study will investigate whether Qoheleth makes a contribution to land (and related) issues and whether he proposes to solve them or whether he is taking a stance for either the “haves” or the “have-nots” (the landowners or the landless respectively).

1.3. Purpose and Aim

The land issue is, and will for the foreseeable future remain, a contentious issue - especially on African soil. Apart from the examples mentioned already, the Zimbabwe crisis is a prominent case in point. The question of whether or not the Bible has something to contribute to such a contentious topic has often been asked. Good answers have been given on inter alia, Old Testament sentiments about family, land and property (cf. Wright 1990). The land issue has also received attention from a black liberation theological perspective attempting to provide moral support for land ownership for the poor and the disadvantaged (e.g. Mosala 1991). Apart from its contribution in terms of content, the last-mentioned study immediately puts ideological readings of the Bible in general at the top of the methodological agenda. All readings of the Bible are (ideologically) “interested” but not all readings are necessarily good.

Utilizing ideology as a hermeneutic tool (cf. Robbins 1996:95-119), an appreciation of land, class, wealth and poverty in the book of Qoheleth will be conducted. The implied author, as well as some of the interpreters (commentators) of the book, will be profiled, in terms of their values regarding land and related issues, to determine whether or not Qoheleth has a contribution to make to land issues. Qoheleth is part of the wisdom corpus of the Old Testament, which sides with the “haves” rather than the “have-nots”
(Spangenberg 1991:243-262). It differs, however, in that it is protest wisdom from mainstream unproblematic wisdom. Whether it also protests on behalf of the “have-nots” is the main aim of this study.

1.4. Methodology: Ideology criticism

The methodology that will be used to assess the ideological position of Qoheleth on land and class issues is Socio-Rhetorical Criticism as proposed by Vernon K Robbins: “Socio-rhetorical criticism is an approach to literature that focuses on values, convictions, and beliefs both in the texts we read and in the world in which we live” (Robbins 1996:1). Within Socio-Rhetorical Criticism there are “multiple textures in a text” that indicate its rich texture. These multiple textures can be divided into the following: “Inner texture, Intertexture, Social and Cultural texture, Ideological texture, and Sacred texture” (Robbins 1996:3-4).

Inner texture is mainly concerned with the relationships between words, sentences and larger sections in the text while Intertexture is mainly concerned with the textual phenomena that exist outside of a text. This is brought to light by oral-scribal intertexture, cultural intertexture and historical intertexture. Social and cultural intertexture is mainly concerned with how the text can “support social reform, withdrawal, or opposition, and to evoke cultural perceptions of dominance, subordinance, difference, or exclusion” (Robbins 1996:3).

The Ideological texture of a text is preoccupied with the ideology of the implied author as well as the reader or interpreter of the text. The author is calling the interpreter into dialogue and this dialogue is possible because of the text. Sacred texture invokes a definite concern to locate the presence of the deity and the divine in the text.

The purpose of this study, however, is to determine the ideological stance of Qoheleth on land and class issues, utilizing the exegetical insights of a number of commentaries on
Qoheleth. This means that the social and cultural texture as well as the ideological texture of Qoheleth will be highlighted and considered as scholars touch on these issues.

Robbins (1996:71) states that social and cultural texture is “living with a text in the world”. Social and cultural texture is built on the following three topics: Specific social topics, common social and cultural topics and final cultural categories. With regard to this study on Qoheleth, specific social topics and final cultural categories will be incorporated. Specific social topics are concerned with the religious response of the text to the world that it is set in. These seven specific religious responses are “conversionist, revolutionist, introversionist, gnostic-manipulationist, thaumaturgical, reformist and utopian” (Robbins 1996:72-74).

Qoheleth, as is shown in Chapter Four, is a gnostic-manipulationist in his religious response to the world. He teaches that life is vanity and that individuals should live with the anomalies that they face in society, but he does not set out to transform his society. This teaching on how to cope with the anomalies of society finds its expression in the final cultural categories of Qoheleth.

Final cultural categories are mainly concerned with the cultural location of the implied author in the text. Cultural location then finds its expression in the following divisions: “dominant culture rhetoric, subculture rhetoric, counterculture or alternative culture rhetoric, contraculture or oppositional culture rhetoric, and liminal culture rhetoric” (Robbins 1996:86-88). Qoheleth’s cultural location, which ties in well with his religious response, is that of counterculture or alternative culture rhetoric, which will be highlighted later in Chapter Three. Counterculture rhetoric is mainly concerned with providing a new or different mindset that is, to a certain extent, opposed to the dominant culture in providing alternatives to that dominant society.

Ideological texture will be the main emphasis of this study (cf. Chapter Four), when the “Ideological Qoheleth” will be discussed. This texture is concerned with “sharing interests in commentary and text” (Robbins 1996:95). The main emphasis of ideological
texture is people, namely: the implied author and the reader or interpreter. It is built on the following: individual locations, relation to groups, modes of intellectual discourse and spheres of ideology. A study on Qoheleh is concerned with his individual location and the relation to the group that he belongs to and in general the values he stands for. In Chapter Four, this is discussed in greater detail and places Qohelefth in the protest wisdom tradition. When measured against the dominant unproblematic wisdom tradition, he can to a certain extent be described as “factional”.

1.5. My own ideological stance

Finding myself within an ideological-critical framework it is important to lay bare my own ideological stance or subjectivity; why I am motivated to do certain things and to make certain choices. This is also a confirmation of the fact that there is no such thing as pure “objectivity” - even when conducting an academic or scientific study. Robbins (1996:96) states: “the beginning place for ideological analysis and interpretation is with people”. People, in this regard, will be the ‘implied author’ of the text (cf. Chapter Four), as well as the reader or interpreter of the text; i.e. the interpreter of Qoheleth. It should be noted that the ideological stance of any individual is multi-layered; it changes over time. As one continues living one’s life, different ideologies have stronger appeals at certain times. Life therefore shapes our ideology. As the author of this mini-dissertation and interpreter of Qoheleth I shall now expose my own ideological development and current stance from the perspectives of “individual location” and “final cultural categories”.

I was born into a Christian family and I am the second of four children. My parents were, and still are, stern, disciplined and god-fearing people and this was passed down to all of us. Family, school and, most important, the church marked my childhood. Church played an integral role in our community that was, and still is, economically depressed. So, my identity is simple: I was born into a previously disadvantaged ethnic group in a previously disadvantaged demographic area.
The house that I grew up in, in Schauderville, Port Elizabeth, is still my family home, although it has changed over the years by way of extension and renovation. As stated before the area was economically depressed and owning your own house and that small piece of “land” that it stood on was a definitive factor in your family’s social standing in the community. As a child I became acutely aware of the differences between our community and that of the affluent white community near by, where the houses always seemed bigger and the properties nicer.

At a young age it was instilled in me that wealth and poverty were racially bound; the whites were the rich people, the coloureds and blacks were the poor people. Later on, as I became aware of the political climate of the country, I realised that the former Apartheid government enforced this division. Coloureds and blacks were conditioned to stay poor through the education and employment system. The white community of our country constituted the “haves” and the people of colour were the “have-nots”.

I fell in love with education and learning at a very young age and have always excelled in this area of my life. This is evidenced by the fact that of my immediate family I am the only one who has thus far obtained a degree. My secondary education brought to light the real discrepancy that was visible in our country. As a part of the school chess team I had the privilege of visiting other schools that we competed against. I always stood in awe of these schools that existed to satisfy the educational needs of the previously advantaged group of whites. Everything in these schools made me think that the people of colour (coloureds and blacks) were robbed of proper education that would keep them economically poor. Fortunately for me this fuelled me to work hard and to excel in education. I am convinced that education is the key to a greater future and I always encourage young people to study because it will lift them out of their poverty.

As stated before the church has played an important role in my life and there is not one instance where the church was absent from my life. The denomination that I belong to, the Church of the Nazarene, has shaped my life in such a manner that most of my ideological development is in some way linked to the church. Therefore I would classify
the ideological stance of my childhood to have been that of an introversionist. That was my religious response to the world as a child. It may be argued that it should have been reformist like many of the other denominations of that time but our church was, and still is, different.

We viewed the world as evil and the best way to deal with this was to remove ourselves from this world. This was done in such a way that we were even told not to interact with other denominations. Not only did we not interact with other denominations; we were purposefully kept from interacting with other races and ethnicity that made up our denomination. Today I realise that this was wrong; even in the church we were conditioned to think in terms of race. The world was evil to me because of the political climate of the country, as well as the economic depression of my community.

In terms of final cultural categories, my childhood was characterised by being embedded in the dominant culture, where no critical questions are asked and everything is simply accepted. All the values and principles of my childhood were underpinned by various structures of authority. These structures of authority were the government, the church, the school and my family. It must be said that throughout my childhood I lived a very sheltered life.

The biggest culture shock of my life came when I enrolled for my first year at the Nazarene Theological College. For the first time I had to adapt to living with people of different ethnicity and culture. I can honestly say that my four years at college taught me to be accepting and tolerant of all cultures in South Africa. This time changed my ideological stance in that I became militant, leading a quiet fight against the structures of authority of my church and educational institution. I therefore viewed myself, in this period of my life, as a revolutionary, being part of an oppositional culture desiring to bring changes to the social order of my educational institution and life in general. This means that students mainly side together and for a short period of time to form a ‘culture rhetoric’ in opposition to the social order.
Although I became more tolerant of cultures, I also became more intolerant of ignorance, racism that still exists in our country and the social injustices of our day. The social injustices I speak of are the institutionalised divide between the wealthy and the poor. This divide, however, is colour blind and is being experienced by both the previously advantaged and the disadvantaged. Black Empowerment, Employment Equity, Affirmative Action are the tools with which the present democratic government wants to remedy the ills of the past. In my opinion this fosters the growth of institutionalised classism, as wealth is placed in the hands of a few individuals and still the disadvantaged communities remain disadvantaged. The Church, again, is eerily silent about this phenomenon just as it was silent during the Apartheid era.

At present I am a minister in a community church and this too has developed my ideological stance. I consider myself to be a gnostic-manipulationist owing to my intimate involvement with my congregants. I have discovered that life is full of extremes and one can never predict the extremes from day to day. The only thing that people can do is to accept life as it is; you can not change experiences that you have to go through but you can learn how to cope with these situations. However, I do move back into what should be deemed the dominant culture of the day. All of the moral values that I subscribe to are supported by certain structures of authority.

Despite this immersion in the dominant culture, I have not lost my revolutionary “inclination” which explains the appeal of Qoheleth. This book seems, to me, to be “revolutionary” at first glance with its pessimistic focus on life and the synergy between the horizons of my life and those of this wisdom book. However, is Qoheleth really a “revolutionary” in terms of land, class and so forth? This is what will have to be determined in this study.

I consider myself to be very socially minded in all aspects of society: economically, politically and spiritually. Social injustices should be highlighted and there is no greater ill than the discrepancies between the “haves” and the “have-nots” of our society. The age-old adage rings true today: while the rich get richer, the poor get poorer. This is
clearly evident in the housing and property market of our day; millions are left destitute and without proper housing and a privileged few flaunt their wealth by their heavily guarded, boom-controlled homes. My belief is that everybody is equal and all possible action should be taken to address these differences that exist.

My strongest opinion is that the Church has a responsibility to address the social injustices of our day. God is the God of both the rich and the poor; preaching this fact should bridge the great divide. The contribution of the Church should not only be spiritual but socio-economic and political as well. We should not neglect our task in being the “light of the world”; where there is oppressive darkness we must lead our country into God’s marvelous light.

1.6. Structure of Dissertation

This mini-dissertation consists of four chapters.

In Chapter One the purpose and aim of the study are introduced. The dominant purpose is to establish an ideological appreciation of Qoheleth on wealth and poverty and land issues. Can Qoheleth make a meaningful contribution in this regard?

Chapter Two will deal primarily with land and its importance in the Old Testament and its centrality in the relationship with God and the Israelites. An important undertaking in this chapter will be the investigation into the origin of wealth and poverty in Israel’s history as well as the origin of institutionalised classism.

Chapter Three will look at the wisdom literature. The most important aspect of this chapter will be the concentration on the book of Ecclesiastes as a whole. Qoheleth is the main exponent of Protest Wisdom in the Old Testament.

The crux of this study will be found in Chapter Four where the ideological stance of Qoheleth and how it pertains to institutionalised classism, wealth and poverty will be
examined. Qoheleth is also placed within the literary tradition that it belongs to, that is wisdom literature. Therefore Qoheleth’s ideological standing is played against the traditional wisdom and its ideological standing.

Chapter Five is the final summary chapter where the findings on Qoheleth, and whether or not he is useful for our modern times on the issue of wealth and poverty and land ownership, will be noted.
Chapter Two

The Importance and Centrality of Land in the Old Testament.

2.1 Introduction

The focus of this chapter will be on the importance and the centrality of land in the Old Testament. The ever-present nature of land and its importance in the Old Testament points to the significant place that it occupies in the theology of the Old Testament. While it can not be convincingly stated that it could be considered a central theme of the Old Testament, it does carry weight as an important ethical matter.

The most important aspect of the question of land in the Old Testament is that it should be recognized as an ethical matter. Ethics is usually defined as a definite code of conduct: conduct being the manner in which people should act when they stand in relation to others. Israel stood in a relationship with God and that relationship was regulated by certain ethics. Land and the manner in which it stands in relation to the owners of that land is an ethical matter.

An examination of who the actual landowners are is necessary in considering the importance and centrality of land in the Old Testament. Israel is central to this aspect because the Old Testament is the story of how God related to a specific people as the nation of Israel. Therefore, central to the aspect of land is the relation that God had with this specific nation and how they viewed land in their history. The land and the giving thereof to the nation of Israel identified them as a nation and, more importantly, established their relationship with God. Ethics, therefore, is the regulator of this specific and unique relationship because while God gave them the land as a gift, this does not necessarily mean that they are the actual owners of the land. Israel could not do as they pleased with the gift of the land to them. Their relationship with God is foremost in their minds and is the actual reason for the Old Testament. So, Old Testament ethics will be
the major tool employed to discuss the importance and the centrality of Land in the Old Testament.

2.2 Defining the term “Land”.

The Old Testament refers to land in two ways: the first is *eres* and the second is *adama*. *Eres* can be used to refer to the entire earth as used in Genesis 1:1, which shows the difference between what is the known earth and the heavens. Land here is to be looked at as a mass that should be differentiated from what constitutes the heavens. The two entities do not meet at all and should be kept separate. Another definition of the term should be looked at as meaning a territorial area that has specified borders that could be connected to a political entity as is the case in Deuteronomy 1:5. Political boundaries that distinguish two countries from each other should be accentuated in this specific meaning (Preuss 1991:118-119).

Examples of the use of *eres* in the Old Testament are, firstly, how it relates to the distinction between the earth and the heavens. The scripture verses used as reference are taken from the New International Version of the Bible (hereafter NIV).

**Genesis 1:1** “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (NIV).

**Genesis 1:10** “God called the dry ground land, and the gathered waters he called seas. And God saw that it was good” (NIV).

Secondly, how it relates to a territorial area, especially how it demarcates Political boundaries.

**2 Samuel 24:8** “After they had gone through the entire land…” (NIV).

**Deuteronomy 1:5** “East of the Jordan in the territory of Moab...” (NIV).
Adama is primarily connected with the reference to humanity as it is created from the reddish soil and it is to that reddish soil that mankind will return. The land is regarded as the dwelling place of man and should be seen as the civilized world, a structured unity that is also the agricultural soil that marks the political boundaries that distinguish countries from each other. This means that Israel is the receptor in the promise of God and this makes them part of the civilized world and, as such, a demarcated territory of its own (Preuss 1991:118-119).

Examples of the use of adama in the Old Testament as concerns the existence of humanity as part of the civilized world are as follows:

**Genesis 2:7** “The Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being” (NIV).

**Genesis 3:19** “By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return” (NIV).

**Deuteronomy 26:9** “He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey...” (NIV).

So, in essence we have to understand land in terms of the mass which is part of the created cosmos but which is to be distinguished from the heavens and the waters. It is from the land that God formed man and this makes man a part of the created order as well as part of the civilized world. Civilization is distinguished because of the demarcation of political boundaries that is the dividing of the land in general.
2.3 The Origins of Israel

Gous (1991:162) states that there are numerous scholars who assert that Israel originated from Palestine in approximately 1200 BC. This places the formation of Israel in the late Bronze to early Iron Age. Archaeological investigation and study has proved that the name Israel already existed during the above-mentioned period and that it pointed to both a territory as well as a group of people. Also, it is unclear when and why Israel became unified and formed a state. To gain clarity it is important to look at the various hypotheses concerning the origins of Israel.

The first hypothesis the *invasion hypothesis* espoused by William F. Albright and G. Ernest Wright. It follows the Biblical account of the invasion of Canaan by Israel as chronicled by Joshua. This hypothesis basically states that the nation of Israel came about when the descendants of the patriarch Abraham, in Egypt, multiplied so greatly that they constituted a nation. Their growth was indicative of the promise that Yahweh made to the patriarch. Following on this hypothesis, after leaving their slavery in Egypt they came to Canaan and conquered it by military invasion. Canaan became theirs by forcible action as they destroyed the inhabitants of the land before them. Joshua therefore proposes that the territory that was Canaan was actually conquered by what should rightfully be seen as a new ethnic group that formulated a new culture in that specific land (Gous 1991:162). Israel should therefore be seen as a new ethnic group that had formed and structured and practiced their own unique religion of Yahwism.

However, there are definite pitfalls to this hypothesis, as it can be refuted on two fronts. Firstly, the Biblical account of the invasion of Canaan, in the book of Judges, concludes that not all of the tribes of Israel conquered the territory and some of them actually settled with the other nations in the territory. Secondly, archaeological investigation has brought to light that the Canaanite cities, which were reportedly destroyed by the Israelites, were actually destroyed centuries before the Israelites arrived. Also, although it is true that cities were destroyed, it is unlikely to be the work of one nation or even of one exact time period.
The infiltration hypothesis, formulated by Albrecht Alt and Martin Noth, was proposed in reaction to the invasion hypothesis. A point of contact with the invasion hypothesis is that this hypothesis proposes that Israel originated from a nomadic pastoral group. This group was in search of pasture for their flocks and became intertwined with what was an existing agricultural society in Canaan. Therefore this group of nomadic pastoral people settled themselves in an unoccupied area and eventually gained political status and control. The problem with this hypothesis is the question of how Israel gained some form of political control even before it existed as a state.

Alt and Noth then proposed what is also known as the amphictyony hypothesis. This is when a common bond is sought that served as a unification mechanism for a group of people. The most common feature of this form of hypothesis is the central sanctuary. According to this, the fact that Israel assembled together and existed of twelve distinct tribes was reason enough to find a central sanctuary. However, this hypothesis also has some pitfalls that make it easily refutable. Israel did not have only one central sanctuary but twelve because each tribe possessed a central sanctuary. Also, the numbers of the tribes and its members differed from each other (Gous 1991:163).

The theologians G. Mendenhall and N. K. Gottwald proposed the internal revolution hypothesis. This hypothesis holds that because there is no evidence that supports the invasion or infiltration hypothesis it means that Israel might have originated by itself. Israel’s existence should be seen as self-determinative. It has been proposed that there is also no evidence to support that Israel was first a group/tribe of pastoral people who evolved to a settled lifestyle and then into a state. At the core of this hypothesis lies the belief that Israel originated when a group of emancipated slaves revolted against the oppression of the ruling cities, bringing about the birth of a new culture and a whole new society built on the ideology of equality.

A central sanctuary or even a common ancestry, however, does not unify Israel. They are unified as a people and exist as a people because they choose to be. The unifying principle that brought the Israelites into origin is their rejection and revolt of the
oppressive cities. Another unifying principle is the need for a society that is equal and shares the basic resources on an equal basis. Israel also organised itself along the lines of a tribal system that formed part of a whole hierarchical society. All of the tribes were self-determinative in regards to having their own authoritative system that follows the authority of the people as a whole. Therefore this hypothesis proposes that Israel originated as a result of an egalitarian society that identified the need for equality in their society.

The problems with this kind of hypothesis are numerous. Firstly, the sources that were used to construct this hypothesis were not properly utilized. They did not take account of the Biblical version of the origin of Israel. In addition, to propose a revolution for the existence of Israel seems to be off the mark. Another reason for pitfalls in this hypothesis is the reconstruction of the Israelite society. Israel could not be sufficiently termed a segmental society because there are traces of patriarchal authority in its history. Segmented societies of that specific period had no traces of patriarchal society or legal power. Archaeological investigation also casts doubt on this hypothesis in that the cities, and the utensils that were utilized, indicate a history of contact between different groups. In this case there is no indication of one self-determinative group of people but rather contact and interchange between two distinct groups of people.

Lemche proposes the *evolutionary hypothesis* to refute the *revolutionary hypothesis* (Gous 1991:165). He proposes that to construct the origins of Israel, it is important to implement archaeological evidence with anthropological surveys. To convincingly construct the origins of Israel, the Old Testament account concerning their origins must be incorporated with archaeological evidence. Israel’s origins are due to evolution, because from the thirteenth century groups that lived on the outskirts of Canaan and were usually subjected to oppression from the city-states were allowed to settle in Canaan. This was possible only because the authority that the city-states enacted on these groups was in decline. As a result the groups that settled in Canaan settled in areas that were not conducive to proper agricultural work. After some time when the land became arable and they had time to develop themselves, attention was given to political determination of the
groups. Therefore it led to the groups organising themselves along political lines that followed the tribal system of kinship and lineage. Thus the tribes of Israel originated. This paved the way to the monarchy that brought together the different tribes to form the state (Gous 1991: 166).

Of all the hypotheses that have been proposed to construct the origins of Israel, it is the evolutionary hypothesis that gains the most acceptance, as the main exponent of this hypothesis correctly incorporates the Biblical as well as extra-Biblical sources to good effect. It is also more viable than the other hypotheses in that it is scientifically rooted and seems to cover a whole range of questions that come up with this type of study. Israel’s origins, like almost all-major civilizations, evolved over a period of time. In this regard, the sociopolitical entity that is Israel can be properly constructed.

It should also be noted that the evolutionary hypothesis also gains acceptance in this study. This is proved and strengthened when later on in this chapter the origin of wealth and poverty; especially the origin of wealth and poverty in Israel is discussed. The leaning towards the evolutionary hypothesis is evident since it is based on facts Biblical and otherwise. Tension will be created and presented when the theological concept of land is discussed. One of the issues arising here is that Israel’s invasion of land lends credence to the invasion hypothesis. Israel’s history and connection to the land is fundamentally built on theological concepts and might differ from historical, archaeological and scientific facts.
2.4 A Theology/Ethics of the Land

In the construction of a theology or even ethics about the land it is important to look at the importance of land in Israel’s history. We should realise that Israel felt a certain affinity to the land and the reason for that must be examined.

2.4.1 The Importance of Land in the Relationship with Yahweh

Gerhard Von Rad (1943) makes two distinctions in the concept and the importance of land in the Old Testament. These distinctions are connected to what he terms the historical and cultic concepts (Wright 1990:5). The historical concept has to do with the belief that Yahweh Promised Land to the patriarchs of Israel and the realisation of that promise in the conquest and invasion of Canaan. As the concept is termed historical it is held that this promise is realised along the lines of history and formulated by the Yahwistic editor who is commonly known as the “J redactor”. The other concept, according to Von Rad, is the cultic concept that proposes that although the land was promised historically to Israel, Yahweh had sole ownership.

The historical and cultic concepts stand together to form what could rightfully be called the “theology of the land” and is built on the following principles:

1. Yahweh gave the land in fulfillment of the promise to the fathers - the historical tradition;
2. Nevertheless, Yahweh was still the ultimate owner of the land, a fact that was to be acknowledged in various legal and cultic ways;
3. Israel and its land were bound together in what Davies rather aptly described as an umbilical relationship, that is, a relationship determined by the nature of Israel’s own relationship to God (Wright 1990:9).
2.4.1.1 The Historical Concept of Land: The Land Promised to Israel

The historical concept of the land finds its origins in the promise that God made with the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Abraham, the first of the patriarchs was elected by God to enter into a relationship with Him. This is where the first aspect of the election principle according to the history of Israel is realised. As the patriarch became the chosen of God, so too would the descendants of that patriarch Abraham become the chosen people of God. Yahweh made the same promise to the two patriarchs that He first initiated with the original patriarch. Genesis 12:2 (NIV): “I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great and you will be a blessing”. Firstly, we see that this is the very first contact between God and the patriarch and from the outset the election principle is brought to light. God promised unto Abraham, who at that point, was still known as Abram that he would become the father of a great nation. Blessings would be the identification of that relationship with God for Abraham; there is no promise of land in the initial contact.

Genesis 12:7b (NIV) notes the all-important promise of land to the patriarch and his descendants: “To your offspring I will give this land”. Here it comes to the fore that God would give unto Abraham and his descendant’s Israel their own land. Election, promise and gift are reflected in this account, for not only is that a promise to them, but it would eventually take on the form of a gift to them. God told Abraham that he would be great amongst the nations and even father a nation, and that nation would have its own land to identify with. It should be stated that if the promise were to be realised fully, then Israel would become a blessing to the other nations and in so doing fully deserves and merits their election and promise.

As stated previously, God repeated the same promise to the other two patriarchs: Isaac, the son of Abraham, and Jacob, the son of Isaac. In Genesis 26:24 (NIV) we see that God appears to Isaac and repeats the same promise that He made to Abraham: “I am the God of your father Abraham. Do not be afraid, for I am with you; I will bless you and will
increase the number of your descendants for the sake of my servant Abraham”. Isaac enjoyed the same promise as his father did and it was in line with the stature of his father. The picture that is painted is that the promise is extended to Isaac because of the relationship that God had with his father, Abraham. Therefore Isaac was included in the list of the patriarchs to which the nation of Israel traces its roots.

Isaac had two sons Esau and Jacob and it is the latter who became a patriarch of Israel. The story of Jacob and his brother is famous, for the Bible teaches that Jacob deceived his older brother Esau to be in line for the blessing that is afforded the eldest son of the family. His name reflects the manner in which he is portrayed in the narratives as a deceiver. God repeats the promise that is afforded to the other two patriarchs in Genesis 35:11 (NIV): “The land I gave to Abraham and Isaac I also give to you, and I will give this land to your descendants after you”. Here we again see the repeat of the promise and the connection with the land and the descendants is clearly made. Important to the study of the land and Israel is the fact that the name of the nation Israel could be derived from the name of the patriarch. God changed Jacob’s name to Israel to signify his esteem in the eyes of God and the other nations around him. Israel could therefore be identified as a nation as well as an historical figure.

As stated before, it is important for this study to look into the history of the nation of Israel, and a good starting point is to reflect on the promise that was made to the patriarchs. All of the patriarchs were the entry point of the nation of Israel into the history of the world as well as a nation as a whole. The patriarchs were nomadic in their identification with the rest of the people around them, and at some point in the future the nation that was to be the descendants of the patriarchs would be in the privileged position of having their own land. In this instance a case for the evolutionary hypothesis can be strongly made. Israel evolved from a nomadic pastoral group into a self defined highly complex state. This is the promise that God made with them, and on studying the history of the Old Testament, it was a promise that He kept and fulfilled. However, the promise in certain cases and events was not honoured as it was supposed to have been honoured
by the nation of Israel. Israel did not consider their part of the promise as important and fell short on many of the prerequisites thereof.

Describing the patriarchs as nomadic could also suggest, that when God made the promise of giving them a land it was based on agricultural purposes, associated with the reality of gaining new pasturage for their animals. When one territory had been used up it was important for nomadic tribes to find new, fruitful, green pasturage that would assist them in their livelihood. A significant shift in the normal workings of a nomadic tribe is inferred by the promise. Abraham and his descendants would no longer be identified as nomads, and were to settle on the new territory that awaited them. This is not the case in regard to the patriarchs of Israel. God made initial contact with Abraham and assured him that his descendants would live in and on the land, as it is their own. Ultimately the descendants would no longer be seen as nomads but would settle and become a state. In essence, this might be a reality that the patriarchs could not foresee themselves, as, in the future of their descendants, the land became a prized possession (Westermann 1976:138-139).

The focus of this study must now shift momentarily to the realisation of the promise by the Israelites, a promise, as has already been stated, that was made to the patriarchs. In this section of the chapter the study will show how the promise became a reality. Our starting point will fittingly be the Exodus out of Egypt after the groups that could be traced to Joseph, son of Jacob, settled in Egypt where they spent 400 years that were marked by slavery and oppression by the Egyptians.

Even in this time of oppression the Old Testament chronicles that the promises being realised for the people were multiplying greatly. Moses became the leader of the people and was charged with the important responsibility of leading the people out of the Egypt. The Exodus out of Egypt became the most important and central event in the history of Israel, as it is the event that pointed them the direction of the Promised Land. God told Moses that he was to tell the people that they were going to be led to the land that was promised to their forefathers and to them. This we find in Exodus 3:17.
2.4.1.2 The Cultic Concept: Yahweh’s Land

The fact that the land is the sole possession of Yahweh is epitomised by the verse in Leviticus 25:23 (NIV): “The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine...” This verse points to the major tenet of the cultic concept, that Yahweh is the divine owner of the land. Yahweh states clearly in this verse that He is the owner of the land and it must not be sold by any means. Another important fact that this verse indicates is that the land is therefore given as a gift to the people. Divine ownership belongs to Yahweh and He had the right to choose to whom He would give the land. In this there is a definite transition from what is seen as divine ownership to divine gift. Israel therefore had to acknowledge divine ownership and had to solidify their special relationship with Yahweh through cultic and certain legal practices.

Israel was given the gift of the land and certain cultic practices were developed that would govern this gift. Laws were developed to govern and regulate the people concerning the land and the gift to them. All of the cultic practices that were practiced after the settlement of the land connected the people with the idea that the land was given as a gift to them.

The cultic concept that Yahweh is the owner of the land can in no way stand apart from the importance of the historical concept. In actual fact the cultic concept is born out of the historical concept. It is therefore also in this concept that the relationship between Yahweh and Israel finds its expression. Yahweh gave Israel the land as a gift and this meant that Israel became the people of Yahweh that was signified by a certain territory. Canaan became their possession and they settled there, and this identified them as a nation as well as the special people of Yahweh.

One other important factor that stands out in the cultic concept of the gift of the land is Israel being influenced by the nations around them. Their neighbours held the belief that the land also signified that it was the “national and territorial claims of a particular god” (Wright 1990:60-61). This basically meant that the god that was identified with the
people of the land was actually the owner of the land. Here it also gave credence to what is called the divine right of the king to be the owner of the land. Although Israel followed this specific tradition in that Yahweh was identified as the owner of the land, they did differ from their neighbours in that nobody could lay claim to the land. Israel did its best to divert this tradition in that not even the king could lay claim to ownership of the land.

An important factor to consider with the cultic concept of the divine ownership of the land is that Yahweh is also safeguarding the families to which the land has been allotted. Safeguarding of the families is done from the basis that they will not be alienated from the land. It should be seen that this divine gift is a theological reality that finds its expression in securing the family traditions. “The primary feature of this system was the preservation of multiple family holdings in relative equality and freedom. The theological force of the belief in divine ownership of the land is thus brought to bear at the economic level and focused, in its practical effects, on the family” (Wright 1990:63).

2.4.2 Land, the Family and Yahweh

The historical and cultic concept that is linked with the land finds its expression in the importance of the family. Land was primarily allotted along tribal or clan lines, which were in turn constituted from families. Family became the focal point in the security and safeguarding of the land according to Israel. A component in the importance of the land and family is firstly the kin group or simply the tribe. Wright (1990:48) states that the word that is translated as kin group is at times misleading for it does not refer to a single family unit but to several family units that are grouped together to form a self sufficient, self protective organism.

The kin group was important to the sociological set up of Israel in that its place fell between the single-family unit and the tribe as a whole. All of Israel was divided along kin groups that in all reality were seen as the most important social unit. A kin group is also referred to in the text as a territorial unit in the allotment of land to the tribes. “In the process of settlement, kin groups became identified with villages or groups of villages - a
process which is apparent in the occasional interchangeability of kin group names with those of villages” (Wright 1990:50). Your kin group therefore identified the area or territory in which you lived and served as an address.

Second in importance to the kin group was the “father’s house” (Wright 1990:53). This division of the kin group also rested on what is seen as the houses of the father that occupied a portion of the land in the territory of the kin group. It was the most important single sociological unit in the existence of Israel. Underlying this fact was the importance of the family heads in the broader importance of the kin group. Israelites found their identity and importance in this single unit as it was the unit in which the land primarily fell. The father’s houses were the primary landowners of Israel and this was important for three distinct reasons. Firstly, the land-owning households had an important role to play in the “military sphere” (Wright 1990:72) of Israel.

The institution of the monarchy brought about the assembly of a standing military system. Before the institution of the monarchy the kin groups and households constituted the military system of the nation. Kin groups and households provided the soldiers for the army whenever Israel as a whole was under threat. Military duty towards Israel as a nation was of importance because of the idea that the land belonged to Yahweh, and it was their duty to protect the land as well as to protect the honour and dignity of their God. Wars were fought on the basis of theological premises in that nations believed that the territories they were fighting for identified them with their god, and when they defeated the other nation then their god had defeated the other god. Land-owning households were the most important contributors to the military endeavours of Israel as they fought to protect the ownership of the land by Yahweh and the gift of it to them.

Secondly, the land-owning households’ importance in regard to their obligations to the land as well as to their relationship to Yahweh is seen in the “judicial sphere” (Wright 1990:76) of Israel. Family households had to be obedient to the will of Yahweh and the importance of the judicial sphere had to be enacted through them. Israelite households had the right to enact certain laws in an internal and external manner. Laws were enacted
in such a manner that the households did not need any external authority to allow them to enact the laws. The elders or the heads of the families were the official judicial authority in the families as well as in Israel as a whole. An integral factor in the relationship between Yahweh and the nation was the administration of justice and the upholding of the will of God.

The most important function of the family households was the “continuity of the relationship with Yahweh” (Wright 1990:81). Family households were the primary vehicles where the faith, traditions and history of Israel were taught and continued. Fathers, elders and the heads of the families had the duty of preserving and continuing the faith, history and traditions of Israel. Yahweh and the relationship with Him were the primary focus of their teachings, and teaching their children as well as consecrating the firstborn sons to Yahweh solidified this relationship. Thus, importance of the land and its relationship to Yahweh and the family became a primary teaching for the families.

Land, the family and the relationship with Yahweh were intertwined and the primary focus of Israel. The families were the initial and most important contact point in Israel and therefore had to solidify this three-pronged relationship. Yahweh was the divine owner of the land and gave it as a gift to the nation of Israel and this brought them into a special relationship. Israel’s family households had the duty of overseeing and preserving that relationship. Although the nation was the focal point of all the tribes, it was the family that was the primary vehicle of the preservation of the traditions, faith and history of Israel. God vested authority in the families to become land-owning households.


2.4.3 The Ethics that govern the Land

The ethics that governed those who owned land or property in Israel were regulated by three important functions. Firstly, responsibility to the owner of the Land, Yahweh, secondly, responsibility towards the family and lastly, responsibility towards others that they stood in relation to.

Israel’s or the property owners’ greatest responsibility was towards Yahweh. They understood that all the land as well as the wealth and prosperity that they enjoyed were a gift from Yahweh. Another important fact that they understood was that this relationship to Yahweh, and the land especially had certain obligations that they had to adhere to. One of the most important obligations towards Yahweh that is related to the land is the institution and observance of the Sabbatical year. The Sabbatical year found in Leviticus 25:2-7 has two distinct motives, the theological motive as well as the humanitarian motive. Theological motive is seen in relation to Yahweh where the land has to rest in direct comparison of the Sabbath day. The Sabbath day is observed because it indicates rest in the Lord where Israel had to rest and reflect on their relationship with Yahweh. A Sabbath year is where the people have to rest and not work the land and the year must be dedicated to Yahweh as a Sabbath.

The humanitarian motive is seen in that the property owners did not have to work the land and that meant a full year of rest for them. Sustenance would be provided by the food of the Sabbath year and it would be divided amongst the property owners and their workers. Its greatest expression was that at the end of the Sabbatical year every debt that was owed to one’s neighbour or family member would be released. Slaves and workers that were in debt to their owners would also to be released, as well as land that was owed to others. This is basically a humanitarian motive but also has a theological motive. Sabbatical years were to focus on the land as the primary link between Yahweh and the people.
If the Sabbatical institutions were therefore neglected it was deemed evil for Israel neglected its responsibility of social justice and charity. Rejecting the Sabbatical institutions would mean rejecting the directives and will of Yahweh. On investigation it can be concluded that the Sabbatical years were not historically kept but became an ideal. To have kept them historically meant that after every 49 years slaves were to be released and land returned as well as debts forgiven. This was unfathomable in that it meant that the economic monopoly that was enjoyed by certain individuals was to be given back to those from whom they had accrued it in the first place. It is therefore clear that the Sabbatical Year became more of an ideal than a historical reality.

Property owners also had a great moral and legal responsibility to their families and especially the family land. Wright (1990:151) states that this responsibility should be seen as parallel to that of the responsibility to Yahweh. Families were connected to the land and not only in what was to be seen as a present reality for Israel but also a past and future reality. So, property owners’ responsibilities were to the tradition and lineage of their families and the preservation thereof in the future. A case in point is the Naboth incident recorded in 1 Kings 21, where King Ahab came to Naboth and requested him to sell him his vineyard. Naboth flatly refused the offer of the king because he understood that the land was a link to his ancestors and the gift from Yahweh. Therefore he displayed not only the ethical responsibility towards his family past, present and future but also his primary responsibility towards Yahweh.

The last and most widespread ethical responsibility was towards those that the property owner stood in relation to in an external manner. This external relationship found expression in relation to those who worked on the land, those who happened to be on the land that they owned and then lastly to their neighbours. Those who worked on the land are divided into two categories, the slaves and the other workers. Owners had to pay those hired as labourers on a regular basis and without fault. It seems that slaves had more rights than hired labourers as landowners preferred hired labourers because they were cheaper and had fewer legal rights than slaves. Others that were on the land that landowners owned were divided into animals and people. Animals and especially wild
animals were to be protected and not hunted. Produce was to be shared with those who happened to be on the land of the landowners. Responsibility to neighbours and their property was basically that restitution was to be made to the neighbour if any damage was incurred on their property, whether directly or in an indirect manner.

Responsibility to family and to others is primarily linked to the responsibility that landowners had towards Yahweh. Obedience to Yahweh found its expression in the ethical responsibility to others. Failing to adhere to obligations amounted to injustice and sinning against Yahweh. In later texts of the Old Testament especially the Prophets, it is alluded that Israel’s demise was a result of its failure to uphold their ethical responsibilities to Yahweh, their families and others.

2.4.4 The Land lost and regained.

Although Israel as a nation understood that the land was a gift to them and that the land historically linked them with each other, and more especially to their God, it also meant that the land could be lost. Israel knew that they came to be a people and gained land because of the promise and gift of land to them. They did not have any natural connection to the land because they did not dwell on the land from the beginning of time. So, because there was no real pre-historic bond to the land they could not lay claim to the land forever. Again it needs to be stressed that the blessings and the promises of the land as well as those of God, were theirs as long as they were obedient. Disobedience meant that the people would lose the land and their identity with the land would be lost. The people would also lose their identity as a nation.

The most telling indication of this truth is seen in the writings of the prophets (cf also Deuteronomistic theology), which warn against the disobedience of the nation and the losing of the land. In actual fact the main evidence of the land lost is seen and verified by the exile of both the Southern (586 BCE) and fall of the Northern Kingdom (722 BCE). “The exile also demonstrated that as a consequence of this historical connection of Israel to the land, it had to lose its land, but it did not at the same time have to lose its God. The
land was and continued to be a gift of grace which also could once again be taken away” (Preuss 1991:127).

Israel was forced to leave the land because of their disobedience for they were not to pollute the land with idolatry and, in effect, sin. During the exile the Israelites were living in a land that was to be deemed as impure: Babylon. This meant that they had to return to the land that was pure, their own land. A new appreciation for the gift of the land was born and the hope of a return became a strong driving force. The tradition surrounding the land was projected into the future. What this basically meant is that the nation remembered the promise of the land to them by God and projected it into the future. Land would again be promised to them and they were to be led back to the land by God and this would all be a future reality. They were hoping for a new entrance into the land and to take up their rightful place in it. Inheritance of the land became a focal point for the nation and it was deemed essential to receive a portion of the land.

Returning to the lost land by Israel meant returning to the promise and gift of Yahweh. This meant the identity of the nation would be restored, for Yahweh would lead them back to this promise and the relationship that they had with Yahweh would be restored. During the exile it meant that if the nation lost the right to the land, the relationship with Yahweh was also severed and in need of restoration. Although they were to return home and find foreigners in their land, it called again for a renewed conquest of the land as a whole, a conquest that was not achieved by military force but a conquest of a more friendly nature allowed them by the Persian King Cyrus. Israel was well aware that they were to share the land with those that occupied it while they were away in exile. Everyone who had a claim to the land even if they were not Jewish was allowed to have a portion of the land to own. There was to be no division of the land along tribal lines, no king or nationalistic pride but an equal sharing of the land. However, this was the ideal. Social reality bears witness to something else.

An important factor of the Postexilic period is the continuance of the institutionalised classism (cf. next section) that existed before in the Monarchic period. In actual fact it
can be concluded that nothing changed in regards to the socio-economic status of the people of Israel. There was still the obvious demarcation of the wealthy and the poor, the “haves” and the “have-nots”. “Haves” were still the people who owned the land and the “have-nots” were those individuals who worked the land on behalf of the landowners. Economic oppression of the “have-nots” was frequent and injustices were experienced regularly. The “have-nots” did not have anybody that championed their cause as the prophets did during the monarchical period. The sages were quiet and did not commit themselves; they maintained the status quo. All that the sages had to say was that individuals had to accept the anomalies that existed in society.

2.5 Wealth and poverty in the Old Testament

2.5.1 Origins of Wealth and Poverty in Israel

2.5.1.1 Defining Wealth and Poverty

When considering the origins of wealth and poverty in Israel, the question of what is wealth and poverty is immediately raised. When discussing these two realities, what comes to mind is most probably money and economic independence or dependence. Defining wealth and poverty is difficult in that they are defined by looking at those who have money and those who do not. They also differ in terms of societal and cultural definitions. Gous (1991:160) states that the two realities need to be looked at, each on its own merit.

“Wealth has at least two aspects: a material one, which is a matter of possessions, and a sociocultural one, which has to do with circumstances and other intangibles” (Gous 1991:160). Those who are wealthy have access to resources that enable them to meet their needs. Satisfaction of needs means that people have control and access of resources that brings a degree of power and authority. In terms of this study the wealthy will be termed as “haves”. Poverty is the direct opposite of wealth; those who are poor or do not have access or control over resources to satisfy their needs. Another distinction of poverty is
that it takes on three realities just as wealth would, namely: economic, social and political poverty. The poor will be termed throughout this study as “have-nots”.

2.5.1.2 Wealth and Poverty in Israel

Gous (1991:166) states that, at the time of the late Bronze Age and early Iron Age two groups occupied Palestine: the Israelites and the Canaanites. He holds that both of these groups derived from the same ethnicity and even shared a common language but there was a marked difference between them. A tribal, peasant existence identified Israel, whereas Canaan was identified by urban and city existence. Canaanites did not have the ability to produce their own food and were reliant on Israel. The peasants, or in this case Israel, formed what was rightfully the basis of their society that was the cornerstone on which the cities were built.

In the cities lived the “merchant elite” who controlled the markets and production and who could exercise taxation over the peasants. Merchants and peasants had a relationship that was built on two distinct levels. Firstly, there existed the “patronage” relationship in that the merchant provided protection for the peasants in return for their services. Secondly, there existed the “partnership” relationship in that the merchant would partner the peasants in providing them with the infrastructure to produce their goods. This was a dangerous relationship in that the merchants usually exploited the peasants by gaining control over the produce of the peasants. Peasants also easily got into debt with the merchants, and on most occasions, became slaves of the merchants because they were unable to pay their debts. Therefore it must be said that the cities enacted power and control over the peasants because they were marked as specialised societies.

The peasants lived a completely different existence to that of the urbanites in the cities. In the existence of the peasants, the family was seen as the primary unit on which the economy of the peasantry was built. Each family had to see to its own livelihood by working their land through agriculture and stock farming, which in most cases belonged to merchants and landowners in the cities. Outside of the family the economic focus lay
with the kin group that they could turn to for help in times of need. Connected to the kin group was also the clan that connected the kin group to a common ancestry. Secondary to the family is the tribe that incorporates various clans into one and they form the core of the nation. Leadership of the tribe lies with the elders and the heads of the clans. Peasant societies tried to live up to an ideal of an egalitarian society in that they deemed all in their society to be equal.

Israel, however, did not stay as a peasant or tribal oriented society. Israel eventually developed into a state after the institution of the monarchy. States are formed in two ways, the first being along the lines of environmental necessity and secondly according the social needs of the nation. Therefore Israel moved from a tribal group into a state, a necessity to protect themselves from their enemies. Becoming a state placed strain on both the environment and the society. As the new system of state took hold in Israel, it necessitated the adoption of the city-state that was exemplified in Canaan. Tribal orientation in Israel did not die out after the development of the state and those in the cities developed the markets mainly to monopolise them. The merchants to such an extent controlled the markets and the city required so much production that it ventured into production itself and started to compete with the peasants.

The city-state that in Israel was readily identified with the king became the main competition of the peasantry and a threat to their livelihood. This specific development gave rise to an anti-city attitude from the peasantry. Resentment of the city-state was not on the basis of the competition of the production of food and goods but rather the ethics that were prevalent in the city. Peasants believed in an egalitarian society in that they believed in the equality of those who were in their society. They did not have any political authority or wealth that was mainly situated in the cities and could not oppose the exploitation and corruption that was indicative of the city. Therefore if the king or the merchants that monopolised the markets and sought expansion of it exploited them, there was in actual fact no resistance, just a resentment of the cities.
The evolutionary aspect of Israel’s existence is clear in this presentation of the origin of wealth and poverty. Here again a definite case for the *evolutionary hypothesis* is made.

### 2.5.1.3 The Reality of Classism in Israel

Those who lived in the city attained wealth that was realised on an economic level. They are the “haves” of the Israelite society in that they monopolised the markets and stood in direct competition with the peasants in the villages. It is also true that those who can be identified as the “haves” were landowners, in that they owned (most of) the land that the peasants had to work agriculturally. Political wealth was also in their reach as they flexed their political muscle and exploited and oppressed the peasants who lived in the villages. The incident between Naboth and the king Ahab is indicative of the political wealth that is being exploited. Ahab exercised this form of wealth over Naboth because he wanted to increase his personal wealth as well as production. He had access to resources and wanted to control the resource that was the livelihood of Naboth.

The peasants or the village dwellers fell into the “have-nots” class. They did not have access to the resources that the “haves” had and would never be able to exercise undisturbed control over these resources. Their ideals differed from those of the city in that they identified the connection of the land as the divine ownership of God and therefore they could not sell or lose the land. According to the Naboth incident, Naboth realised that the vineyard that he owned was God’s and belonged to his family and this made it impossible to sell. Exploitation and oppression of the “have-nots” were rife in Israel in that the “haves” controlled the markets and exercised taxation over the produce of the peasants as well as their agricultural land. Peasants who fell into debt had to give up their land as compensation and become slaves. Peasants were economically, socially and politically poor and could not oppose the oppression of the cities and had to endure it.
Chapter Three

Qoheleth and Wisdom Literature

3.1 Understanding Wisdom Literature

3.1.1 What is Wisdom?

In the quest to understand and to underpin the literary genre of Wisdom Literature in the Old Testament, it will be advantageous to first define wisdom. Spangenberg defines wisdom as meaning “common sense”, (Spangenberg 1991:228). Common sense has to do with the ability of individuals to make certain well-informed decisions. These well-informed decisions have one intended purpose and that is the balance of life either to create balance in a life that is wrought with chaos or to maintain the existing balance.

Loader (1986:108) states that wisdom is the “reflective outlook” on life, where those who were seen as wisdom teachers would apply their findings to everyday life, so that they could find their way through it. Reflecting would be in the domain of thinking; thinking that had to do with the workings of life and how nature and the world might affect that life. After reflection, the findings would be used to again bring order to life.

Balance, order and harmony are the primary focus of wisdom. The wisdom teachers taught that if you observe these principles of order, it would go well with you. If you go against observing these principles then negative things will happen to you. Thus, wisdom had to do with actions and consequences. Observe positive deeds and you will reap positive results. Observe negative actions and negative results will be reaped. However, in later wisdom traditions the teaching of action-consequence was altered and then it was discovered that good actions and decisions do not necessarily yield positive results.
Loader (1986:110) draws the following diagram to illustrate the basic notion of order in wisdom.

The diagram indicates that God first institutes order. So, the starting point of order is found in God, for He is the Creator of all things. Man has to obey the rules of wisdom that are firstly situated in God the Creator. Obeying God brings about the natural order of the universe. In this regard one can regard Wisdom Literature as having a retributive aspect, namely that if man obeys the natural order as well as the Creator of that order, he will reap certain rewards. Again it should be mentioned that if you obey, success comes to you. On the other hand if you disobey, only failure will come to you.

When man obeys the actual rules of order, he is obeying and submitting to the authority of God. Disobeying the rules of order means you disobey the authority of God and are not willing to submit to God.
3.1.2 Wisdom Books

Wisdom literature in the Bible is confined to the following books: Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes and, outside of the Bible, the apocryphal books of Ben Sira and the Wisdom of Solomon. In these wisdom books we realize that the primary focus of wisdom is to master life by adhering to proverbs and admonitions (Gottwald 1985:563-564). A proverb or reflection has to do with a saying that is adduced when looking at life and its experiences. Here it needs to be said that certain observations are made about life and the wisdom teachers construct proverbs that befit that experience of life. Admonition is when you are called on to conduct life in a manner that is different from how you are living at present.

In this section we will be looking at two of the wisdom books that are found in the Biblical canon. These are the books of Proverbs and Job; Ecclesiastes will be looked at in greater detail further on in the chapter.

3.1.2.1 Proverbs

Proverbs has traditionally been held as the epitome of wisdom and its contents cover a wide range of subjects that address the spectrum of life. Loader (1987:41) states that the book covers almost every topic under the sun, ranging from deep religious and spiritual meditation to teachings on ethical living that can be applied to everyday life. Authorship of Proverbs has been attributed to Solomon because of the assertion that Solomon was a wise man, as set forth in 1 Kings 4:29-34. This attribution does not necessarily imply Solomonic authorship, at least not for many sections of Proverbs that can be dated much later than the 10th century.

The book should be viewed as the collection of wise sayings that utilize the typical genres that are indicative of wisdom literature. These genres are normal proverbs, aphorisms, proverbs of instruction, numerical sayings, reflections and proverbs of praise,
and so on. Loader (1986:107-112) also holds that Proverbs display some of the classic characteristics indicative of Hebrew poetry, such as parallelism and stylistic figures.

Structurally, the book of Proverbs is divided into different collections with the dating that can be demarcated as follows (Loader 1987:40-42):

a) **Proverbs 1-9**: Instructive proverbs that are “attributed” to Solomon. These instructions are cautions that are set out to all to follow so as to be successful in everyday living.
   Date: The first collection is dated from the fourth century.

b) **Proverbs 10: 1-22:16**: This section is also ‘attributed’ to Solomon and contains aphorisms that are short and direct sayings. Redaction techniques are also visible because most of the aphorisms have been designed to link up with one another.
   Date: The second collection is dated from the early post-exilic period.

c) **Proverbs 22: 17-24:22**: Here we read about the sayings of the wise men who are visibly influenced by the wisdom literature of Egypt and Mesopotamia.
   Date: The third collection is dated from the time of the monarchy.

d) **Proverbs 24:23-24**: This is a section of short collective aphorisms.
   Date: Collection 4 is difficult to date.

e) **Proverbs 25-29**: Observations about nature and agriculture are the feature of this section. It is usually characterized as the Hezekiah sayings as Hezekiah copied the words and proverbs of Solomon.
   Date: The dating of this collection is from the reign of Hezekiah.

f) **Proverbs 30**: Here we have the words of Agur that are followed by poems and numerical sayings.
   Date: This collection cannot be dated.
g) **Proverbs 31:1-9**: The words of Lemuel: here we have wisdom in a feminine guise.

   Date: This collection cannot be dated.

h) **Proverbs 31:10-31**: This section includes the praise of the virtuous woman and is a caution against the kind of women who is described in the Lemuel sayings.

   Date: This collection displays features of post-exilic times.

Wisdom in Proverbs urges people to follow the order that has been created by God. Maintaining the created order is the message of wisdom in the book. This is the difference between being wise and being foolish. Foolishness is when you go against the created order and when you go against the God of the created order. Religiosity became a hallmark of wisdom for it included the identification of God as the creator of order. As the wisdom tradition developed and it became a religious system, individuals were being categorized according to their attitude rather than their actions. Proverbs is the symbol of traditional wisdom and the main exponent of the doctrine of retribution. The book accepts and espouses that for every good action there is a favourable result, and for every bad action there is an unfavourable result.

### 3.1.2.2 Job

Job has been widely accepted as forming part of the traditional wisdom books that are found in the Old Testament. Loader (1987:1) states that Job is not only one of the greatest literary works of the Old Testament, but also of world literature. Many scholars throughout the ages have not been able to underpin a widely accepted message for the book of Job. It has been stated that it is difficult to establish an exact meaning and message for the book, for the uniqueness of Job is that it can be read and interpreted in various ways. This, in fact, is the hallmark of every great literary work and thus it is why Job is considered as one of the great literary works of world literature.
The book of Job can be structurally divided into three parts: the first part is the prologue; the second is the main thematic part; and the third, the epilogue. Both the prologue and epilogue are constructed to form a framework of prose. In the prologue the story is told of how Job had to suffer because of the test of his godly and wise character. It is also in this section that we see his friends coming to sympathize with him.

The epilogue is where the roles are reversed in that the wrath of God is expressed against the friends of Job because they spoke ill of the workings of God in the life of Job. Job is again blessed and elevated by God for not speaking “wrongly” about God. Both the prologue and the epilogue form the framework of the whole text. In the main poetic section we see the frustrations of the friends and Job building up and coming to a climax. One of the striking features of this section according to Loader (1987:2) is that Job actually challenges God to show that He is just. Then the climax follows where God actually responds and Job is forced to retract all the negative things that he said.

The meaning and message of Job is difficult to establish because of the results that should be gleaned from the research work. The research models that should be incorporated are the “wisdom model”, the “psalmist model”, and the “judicial model” (Loader 1987:6-7). Each of these models has a distinct feature that allows a grasp on the book to interpret and establish its meaning and message. The “wisdom model” provides for a wider “framework” that runs through the whole book of Job. It is in this wisdom model that the doctrine of retribution is highlighted; this doctrine states that good deeds bring good results. Job displays an outpouring of emotions that is typical of the psalms and this is therefore indicative of the psalmist model of interpretation. There is a challenge laid against God, by Job, that take on the form of a lawsuit and indicating the “judicial model” (Loader 1987:6).

The book of Job exhibits the three phases of the development of wisdom, namely: the unproblematic or traditional phases of wisdom, the rigid phase of wisdom and protest wisdom. A distinct feature of unproblematic wisdom that is displayed in the book is the doctrine of retribution that is brought to light by the friends of Job. They are convinced
that every good deed will be followed by good results and that the opposite is also true, that for every bad deed individuals will be punished. Therefore they try to convince Job that his suffering is due to the fact that he sinned and God is punishing him. Job reacts to this idea and protests against the doctrine by pointing to his own life experiences. Protest wisdom is then a distinct feature of the book of Job as he clearly protests the teaching of unproblematic and rigid wisdom (Loader 1987:6-7).

### 3.1.3 Development of Wisdom

To understand the development of wisdom we must first appreciate the different eras of wisdom in the history of Israel. As the history of Israel took shape so too did the wisdom tradition.

The eras of wisdom in the Israelite history can be categorised by three periods. These periods are the Premonarchic period, the Monarchic period and lastly the Post-exilic period. The Premonarchic period was just before the formation of the state and wisdom in this period was characterised as tribal or clan wisdom. Wisdom was situated within the clans or tribes that constituted the nation before the formation of the state and the monarchy. This form of wisdom finds its origins in what Morgan (1981:38) terms “popular wisdom”. Popular wisdom is just what its name indicates, popular teachings or ethics that were well known and widespread at that specific period of time. Characteristics of popular wisdom were proverbs, parables, riddles and fables (Morgan 1981:34-36). It is therefore natural that popular wisdom would then evolve into clan or tribal wisdom that was adopted by tribes or clans and structured in such a way that it became indigenous to that specific tribe. Tribal wisdom was located in the family, and the focus remained there, for the main exponents or teachers of tribal wisdom were the heads of the families as well as the elders of the clan or tribe (Spangenberg 1991:230).

The following period in Israel’s history was the Monarchic period, when the tribes of Israel were assimilated into a state and a king was instituted. Wisdom, therefore, also underwent a change in that the location of wisdom that was once situated in the clan or
the families moved to the court of the king. No longer was wisdom just the domain of the tribes; it now became known as court wisdom and the courtiers became the main exponents of wisdom teachings.

A last period in Israelite history is the Postexilic period. This period occurred after the return to Jerusalem and Judah by those who had been taken into exile. Where the courtiers during the monarchic period were the teachers of wisdom, now a new class of sages evolved in this period, namely the wisdom teachers. Schools of wisdom were formed and wisdom teachers or sages took over the role of wisdom exponents.

Three different phases of wisdom can be fitted into the different eras of Israel’s history. The three phases of development of wisdom are the unproblematic phase, the phase of rigidity, and the phase of protest wisdom. Unproblematic wisdom conspicuously reflects the doctrine of retribution. Cause and effect were the main principle behind this doctrine. Wisdom teachers taught that there was a direct correlation between actions and consequences. Every good or positive action would bring about a favourable result. In actual fact it should be understood that the teachers taught that this is true wisdom. Wise individuals understood that wisdom was about order by God and when you maintained and obeyed the order created only favourable results would be reaped. Opposed to this is that bad actions would mean the reaping of negative results and this was to be avoided. Here the distinction between wisdom and foolishness was signified. This phase extends right across Israel’s history and is markedly represented in the book of Proverbs.

The next phase of wisdom took on a form of rigidity in that the basic tenet of the doctrine of retribution was rigidly observed. In this phase the result is focused upon and from there inferences are made to the possible actions that led to the results. It is in fact still the doctrine of retribution operating here, but viewed from the consequences to the causes. A prime example of this kind of argumentation is Job’s friends and this phase of rigidity is found primarily in the monarchy and post-exilic eras.
The last phase of the wisdom tradition is the phase that is correctly termed as protest wisdom. As stated before, protest wisdom is the main characteristic of the Postexilic period. Protest wisdom rejects and opposes the teachings of unproblematic or rigid wisdom. Wisdom teachers in this phase reject the doctrine of retribution and the rigidity with which it is upheld. Where unproblematic wisdom finds a direct correlation between the principle of cause and effect and works from that premise, protest wisdom finds no such correlation. A good result will therefore not be the effect of good actions; bad results could also be garnered from good actions or intentions. Wise or righteous people might not reap favourable results, but could also reap unwanted bad results. In this form of wisdom there is no guarantee that good intention brings good results, thus making the doctrine of retribution null and void. Prime examples of this phase of wisdom are Job and the book of Ecclesiastes. Job, however, stays optimistic whereas Qoheleth (Ecclesiastes) is pessimistic about life.

3.2 Wealth and Poverty within the Wisdom Perspective.

In understanding wealth and poverty in the wisdom perspective it is important to look at the issue from two different angles. Firstly, it is important to look at the economic position of the wisdom teachers (sages). Secondly, it is important to look at the development of wealth and poverty in the wisdom perspective.

“The bearers of wisdom are caught in class contradiction. They enjoy a measure of class privilege through their vocational status and education” (Gottwald 1985:574). This allows them to view the socio-economic class divisions as an outflow of the created order. Sages are therefore preoccupied with adherence to the order that will bring about success and prosperity. Disobedience to the order will result in individuals experiencing poverty or oppression. They therefore stand in the middle between the poor and the wealthy but do not take a stand with either. However, their teachings did have an indirect impact on government policies, as they were employed in the court of the king (Gottwald 1985: 574). The most important contribution that the sages make to the teachings of
wealth and poverty is to maintain the status quo. This will now lead us into the development of wealth and poverty in the wisdom perspective.

In the Premonarchic period the notion of wealth and poverty did not exist. Clan relationships were strong and this meant that everyone lived closely together and everything was shared amongst the people. They were a classless society adhering to the notion of “limited goods” and adhered to a philosophy of “wantlessness” (Robbins 1996: 83). During the Monarchic period the solidarity of the clan system vanished and people developed diverse occupations. Economically things changed for the people of Israel, as they had to become more productive to uphold and support the state. A social class system took shape with the landowners and the peasants forming a marked distinction (Spangenberg 1991:236). Exploitation of the needy became a feature of the social and economic changes. The wisdom teachers did not support the exploitation of the needy but did not speak out authoritatively against it. They took a stance somewhere in between: they upheld the status quo.

The period of the divided Kingdom also brought about the differences between the haves and the have-nots. In the Southern Kingdom the aspect of land forfeiture continued and the reality of land barons became more prominent. In the exploitation of the peasantry, widows and orphans became an unwanted feature. All of the prophets became the champions of the poor, whereas the wisdom teachers had a different motive in defending the poor. Their motive had to do with adhering to the social order; here the rich and the poor had to co-exist together. Wisdom teachers did not oppose the class of the poor but taught the maintenance of the status quo. Rich and poor had to learn how to live together and not necessarily apart. Poverty was due to laziness and the pursuit of pleasure and not necessarily the exploitation of the poor, as the prophets taught (Spangenberg 1991:236). In the Northern Kingdom, the same social and economic changes that had swept through the Southern Kingdom, took hold. The wealthy land barons again played an integral role.

The protest wisdom that is evident in the book of Job chronicles Job’s reaction to the assertion of his friends. They display the typical teaching of the doctrine of retribution in
that “the righteous experience good fortune and happiness, while the wicked experience disaster and misery” (Spangenberg 1991:240). In their assertion, because Job is experiencing suffering it must be that he is wicked and sinful. Exploitation and oppression of the poor is the work of the wicked and therefore, not only is Job wicked, but he is also an oppressor. Job rejects this idea and points to his own life experiences that suggest that good people can suffer as well. He did not deal wickedly and yet he is suffering calamity: thus protest wisdom is given credence to.

The doctrine of retribution is not solely applicable to the workings of God. During the Hellenistic period there is a real protest against the doctrine of retribution and Qoheleth (Ecclesiastes) is the main exponent of this wisdom tradition. Qoheleth seems to be arguing with the tradition in which he was raised. Hard work does not necessarily bring about the rewards of happiness and wealth. Wealth is not viewed as a reward but as a gift from God. He holds that because one receives wealth from God it does not mean that you will be able to enjoy that specific wealth. This is because for Qoheleth there are too many unknowns that constitutes life. The pursuit of wealth is criticized and deemed to be too risky. It is unclear if Qoheleth was defending the poor and taking a swipe at the rich but he seems non-committed on taking a side (Spangenberg 1991:242-243).

The wisdom tradition does not take a compassionate leaning towards those that are thrust into a life of poverty. This includes even the protest wisdom tradition. Protest wisdom rejects the doctrine of retribution, but it does not protest against institutionalised classism. Institutional classism is the division that is made between the wealthy and the poor. Poverty is linked with laziness. Exploitation and the oppression of the poor are not the concern of the wisdom teachers and they seem not to take a stance against it. The most that they probably did or hoped to do is to influence unjustness indirectly.
3.3 A Closer look at Ecclesiastes

3.3.1 The Title/Name Qoheleth

The word *Ecclesiastes* is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word “Qoheleth”. “Preacher” would also not be an inaccurate literal translation of the word Qoheleth. An important point to consider is that this term does not point to a specific person but can be considered as a title that is used to describe someone. Another point that should be considered is that it could also be a pseudonym since many of the literary works of the time had the presence of pseudonyms. The question then to be raised is whether Qoheleth was truly a historical person as Lohfink (2003: 10) asks. He is convinced that Qoheleth should be interpreted as the work of an ideal philosopher.

It is insightful to ponder on the meaning of the name Qoheleth. Crenshaw (1988:32) states that the term has been identified to point out a personal name, an acronym and even a function. The term is used seven times in the book of Ecclesiastes.

1. The words of Qohelet, son of David, King in Jerusalem. *(1:1)*
2. The ultimate absurdity says Qohelet, the ultimate absurdity; Everything is absurd. *(1:2)*
3. I, Qohelet, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. *(1:12)*
4. Look, I have discovered this—says Qohelet—adding one to one in order to find sum. *(7:27)*
5. The ultimate absurdity, says the Qohelet, everything is absurd. *(12:8)*
6. In addition to the fact that Qohelet was a sage, he also taught the people knowledge. *(12:9a-b)*
7. Qohelet sought to find pleasing words and accurately wrote down trustworthy sayings. *(12:10)*

Our problem is created by the fact that even in the book itself Qoheleth is understood to be different and even takes on a different form. The problem that also exists is the inscription of royal authorship. David did not have a son with the name Qoheleth and it
can not be assumed that Solomon is the author of the book. Another point to note is that the author does not write as a king but as a teacher, a sage, and a wise man. Qoheleth, as stated before, refers to an office bearer who calls people into a gathering. So, why did Qoheleth assemble the people? The answer is clear, and that is to teach them and to instruct them in wisdom and the order of life.

Wisdom here is not in a formal setting as in the wisdom schools but the focus has shifted to the realm of the ordinary, the ordinary being everyday life. As the term Qoheleth refers to one that gathers it can also be interpreted as not only the gathering of people but also of objects. These objects have to do with wisdom. Qoheleth could have been the gatherer of wisdom sayings, proverbs and the like. On closer study of the book one must come to the conclusion that Qoheleth is definitely a gatherer of wisdom.

### 3.3.2 Qoheleth, the Man

Understanding the term Qoheleth is not enough for this study and the question that should be asked is who is Qoheleth, the man?

Robert Gordis (1968:vii) states that there is no book in the Bible or even in the world of literature that has the characteristics of the book of Ecclesiastes. This author states that Qoheleth is a very personal book. The only way that this book will be properly understood is when it is read in light of the history of the Israelite nation. As we know, this is a history that is rich with a broad and distinct intellectual tradition. Qoheleth displays an impression of life that is unique to this book and the whole of literature. Tradition is continued in that Qoheleth in his writings offers very little about his life and who he was. Other Biblical writers also did not offer much about themselves and we see that Qoheleth is following in this tradition.

Most scholars tend to agree that it would be much easier to assert that the author of this book was not King Solomon. On studying this writing one will realize that this is a man who was shaped by his experiences of life and that he flies against all the tradition and
thought that he knew. Qoheleth is not your typical Jewish wisdom teacher for he opposes the tradition of wisdom that was accepted by his faith. Solomon is obviously not the author but the author seeks to identify himself with the King. Qoheleth might even have aspired to be like the wise king but mostly stood on the opposite side of the traditional wisdom spectrum.

Michael E. Eaton (1983:23) interestingly holds that there appear to be two different authors in the book of Ecclesiastes. His argument is based on the fact that the author introduces himself to the readers as the “Preacher”, as if this person is going to comment on the work and writings of another man. In different parts of the writings the “Preacher” is reminding the readers of his presence as well as his assumed role. Eaton does however hold that the evidence of the writings point to the author being the exponent as well as editor of his own brand of wisdom literature. The author seems to point to himself in the first person and never in the third person. There is the presence of an editor and the distinct possibility that the editor is presenting the work of a wise man, thus the presence of dual authorship. Eaton convincingly proposes that there is no name to put to this author and he should be seen as a pseudo-editor. This author is clearly a great admirer of Solomon and most importantly the author himself is a historical figure (Eaton 1983: 21-23).

The most common misinterpretation regarding the identity of Qoheleth is the interpretation in chapter two. In this chapter we read that he accurately and with full detail describes a life of luxury and wealth. Many scholars have interpreted this to mean that Qoheleth was extremely wealthy and most probably an aristocrat. However, the literary style that he is adopting is to superimpose the life of the great King Solomon to bring to light the futility of riches and wealth.

So, what is it that we actually know about this man? Everything in the book points to the fact that Qoheleth lived in Jerusalem. The rich history of the capital city and its way of life are fully characterized in the book. No other centre would have done justice to the uniqueness of the book. References to this great city are found in Chapters 1, 4 and 5. We
read about the temple and there are references to the ritual of sacrifices as well as the most obvious repetition of the name Jerusalem in the book. All of the evidence gained in the book points to what has been said before, that Qoheleth was a wisdom teacher. He most probably was a teacher in the wisdom schools that catered for the educational needs of the wealthy youth. Qoheleth was not only a wisdom teacher, but as also stated elsewhere, he was a collector of wisdom teachings. Gordis (1968) argues that he was the most learned of the ancient philosophers after the emergence of Plato. This is because he was cultured and very well informed and drew from various sources to come up with a unique worldview.

Qoheleth is clearly writing as an old man as he nostalgically looks back at the joys of youth and warns that it should be enjoyed before it is too late. He also writes as a bachelor and most definitely as a childless man. The author has no affiliation to family and advises others to leave their estates to strangers. Ecclesiastes testifies to a man with deep life teachings that are evident in all facets of his life. A love of and for life is evident in Qoheleth and is envisaged in the quest for a healthy mind as well as body. His Jewish heritage is evident and he was brought up on the rich religious traditions of the Israelite people.

Influences from the Torah as well as the Prophets are evident in the book. Another influence was the Hokmah (Wisdom) that was concerned with the quest for righteousness. Justice became another important factor for Qoheleth and he sought it in everyday life. Injustice and suffering are cause for concern for Qoheleth and he addresses these in his writing, although not solving the matter. Another important fact to remember is that in the book God is pictured as being distant and Qoheleth sets himself up to be an agnostic. Humanity is at the centre of this book; it almost seems as if there is no place for God. Enjoyment of life in spite of the enigmas of life is important in the teaching of this author and that is only possible in the realm of human endeavour.
3.3.3 Qoheleth in the Old Testament Canon.

An important question to ask is where does Qoheleth fit in the structure of the Old Testament Canon?

In the Hebrew Tradition Qoheleth was grouped with the five scrolls that were used on official festive occasions. Lohfink (2003:1) states that the book of Qoheleth is usually read in Synagogues at the time of the Feast of Booths or Tabernacles. This he asserts is because the writings invite the readers to rejoice. In other traditions the book is grouped together with Proverbs as it was established by the Septuagint and maintained in the Vulgate and the English versions of the Bible. Obviously this group was coined Wisdom Literature because of its association with Solomon. It is therefore obvious that because of the assumed link with Solomon it found its way into the Canon.

This, however, does not explain how the book became part of the Canon when one considers the contradictions, humanistic, skeptical views that are espoused by Qoheleth. Considering the fact that if the sting of the obvious skepticism of the book were to be removed it is clear that the author espoused the traditional values and observance of the Torah (see redactional ending of the book). Lohfink (2003:10) holds that Qoheleth was part of the school-“books” that were used in the Temple School in well-structured synagogues. It was included in the Canon because of the threats that were posed by the Greek education and the establishment of a Greek Gymnasium. This meant that there was pressure on the Temple School to modernize its teachings. Qoheleth was seen at the time to be very modern and different to that which the scribes and teachers were used to. The other wisdom literature had monarchical overtones but an ordinary man who taught about his experiences of life and was accepted into the school “books” as well as the Canon wrote Qoheleth.

Spangenberg (1991:234) argues for a date that would place the book in the Postexilic period and especially the Hellenistic era. This can be accepted because the vocabulary and the sentence structure are representative of the Postexilic era. The argument for
modernization of the Canon because of the pressures of Greek influence can also stand as indicative of the date. Eissfeldt has raised the argument that Qoheleth displays Hellenistic tendencies but there is no succinct contact with any Greek school of thought (Lasor 1982:588). A possibility for dating that most scholars agree on places the book between the period of 400 and 200 BCE.

### 3.3.3.1 Qoheleth within the Hebrew Literature Tradition

We see that the author Qoheleth was completely different to the rest of the wisdom authors with Jewish background. Robert Gordis (1968: 43-50) states that both “form and content” displayed a refreshing originality from the rest of literature in the Hebrew tradition. At the time of the writing it was well known that the Pentateuch was seen as the authoritative source for instruction. Much of the influence from the Pentateuch is found in the book of Qoheleth. Strikingly we see that he uses traditional material and fuses it well with his skeptic view of life. Qoheleth draws a lot of parallels in his writing with many of the texts of instruction to support his wisdom teachings as well as to contrast them to his teachings.

Not only did Qoheleth borrow from traditional Hebrew texts, but also his own writings served to become a source for the texts of Ben Sira and the Wisdom of Solomon. In these texts the writers do not borrow directly from Qoheleth, but traces of the pessimistic, skeptical influences regarding the wisdom style of Ecclesiastes can be assumed. Ben Sira seems to differ with Qoheleth on many points, but still the influence is prevalent. The author of the Wisdom of Solomon is more direct in his approach in that he opposes the skeptical views of Qoheleth. Qoheleth in his writings never seems to be patriotic to the nation of Israel, but he is favourable towards the Temple and its traditions.
### 3.3.3.2 Qoheleth within the Old Testament Wisdom Traditions.

Firstly it will be advantageous to look at the place he occupies amongst the literatures of his neighbours. This is because many scholars believe that his Ancient Near Eastern neighbours influenced Qoheleth. There are even those who believe that he borrowed from his contemporaries in many instances of his writings. Choon-Leong Seow (1997:62) states that ancient scholars labeled texts from countries such as Egypt and Mesopotamia as wisdom literature because it reflected the same form, structure, and character of those wisdom literatures of the Biblical tradition. Interestingly enough the term “wisdom” is not prevalent in the sources outside of the use of the Bible. However, though not present, there is a strong suspicion that they were used as sources for the compiling of Biblical wisdom. Concerning the book of Ecclesiastes, studies have shown and it has been debated that there are traces of especially Egyptian and Mesopotamian influence. These influences can not be disputed because most of Israelite Wisdom displays an international outlook as well as influences (Seow 1997:62).

It can almost be said that Qoheleth’s seemingly pessimistic view on life could also have been influenced by texts from Egypt. These texts show a striking resemblance with the work of Qoheleth in that they echo most of the same views that he espouses. The nature of Qoheleth’s pessimism is not debilitating and destructive, but has an ironic edge to it, which is displayed in these texts. Other parallels are found in the religious instructions that are found in these texts. Qoheleth seems to follow the same form and style as theirs, and most importantly tries to adopt a practical hold on wisdom. Wisdom should be applied in a practical manner and not only in theory; it should not only be an ideal but a way of life.

The question should now be asked: what place does Qoheleth occupy in the Israelite wisdom tradition? Firstly, Qoheleth is strikingly different from the rest of the Wisdom literature. The most obvious reason would be because he opposes the traditions of wisdom that existed before he arrived. Retribution is a common thread throughout the other traditions. Qoheleth fights this doctrine in that his pessimistic, skeptical views make
a mockery of this doctrine, and can therefore be coined protest wisdom (cf. also Job). His form of wisdom takes on an almost reformative mould.

Wisdom literature in the Bible is not concerned with the themes that are prevalent throughout the Old Testament. The themes of the Old Testament can be divided into what is seen as Salvation History or Covenantal History. These themes are not a concern for the authors of wisdom and this holds true in the book of Ecclesiastes. This form of literature is mostly concerned with human life and experience and finds no place for much theological teaching. Evidence of this is seen, as Qoheleth never uses the distinctive name “YHWH” but rather “Elohim” in his reference to God.

Qoheleth is not strongly tied to any of the other Old Testament books, although they influence him. However, Qoheleth is part of Wisdom literature and his ties to the other writings are well established and strong. A feature of wisdom is its vocabulary and it is shared throughout the literature, and the book of Ecclesiastes continues this specific tradition. Qoheleth seems also to advocate the benefits of wisdom and is clearly setting out to seek for wisdom. Wisdom is always positive though he looks at it from a different angle compared to the other teachers. Ecclesiastes does take its place in wisdom literature and is congruent to its traditions though it differs on certain aspects. Qoheleth was definitely a wisdom teacher, for he employed the traditions of his wisdom literature.

Let us now consider more closely the distinct characteristics of Qoheleth’s wisdom. Qoheleth argues for a balance between what should be considered as the positives and negatives of life. There is seemingly neither a right way nor a wrong way to live our lives. Whatever happens is what we are meant to experience as part of life. Where wisdom tradition teaches that the underlying order in life is created and governed by God, it is Qoheleth who suggests that mankind cannot truly fathom that order and is therefore vulnerable to chance.

Enjoyment of life, although reserved, is important in Qoheleth’s teachings. Life should be enjoyed to the full whether it is positive or negative. Life for him can only be enjoyed
when one can fully exploit the good times and cope with the bad. Hedonism is not the point that Qoheleth is advocating. Wisdom and knowledge are to be applied to life so that the best can be brought out of it. Earlier wisdom tradition had a retributive rigidity to it that Qoheleth is opposing. Life does not necessarily have to bring the desired results that we may have in mind.

A theme that can be identified in the book of Ecclesiastes that is another distinct characteristic is the idea of seizing the day (carpe diem). The products of our labour are to be enjoyed and that is the point to life. Wisdom is to align itself with this teaching and see the virtue in this new doctrine. Seizing the day has to do with not giving up the opportunity to do something constructive with life. It is not that Qoheleth is saying that there is no tomorrow, but he argues that we should not wait for tomorrow. The future should be dealt with today and things should be put in place that will bring dividends tomorrow, whether good or bad. This new doctrine does have its pitfalls in that it opens up the certainty of risk taking. Qoheleth’s wisdom acknowledges the presence of risk, but holds that risks can be countered if wisdom and knowledge are applied. Risks therefore will not be avoided, but rather channeled in such a manner that the good can be taken out of it.

The book of Proverbs, especially, distinguishes between a wise man and a foolish man. A wise man is someone who lives according to the order that is instituted by God. Foolish men are those who live contrary to that underlying order. Qoheleth, however, makes no such divisions. Qoheleth is convinced that a wise man can deal foolishly and vice versa. He does however reject the ways of the foolish and believes that the foolish are self-destructive. Self-destructiveness for Qoheleth stems from laziness.

The last important characteristic of Qoheleth’s wisdom is his attitude towards the monarchy. Although Qoheleth is equated with the elite he is not particularly impressed with the monarchy. He does not question their place and importance in society, but rather teaches on the conduct of those who are in the employ of the monarchy. Loyalty is an integral ingredient; when one is in the employ of the monarchy, this is total loyalty. It is a
historical fact that the wisdom teachers were in the employ of the monarchy and served in the court of the king but this was never the aspiration of Qoheleth.

3.3.4 The Structure of Qoheleth

To follow the line of argument that is presented by Qoheleth is almost impossible because the work seems like a presentation of various fragmented pieces of writing and thought. Qoheleth does not present his work in a singular form or singular argument. However, he does follow tradition in that he repeats his arguments to emphasise his main thrust and theme as well as using a cluster of proverbs to reinforce his arguments. The structure that he uses is simply to correct the older wisdom teachers in their method and style as well as to correct their wisdom teachings.

For our study purposes we will incorporate the structure of the book of Ecclesiastes as presented by Lasor (1982: 591-592).

Introduction (1:1-3)
Title (v. 1)
Theme (vv. 2f.)
Theme demonstrated- I (1:4-2:26)
By human life in general (1:4-11)
By knowledge (vv. 12-18)
By pleasure (2:1-11)
By the fate of all persons (vv. 12-17)
By human toil (vv. 18-23)

Conclusion: Enjoy life now as God gives it (vv.24-26)

Theme demonstrated- II (3:1-4:16)
By God’s control of all events (3:1-11)

Conclusion: Enjoy life now as God gives it (vv. 12-15)
By the lack of immortality (vv. 16-21)

Conclusion: Enjoy life now as God gives it (v.22)
By evil oppression (4:1-3)
By work (vv.4-6)
By miserly hoarding of wealth (vv. 7-12)
By the transient nature of popularity (vv.13-16)
Words of Advice- A (5:1-12 [MT 4:17-5:11])
Honor God in your worship (5:1-3 [MT 4: 17-5:2])
Pay your vows (vv. 4-7 [MT 3-6])
Expect injustice in government (5:5f. [MT 7f.])
Do not overvalue wealth (5:10-12 [MT 9-11])
Theme demonstrated- III (5:13-6:12 [MT 5:12-6:12])
By wealth lost in business (5:13-17 [MT 12-16])

Conclusion: Enjoy life now as God gives it (vv. 18-20 [MT 17-19])

By wealth that cannot be enjoyed (6:1-9)
By the fixity of fate (6:10-12)

Words of Advice- B (7:1-8:9)
Honor is better than luxury (7:1)
Sobriety is better than levity (vv. 2-7)
Caution is better than rashness (vv. 8-10)
Wisdom with wealth is better than wisdom alone (vv. 11f.)
Resignation is better than indignation (vv. 13f.)
Moderation is better than intemperance (vv. 15-22)
Men are better than women (vv. 23-29)
Compromise is sometimes better than being right (8:1-9)

Theme demonstrated- IV (8:10-9:12)
By the inconsistencies in justices (8:10-14)

Conclusion: Enjoy life now as God gives it (v. 15)

By the mystery of God’s ways (vv. 16f.)
By death, common fate of wise and foolish alike (9:1-6)

Conclusion: Enjoy life now as God gives it (vv. 7-10)

By the uncertainty of life (vv. 11f.)
Words of Advice- C (9:13-12:8)
Introduction: a story on the value of wisdom (9:13-16)
Wisdom and folly (9:17-10:15)
Rule of kings (vv. 16-20)
Sound business practices (11:1-8)
Enjoying life before old age comes (11:9-12:8)

Epilogue
Aim of the Preacher (12:9f.)
Commendation of his teachings (vv. 11f.)
Conclusion of the matter (vv. 13f.)

It is evident that Lasor is proposing that the thread that runs throughout the whole book and which binds it together is “enjoy life as God gives it”. Viviers (1999:735) states that the binding theme that is proposed by Lasor is noticeable throughout the book but it is not the major theme. The major theme of the book is found in Ecclesiastes 1:2 and concludes in chapter 12 verse 8, but it is presented throughout the book (1:14, 17; 2:1, 11, 15, 17, 19, 21, 23, 26; 4:4, 6, 8, 16; 5:9; 6:2, 9; 7:6; 8:10, 14). This theme is (Ecclesiastes 1:2)

“Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; Vanity of vanities, all is vanity” (NKJV). However Lasor’s proposed theme is not discarded but can be modified in saying that it is important to enjoy life, but people are to be cautious of the vanity of life. All activities in life should be seen as in vain.

The Epilogue (12:9-14) was not originally part of the book and is considered a later redactional adding of the book. Viviers (1999:735) states that there is definite certainty about the redactional adding of both the introductory verse (1:1) and the epilogue. He states that the introductory verse is reminiscent of the headings that are found in Proverbs and the Song of Solomon, where the book is attributed to Solomon. Solomon’s signature therefore was helpful in making Ecclesiastes part of the Biblical Canon. Two redactional endings have been included in 12:9-11, that reflects an admirer of Qoheleth and 12:12-14 reflects the work of a conservative critic (Viviers 1999:735). It is also evident that the epilogue is included with the main purpose of rectifying the message of Qoheleth to make it less pessimistic and cynical.
3.3.5 The Message of Qoheleth

It is easy to identify the message of any book and also to elaborate on a message that may not be there. To over systematize a message is also very easy to do. Usually scholars try and work from the inside out. They endeavour to find a singular theme that runs right through the book and build up to the message from there. In the book of Ecclesiastes it will be advantageous for our study if we consider the concepts that Qoheleth is bringing to the fore and from there build up to the overall message.

We must therefore look at the use of the term “hebel” in the writings of Qoheleth. This term is usually translated as “vanity” and is important in that it is part of the “thematic statements that frame the body of the book: Absolute vanity … everything is vanity” (1:2; 12:8) (Seow 1997:47). Vanity appears a total of thirty-eight times in the book of Ecclesiastes and literally it would refer to anything that has to do with wind or breath. In reality the word vanity points to anything that is superficial and contradictory to an established norm. A moment of vanity is only experienced for a short while and cannot be understood in the realm of the physical as well as the intellectual and the supernatural.

Qoheleth depicts a universe that is alive with activity, activities that include human as well as natural elements. Despite this, he also makes it clear that nothing new happens in the activity of the universe. Therefore nothing is gained in all the activities that are taking place and hence everything is vanity. Key concepts for the author are toil and advantage and even in the activity that involves these key concepts nothing is gained. Vanity is applied to virtually all the endeavours of humanity and the picture of futility in all endeavours is strongly depicted by Qoheleth. No one is spared the futility of human toil; the author cuts right through the social and economic realities of society. If an individual gains or benefits from toil success is also not guaranteed because of the presence of death. Whatever is gained will have to be left for the enjoyment of others. This basically means that nothing is lasting and it is therefore in vain for anybody to pursue the trappings of life. As stated before, humanity is not in control of the activities of life, but Qoheleth tells us that God is in control of all things. God ultimately decides on the
realities of human life and He alone knows who will benefit and gain from the toil of life. Here we see Qoheleth not differing from the traditional views and values of the Wisdom literature in that God is in control of the universe and the created order.

God is the determinative factor in the natural realm and there is nothing that mankind can do that will change that fact. Humanity is in no position to go against the Sovereign and challenge Him. Man cannot change what God has decided and even the use of words is only a vain exercise. There are certain things such as knowledge that are elusive to mankind and the most striking fact is that even wisdom and righteousness elude man. Qoheleth contradicts the established doctrine of retribution that is present in the tradition of wisdom literature.

Whether an individual is wise or righteous it does not mean that favourable results will follow their actions. Disaster will strike even in the presence of wisdom and righteousness, so it can be said that it will be futile for individuals to be wise and righteous. Everything for Qoheleth is vanity for one cannot distort the determinative work of God, and what complicates matters is that God is unknown and most of the time far away. The world, for Qoheleth, is signified by a host of uncertainty and definite risks. Nothing in life is guaranteed and almost nothing will happen as we expect.

Qoheleth does his best to teach that the use of wisdom, and especially that of traditional wisdom, is inadequate. This is because he makes clear distinctions between the natural and the supernatural; this is the distinction between God and humanity. The fact that the wisdom teachers were trying to predict the outcome of life through the doctrine of retribution was seen as almost blasphemous. God, for Qoheleth, is free to do as He pleases and mankind is limited forever in knowing the full extent of God’s working. Mankind has also failed to realise these limits and has pursued certain activities that have led to a false sense of accomplishment on the part of the wisdom teachers. Again all of this accomplishment leads to the fact that it is vain for mankind to think that it can encroach on ground that is reserved for the Sovereign God.
The question then should be posed as to whether or not it would be right to assume that Qoheleth’s message is that of vanity? Some scholars emphasise his focus on the enjoyment of life (cf. Lasor). On the one hand it is possible to assume that everything Qoheleth states about the workings of life is basically vanity for the author. Nothing is certain in life and even the enjoyment of that life brings about the presence of vanity. Mankind is in no position to change the natural order of the universe and therefore must accept that to try and change or even challenge that order is classified as vanity. Wisdom and the pursuing of righteousness do not guarantee that life will offer anything new. God is the only one who can change the natural order of life and the determinative actions of God are final. Qoheleth espouses the pursuit of the enjoyment of life but states categorically that the pursuit of that enjoyment is vanity. Life is to be enjoyed but that enjoyment does have its limits and is always clouded by vanity.

On the nature of the writings of Qoheleth it is almost possible for us to give different titles to the message of the book. Actually it would be even possible for us to give secondary titles to the book of Ecclesiastes. These titles could be: “On the Meaning of Life, The Disillusionment of Worldliness, The Philosophy of Self-Quest, and The Book of the Natural Man” (Purkiser 1955:269). We see that the book of Job is preoccupied with the problem of suffering and how it affects mankind. The book of Proverbs shows us the preoccupation with certain formulas for happiness and success in life. Qoheleth in his writings is preoccupied with the existence of mankind on the whole. Ecclesiastes eloquently poses the question about the meaning of life and how we are to come to that specific meaning. Life for mankind is not permanent or lasting.

Searching for the meaning of life may lead one to explore various avenues of life and that means that different aspects will be employed to get to what is a perceived meaning of life. Qoheleth is teaching us that using knowledge might at the end of the day just increase our levels of sorrow. Enjoyment and the joy of the meaning of life are definitely not found in the pursuit of material things. All sensual pleasures will only leave one dissatisfied with the outcome of searching for the meaning of life. Foolishness and acting foolishly will lead to a life of bitterness. The hard work and the deserved fruits of our
labour are not lasting, for in the end we will have to leave it behind for the foolish. Importantly it is for mankind to know the Sovereign God and because of the obedience of man to the divinely appointed order it is doubly important for man to try and enjoy his life to the best of his ability.

3.3.5.1 The Place of God in Qoheleth

Qoheleth follows the tradition of Proverbs in that he acknowledges the fear of God as paramount to the understanding of God. Fearing God is noted four times in the book and this is because Qoheleth wants to help mankind realise that they are not on the same plane as the Sovereign. The fear of God is not to be a crippling fear but rather a holy reverence for the Creator. Respect is at the heart of it in that mankind must not be fooled into thinking that it will be able to manipulate and even deceive God. Avoidance of all forms of ritualistic and religious sacrilege is important to the idea of the fear of God. God, in Qoheleth’s estimation, is more concerned with obedience to Him than the offering of sacrifices and the vanity of religious observance. Adhering to the fear of God will basically divert His wrath from mankind and this requires sincerity and genuineness of heart as well as attitude.

Ecclesiastes is also concerned with the manner in which God actually relates to mankind where other Biblical authors are concerned with how mankind relates to God. Qoheleth is formulating a definite link between what should be the fear of God and the avoidance of all things evil. However, what he does not do is state what should be perceived as good or even as evil. In the book of Proverbs the distinction between good and evil is displayed as diverting from the set standard of the created order. When one complies with the standard then one is doing well. Opposite to this is when one diverts from that order then evil is believed to have been done. Qoheleth does not commit himself to such rigid distinctions because it would mean that he is not in fear of God and opposes the created order. Good and evil for Qoheleth is brought to the fore because of his experience of life.
Qoheleth never refers to God’s personal name Yahweh and rather refers to Him as “the God” (Spangenberg 1993:20). There is no mention in the book of the promises that God made to the Israelites or even the great Exodus event. God is not spoken directly to as is the case with the Psalms and God is not sympathetic toward the poor and the oppressed. Man’s life is controlled by fate and God is dealing with humanity in this manner. Again Qoheleth is protesting against the teachings of traditional wisdom that teach God is “predictable”.

Ethically we see that Qoheleth is teaching that it is important for us to treat others in the same manner that we would want to treat ourselves. Qoheleth continually implies that we are to look in the mirror, and inwards, before we cast our attentions outward. In this it can be read that whatever the outcome of one’s own actions it is important to bear with the actions of others. Individuals can choose to be good or even evil and know that their actions directly impact on how God will relate and react to them. An interesting fact that Qoheleth is describing is that mankind is prone to do evil and the only way to avoid evil is to apply the wisdom as taught by the sages. Wisdom would therefore help one to become righteous and the fear of God will therefore become an inward reality rather than an outward show of religious piety. God, in the book of Ecclesiastes, as stated before, seems to be distant and impersonal. He relates only to mankind in regard to how mankind adheres to the standards of the created order.

So, what are the contributions that Qoheleth is making to the study of Theology and Biblical Theology especially? Although the writings of Qoheleth are skeptical and overly pessimistic in nature and we see he asserts that it is impossible for mankind to know God, we also see that he is contributing to the relationship that mankind must have with God. Firstly, there is the stressing of the limits that are imposed on human knowledge, wisdom and human ability. God has placed limitations on the ability of mankind because he had ordered the natural events of life. Mankind, therefore, has little or no power in changing the past or even trying to alter the natural events of life for there are limitations to our actions.
Further limitations are placed on mankind in that it is again impossible for us to understand the workings or actions of God. Understanding that the Sovereign sets out our lives is the easiest thing to do but actually understanding why this is so is virtually impossible. The problem does not lie with God but is solely a problem that is faced by mankind. This is because mankind wants to search even the mind of God and His ways. Proverbs sets out to highlight that the wisdom of mankind has its own limitations and that knowing the ways of God might be possible. Qoheleth is stressing these limits of wisdom and says that man has no way of influencing its own future or destiny. Qoheleth stresses this because he may have lost some faith in God and does not depend on wisdom to help in controlling the order of life like other wisdom teachers taught.

Some other contributions made by Qoheleth have to do with accepting and dealing with what should be seen as the definite realities of life. Qoheleth is not preoccupied with the Covenantal Theology of Israel or even its redemptive history but he does acknowledge the importance of the grace of God. God is gracious to all of mankind in the good things that He has created and the blessings that was bestowed on us. However, the problem of limitations comes to the fore even in this aspect of grace. Grace means unmerited favour that is bestowed on mankind by God but even in this sense God does not allow mankind to have everything that it desires. Man can toil as hard as it can to gain something in life, but in the end nothing can actually be guaranteed, because God decides.

Another definite reality that is depicted in the natural order of life is the presence of death. Death is a certainty in life and mankind knows of its presence but when it will come to all of us is not known. If there is one thing that really highlights the limitations of mankind then it is the reality of death. Nothing can be done to take away this reality from our existence and we realise that we will never know when our time comes to leave this earth. Qoheleth follows tradition in that he depicts that man was created from the dust of the earth and God breathed life into him. He does, however, go further in asserting that on the event of death, the dust of creation returns to the earth and the spirit of man, which is the breath of God, will return to God.
The last of the contributions that Qoheleth makes is adding to the preparation of the Christian Gospel message. “As a critique of the extremes of wisdom, a window on the tragedies and injustices of life, and a pointer to the joys of existence, it stands on its own as a word from God to all mankind” (Lasor 1982:599). In this it is important that the value it lends to the Christian Gospel must not be overlooked or even underestimated. Contrasting the suffering and death that is present and prevalent in life, it is impossible for us to miss the credence and the weight that is being lent to the fact of the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Christ Jesus. Qoheleth’s messages of toil pave the way for the beautiful message of Christ to find rest and peace from a life of weary toil. The command from the writings of Qoheleth for us to enjoy the free gifts of God to the full finds its fulfillment in the teachings of Christ for us to trust in these free gifts that are given by our God.
Chapter Four

The Ideological Qoheleth on Class, Wealth and Poverty

4.1. The Ideological Qoheleth

In profiling the Ideological Qoheleth we have to apply the method of socio-rhetorical interpretation that was discussed in Chapter One. Social and Cultural texture and Ideological texture (Robbins 1996:71-94; 95-119) are helpful in underpinning the implied author, which, although not theoretically true (only a construct), can, in practice, be “equated” with the author “Qoheleth”, laying bare his ideological stance and values.

The Ideological Qoheleth will be constructed by investigating the social and cultural texture of Qoheleth. Robbins (1996:71) defines the social and cultural texture of a text as “living with the text in the world”. This category of socio-rhetorical interpretation is built on sociological and anthropological theory. Therefore the text is preoccupied with “social and cultural location” (Robbins 1996:71) as well as with its “orientation” (Viviers 1997:373); that is, what the actual objective of the text is. In terms of the text (book) of Qoheleth this analysis endeavours to expose what kind of book Qoheleth is. It will attempt to uncover Qoheleth’s views on how to change life in terms of ideological thought. The question that arises is, how does the text want to ‘better life’ in terms of the implied author’s values? We see here an overlap of the text/book and the implied author.

Three distinct topics characterise the social and cultural texture of a text: specific social topics, common social topics, and final cultural categories (Robbins 1996:71). In looking at the ideological Qoheleth, two of these topics will be used, namely: the specific social topics and the final cultural categories.
Specific social topics are preoccupied with the religious response(s) to the world that the text/book reflects. A religious response highlights how the text deals with the question of coping with reality and the reformation of the world if need be.

Seven religious responses are identified, namely: “conversionist, revolutionist, introversionist, gnostic-manipulationist, thaumaturgical, reformist and utopian” (Robbins 1996:72-74).

Qoheleth is definitely a gnostic-manipulationist. He does not actually seek to change or reform the world in a revolutionary way, but tries to persuade his readers/listeners of his pessimistic views. This comes through in the main message of Qoheleth in that all activities in life are vain. Qoheleth states that it would be in vain to try and reform the world because an injustice will always be part of the world and this must be accepted. There is a definite affinity to the wisdom tradition in that Qoheleth displays himself as a typical sage, but there is a clear difference in his wisdom teaching. As indicated previously, he protests the teaching of traditional or unproblematic wisdom that good deeds bring about good results.

The other topic relating to social and cultural texture that pertains to the text of Qoheleth is “Final Cultural Categories” (Robbins 1996:86). This helps to place individuals within a certain cultural location and express themselves within a specific rhetoric. Robbins (1996:86) states that “cultural location” differs from that of “social location” in that it is the presentation of an individual’s argument to other people. Five distinct cultures (and rhetoric) are identified that will allow for the identification of the cultural location of the implied author of a text: “Dominant culture rhetoric, Subculture rhetoric, Counterculture or alternative culture rhetoric, Contraculture or oppositional culture rhetoric and Liminal culture rhetoric (Robbins 1996:86-85).

Qoheleth’s cultural location can be described as countercultural or alternative culture rhetoric. Robbins (1996:87) states that: “Counterculture rhetoric evokes the creation of a better society, but not by legislative reform or by violent opposition to the dominant
culture. The theory of reform manifest in its rhetoric provides an alternative, and hopes that the dominant society will see the light and adopt a more humanistic way of life. It evokes a willingness to live one’s life and let the members of the dominant society go on with their madness”.

This quote reflects Qoheleth. The text of Qoheleth provides for a new phase in the wisdom tradition and that is Protest Wisdom. Therefore, Qoheleth seeks for a counterculture rhetoric that will provide relevant alternatives to the dominant society. His alternative culture rhetoric is that of protest against the dominant society’s affinity to unproblematic wisdom and its doctrine of retribution. He espouses his ideology that all the activities of life are in vain and that individuals have to accept the anomalies of life. It attempts to widen the implicit views of the past.

The most important factor that will enable us to develop the profile of the Ideological Qoheleth is that of the Ideological Texture. As stated in Chapter One, people are the primary focus of this specific texture of the text. “People”, here, refers to the writer of the specific text and those who read and interprets the writings of the writer. Present in the text is the ideology of the implied author that is presented to the reader who interprets the text with his own ideology: "Ideological analysis of a text then, is simply an agreement by various people that they will dialogue and disagree with one another with a text as a guest in the conversation" (Robbins 1996:95). Simply put, the idea is created that the implied author and reader have their own preferred ideologies that dialogue with each other throughout the text.

Viviers (1997:375) states that the reader’s individual locations and experiences, in addition to those of the group to which they belong and their respective hermeneutical modes, shape and mould the interpreters of the text. In Chapter One, I, Adrian Jacobs, have highlighted my own ideological development. The Ideological Qoheleth is the “implied author” and the values he underwrites. Ideologically, Qoheleth is clearly a pessimistic and cynic who is opposed to the ideology of the doctrine of retribution. Life for Qoheleth does not consist of reaping good results that result from good deeds. Good
deeds, in his estimation, will not necessarily bring about good results; the enjoyment of life should be done warily and reservedly because, in the end, all things are in vain according to Qoheleth.

An implied author also belongs to an ideological group. These groups can be “cliques, gangs, action sets, corporate groups, historic traditions, and multiple historic traditions” (Robbins 1996:100-102). Qoheleth hints that he may be part of a faction because he stands in direct opposition to the dominant group that holds on to the unproblematic wisdom tradition. He presents a new ideology of Protest Wisdom that is purposed to disprove unproblematic wisdom and the doctrine of retribution. However, he is not a “stone throwing” protestor.

To summarise, the Ideological Qoheleth is a gnostic-manipulationist who is not actually preoccupied with the idea of changing the world or human life radically. Life for Qoheleth must be lived according to its realities; it is important to enjoy life but there are limits. He does, however, propose an alternative or counterculture rhetoric to that which is indicative of his times. Protest Wisdom is to take the place of unproblematic wisdom and its outdated and irrelevant doctrine of retribution. This is also Qoheleth’s ideological stance, his individual location.

Qoheleth is an “intellectual revolutionary” in his reaction towards the doctrine of retribution and the beliefs of the unproblematic wisdom tradition. There is a definite revolt against the idea that good deeds will bring about good results. Qoheleth and the Protest Wisdom tradition propose that life is unpredictable and individuals will have to accept the good with the bad. The “revolution” is led against an ideology but not primarily against the socio-economic realities of his society. With regard to the latter, Qoheleth is a sage, a wisdom teacher who, ironically, upholds the status quo. According to Gottwald (1985:576), the sages were in a privileged class that stood between the two distinct classes. The sages were, therefore, not committed to taking sides between the “haves” and the “have-nots”. They therefore taught the adherence and maintenance of the status quo.

4.2 Qoheleth the Protester
In the construction of the Ideological Qoheleth, it was indicated that his individual location was that of Protest Wisdom. Protest Wisdom was the last of the phases of wisdom development that came to head in the Postexilic period. The main exponents of this phase of wisdom in the Biblical Canon are Job and Qoheleth. It is termed Protest Wisdom because there is a protest against the major tenet, namely that of the doctrine of retribution, of the unproblematic and rigid phase of wisdom.

Examples of the doctrine of retribution are found in its main exponent, Proverbs.

Proverbs 10:27-30 (NIV): “The fear of the Lord adds length to life, but the years of the wicked come to nothing. The prospect of the righteous is joy, but the hopes of the wicked come to nothing. The way of the Lord is a refuge for the righteous, but is the ruin of those who do evil. The righteous will never be uprooted, but the wicked will not remain in the land”.

Proverbs 11:19 (NIV): “The truly righteous man attains life, but he who pursues evil goes to his death”.

Proverbs 12:21 (NIV): “No harm befalls the righteous, but the wicked have their fill of trouble”.

Spangenberg (1993:8) holds that these verses are indicative of the teachings of the wisdom teachers who taught the pursuit of enjoyment and prosperity. The doctrine of retribution is clearly seen in these verses where good deeds will result in good consequences. Wisdom is the ultimate pursuit of happiness and righteousness and adherence to its teachings will bring about success in life, whereas bad deeds bring about bad results. Wickedness and folly are the domain of those who do not adhere to the underlying nature of life and live in opposition to that order.

Protest Wisdom revolts against this doctrine of retribution and Qoheleth is masterly at doing this as he reacts to the “truths” just stated.
“In this meaningless life of mine I have seen both of these: a righteous man perishing in his righteousness, and a wicked man living in his wickedness. Do not be over righteous, neither be overwise—why destroy yourself? Do not be over wicked, and do not be a fool—why die before your time?” (Ecclesiastes 7:15-17 [NIV])

In Ecclesiastes 7:15, Qoheleth “lashes” out at the doctrine in Proverbs 10:27; 11:19 and 12:21 where it is held that a long life will follow the righteous and death the wicked (Spangenberg 1993:110). Righteous people are not guaranteed a long life according to Qoheleth and the opposite may be true, the wicked may live longer in their wickedness (Kinlaw 1968:623). Tension is created in that he rips out the heart of the doctrine of retribution. Why then, if the good life is not rewarded, should we desire to be good? Qoheleth is cynical in that his life experience has taught him that righteousness is not always rewarded.

“All share a common destiny—the righteous and the wicked, the good and the bad, the clean and the unclean, those who offer sacrifices and those who do not. As it is with the good man, so with the sinner; as it is with those who take oaths, so with those who are afraid to take them. This is the evil in everything that happens under the sun: The same destiny overtakes them all. The hearts of men, moreover, are full of evil and there is madness in their hearts while they live, and afterward they join the dead”. (Ecclesiastes 9:2-3 [NIV])

These two verses should be understood as a lamentation by Qoheleth that all men experience the same fate or lot. Murphy (1992:91) states that vanity is to be seen in these two verses - vanity in the case of the two distinct classes. He states that Qoheleth is presenting his evidence for the assertion that he made in verse one. The same fate or lot comes to the two classes that are supposed to be different on all levels according to their religious stances. However different they may be in terms of righteousness and wickedness, death comes to them all as is set forth in verse three. Qoheleth nullifies the
doctrine of retribution. No degree of righteousness or wickedness will save you from your predestined fate and that is death.

Qoheleth is definitely a protestor and believes that all in life is in vain. The major thread that binds this book is the teaching that all in life is vanity - this is mentioned or alluded to throughout the entire book. Good and bad people are, fundamentally, the same; they face the same fate in life as well as facing the same fate that leads to death. Bad things can happen to good people (Job is an example). Thus, the notion that only good things follow good people is preposterous in Qoheleth’s reasoning. Wicked or bad people could, for some twists of fate, enjoy good things and even prosper in their wickedness. What Qoheleth does teach is the seizing of the day (Ecclesiastes 3:12-13; 9:7-10; 11:7-12); people have to take the initiative and make the best of the opportunities that they are afforded but, even here, vanity ‘gles’.

Although you can make the best of your opportunities individuals are to be aware of the vanity, the possibility of the potential meaninglessness of these exercises. This main message or stance of Qoheleth is clear throughout his entire book. However, the question of whether or not Qoheleth also protests injustice with regard to class, land, poverty and wealth still remains. Does he offer a way out of the institutionalised hierarchies of his time, or does he simply reinscribe them as his traditional colleagues have done?

4.2.1. Qoheleth and the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots’

Narrowing the focus to the issue of wealth and poverty, the traditional sages held the following view: “He who has a slack hand becomes poor, But the hand of the diligent makes rich” (Proverbs 10:4 [NIV]).

Wealth is clearly connected with the diligence of hard work. Those who are slack in their dealings will only become poor (Ross 1991:953). Laziness and diligence were also then, according to the sages, the primary reasons for a class of ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’ in ancient society. Qoheleth would, from his ideological protesting stance, question the
rigidity or absolute predictability of these outcomes, as has been shown above. But does he protest classism and its accompanying hierarchies as such? Or does he also take the (traditional) stance that this is part of life and one can do nothing about it – the poor will always be with us. Before proceeding with this specific issue, it is necessary to hear Qoheleth on the “givens” of life that certain things are unchangeable, as though “fixed in concrete”.

**Ecclesiastes 1:9** (NIV): “What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun”.

**Ecclesiastes 1:15** (NIV): “What is twisted cannot be straightened; what is lacking cannot be counted”.

**Ecclesiastes 7:13** (NIV): “Consider what God has done: Who can straighten what he has made crooked”.

These three verses suggest poor chances for the eradication of classism although this issue is not mentioned directly. It gives a glimpse into the “heart” (ideological stance) of Qoheleth; one hears “behind the lines” that certain things are as they are and cannot be changed. The best one can do is accept it and make the best of it. Qoheleth seems rather rigid in his conviction that life’s structures and institutions are “set”. Let us hear more from him on the specifics of class hierarchies.

“Again I looked and saw all the oppression that was taking place under the sun: I saw the tears of the oppressed—and they have no comforter; power was on the side of their oppressors—and they have no comforter. And I declared that the dead, who had already died, are happier than the living, who are still alive. But better than both is he who has not yet been, who has not seen the evil that is done under the sun”. (**Ecclesiastes 4:1-3** [NIV])
It is clear that this section has a distinct characteristic that is unique and located only in Qoheleth. This unique characteristic is clear. In verse one he makes an observation, which he then reflects upon in verses two and three. Qoheleth is observing and reflecting in this case on the oppression of the “poor”.

Seow (1997:177) states that the oppression that Qoheleth is an eyewitness to is not imagined but can be proved with concrete facts. Additionally, he holds that the same use of the noun is also found in the books of Job and Amos (cf. Job 35:9 and Amos 3:9). In the case of oppression, on any level, two distinct classes exist: the oppressor (“have”) and the oppressed (“have-not”). The striking features of Qoheleth’s observation on oppression are twofold: the oppressed do not have anyone to comfort them or champion their cause. He only sees their tears, their anguish of oppression. However, he observes that the oppressors stand with power behind them allowing them to commit the oppressing acts. No one was willing to come to the aid of the oppressed, leaving them helpless and hopeless.

Eaton (1983:91) states that compassion for the oppressed has always been a feature of the Old Testament. “Oppression of people by a king (Pr. 28:16), of a servant by his master (Deut. 24:14), of the poor by the affluent (Pr. 22:16; Am. 4:1), the bureaucratic (Ec. 5:8) or even by others who are poor (Pr. 28:3) is viewed with indignation” (Eaton 1983:91). Oppression as a whole in the Old Testament is singled out for rebuke. Qoheleth is highlighting the problem of comfort and aid for the oppressed and it is clear that he does show compassion and sympathy for their cause. Traditional wisdom in Proverbs 22:22-23; 23:10-11 and 24:11-12 teaches that God is the defender and comforter of the oppressed. Again there is a contrast between Protest Wisdom and the doctrine of retribution. Qoheleth is adamant that there is no comforter for the oppressed, not even God. He offers sympathy but no hope; he too leaves them helpless and hopeless.

The principle of the observation in verse one is clear: the oppressed (“have-not”) should accept their fate, and the oppressor (“have”) seems to gain more power and control in the exercising of oppression.
Although he does not seem willing to champion the cause of the oppressed he does offer, with his reflections in verses two and three, a somewhat ironic way out of the oppressive state that they are in. Qoheleth is extolling death as preferable to life as is the case as well in Job 3 and Jeremiah 20:14-18. He is placing a higher value on death, because in his estimation it is the only freedom awarded in the case of oppression. For Qoheleth the dead are better off than those who are alive and experiencing oppression, because they lived through their share of oppression and gained freedom through death only. Death is therefore desirable if you are oppressed for in this you will find comfort. Not only does death bring freedom in Qoheleth’s estimation; it is also the ultimate unifier - even for animals.

The latter is stated in Ecclesiastes 3:18 (NIV): “Man’s fate is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both: As one dies, so dies the other. All have the same breath; man has no advantage over the animal”.

Spangenberg (1993:65) states that, in death, Qoheleth teaches that all men, and even the animals, are equal. This means that both the “have” and the “have-not” share the same fate as the animals. The breath that man has is not distinguishable from that of the animals. Furthermore, nothing will be able to distinguish the oppressor from the oppressed; death levels the playing fields.

However, Qoheleth continues and, in an even more disturbing manner, he holds that the most desirable of all is to have never been born. The sole reason for this is that the unborn are guaranteed freedom from a life of oppression; the state of the unborn is freedom from pain, suffering and the hopelessness of life.

Qoheleth is not placing a high value on life at all, as traditional wisdom is accustomed to. He is non-committal and offers no solution. Yes, there is a definite compassion for the oppressed but no solution to their problem is given. Nobody is in the position to bring hope and comfort to the oppressed; no one is willing to defend them, not even God. All that he offers is praise for the dead and the unborn. The startling principle that Qoheleth
is teaching is that the oppressed should rather accept their fate, that the oppressor will gain more power and control over them and the only freedom is found in death. This is a rather shocking irony.

“If you see the poor oppressed in a district, and justice and rights denied, do not be surprised at such things; for one official is eyed by a higher one, and over both are others higher still. The increase of the land is taken by all; the king himself profits from the fields”. (Ecclesiastes 5:8-9 [NIV])

These two verses should be deemed as an admonition from Qoheleth or even a serious caution. Qoheleth has observed the injustice that the “have-nots” are suffering at the hands of an oppressive bureaucracy and he is reflecting on his findings. Again he is returning to the issue of oppression on a socio-political and economic level. However, in this case the author is reflecting upon the injustices of the oppression that are directly linked to wealth and poverty.

In verse eight, Qoheleth states that the sight, or even the actual experiences of injustice, should not be marvelled at. It is almost as if he is saying that it would be useless to be shocked at the oppression of the “have-nots”. The reason he gives for this is the oppressive bureaucracy that lords over the poor. Murphy (1992:51) states that the reference in this regard to the oppressive bureaucracy is ambiguous and could be misconstrued. Ambiguity is seen in the function of the bureaucracy. A hierarchy of bureaucracy should be deemed as good because there is a sense of supervision that should be welcomed. However, this is not what Qoheleth is recommending; he is lamenting the complete opposite: the bureaucracy is corrupting the very system that they have to protect. All that the bureaucracy is interested in is their personal gain. The oppression and injustice that they are guilty of will never come to light because they protect only themselves.

The important fact that should not be lost in the interpretation of this passage is the oppression of the “have-nots”. Here, again, Qoheleth is recognising their plight and
laments their unfortunate situation but offers no solution. He is not marvelling at their specific plight but at the conduct of their oppressors. It is evident that Qoheleth is not interested in coming to the aid of the oppressed, nor is he doing anything to help them. The extent of their problem is severe and yet all he highlights is the fact that there is nobody who will protect them. Injustice on the grounds of socio-economic oppression is his focus but he offers no remedy for this social ill. Qoheleth does not even seem interested in alluding to any form of divine intervention that is a prevalent focus of the other Biblical writers. Nobody, it seems, is capable of righting this wrong; no one, not even God will tip the scale in favour of the oppressed.

So, all that Qoheleth is saying in verse eight, is that injustice is real and tangible; it is therefore nothing to be surprised at. Again it is the “have-nots”, at the lowest end of the hierarchical scale, who are bearing the brunt of this injustice and oppression; they too should not be surprised, as it is their fate. It is clear that Qoheleth is teaching that the ‘have-nots’ should accept their fate, as this is the nature of bureaucracy. The ‘have-nots’ should not only accept their fate but also accept the classism that is prevalent in society. Qoheleth also underwrites adherence to the hierarchical powers that exist in government. The oppressed should be obedient to the hierarchy and even the different levels of the hierarchy should be obedient to the levels above them. Adherence and obedience to societal hierarchies is expected of everyone who is part of the society.

Viviers (1999:745) states that, like verse eight, verse nine has an ambiguous tone to it because of the translation from the Hebrew. An important factor in this verse is the mention of the king. All that this verse does is evoke the following questions: Is the produce of the land only for the benefit of the king? Does the king benefit from the cultivation of the land? Is the king investing resources that will enable prosperous growth? In what relationship do the “have-nots” and the bureaucracy stand with the king?

Farmer (1991:168) interprets this verse, as meaning that all the produce of the land is profit for the official hierarchical system that exists. In other words, only the “haves” will, in this case, have more to share between them because the source of their profit is
the land that is being tilled by the “have-nots”. Farmer is therefore convinced that, in Qoheleth’s estimation, the source of poverty for the “have-nots” is the injustice suffered at the hands of the “haves” when the produce that comes from the work of the “have-nots” is taken from them. Eaton (1983:101) accepts this verse to mean that the official hierarchical system cannot override or devalue the authority that the king possesses. Everyone is subject to the king; the bureaucracy, the poor; everything is for the benefit of the king.

Two things stand out in this passage, Qoheleth is again showing sympathy for the oppressed - the “have-nots”. But he is also condoning the adherence to the hierarchical status quo. Therefore, everyone must obey the authority of the king; the land and its produce and its apparent profit is to the benefit of the king. The king will not necessarily come to the aid of the oppressed; they then have to accept their fate as well as the hierarchy that is exploiting them.

“All man’s efforts are for his mouth, yet his appetite is never satisfied. What advantage has a wise man over a fool? What does a poor man gain by knowing how to conduct himself before others? Better what the eye sees than the roving of the appetite. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind”. (Ecclesiastes 6: 7-9 [NIV])

In this section, Qoheleth is addressing the insatiable desires of mankind. The language Qoheleth uses for insatiability as well as consumption should be seen as relating to the problem of human greed. Seow (1997:228) asserts that the usage of these words brings about an apparent link to Canaanite mythology and especially that of Death and Sheol subtly echoing in the background. Death is deified in Canaanite mythology and is commonly depicted as an insatiable monster always seeking to have more victims. Viviers (1999:746) states that Qoheleth is depicting the human mouth as a bottomless pit, never reaching fulfillment and always desiring more. Combining this portrait of man’s mouth with death, it is clear that Qoheleth is certain man toils for nothing. The reason for this is that there is no need for toil when one will always desire more and never be able to have enough.
Man works only to still the hunger momentarily; his stomach should be viewed as a bottomless pit that is never filled. Here it needs to be noted again, that Qoheleth is alluding to the rich and the oppressors. Their desire for wealth is insatiable. This insatiable desire has only one outcome and that is the oppression of the poor. Rich individuals will leave nothing to waste, endangering everything and everyone around them. Therefore, the rich get richer while the poor get poorer. The reason for this truth is clear - the insatiable desires of mankind and the “haves” wanting more.

This observation of human greed is a difficult truth for Qoheleth to ponder and come to grips with and he is therefore led to ask a rhetorical question in verse eight. In the face of the monstrous appetite for greed that is displayed by the rich, will the wise have an advantage over the unwise? The answer should be an emphatic no. Not even the wise should be seen as having security amidst the onslaught of the powerful to satisfy an insatiable appetite. Here, again, it is clear that Qoheleth is standing in stark contrast to the teachings of the retributive doctrine. Qoheleth is clearly stating that not even wisdom is enough when the rich and the powerful have designs on your belongings - wisdom will not be able to save the wise. A poor man who is knowledgeable about dealing with those around him must also not consider himself secure according to Qoheleth’s assertion. Wisdom and poverty are then equal; they will not bring security in the midst of the oppressive onslaught of the “haves”. Greed will not stand still to verify the credentials of the wise and whether or not they adhered to the wise order, nor will the fact that a man is poor deter that greedy desire. It will exploit and destroy everything in its path and never cease.

Qoheleth gives an answer to this dilemma that the wise and the poor find themselves in. What the eyes are seeing should be deemed better than an insatiable desire. All that this means is that Qoheleth is instructing both the wise and the poor to actually count their blessings and accept their lot. The intimation is clear: enjoy the present and the pleasures of life. To the wise, he is saying that no amount of wisdom will bring security in wealth; the desire to acquire more will never subside.
The message to the poor and the oppressed again offers no help. Even if they know how to conduct themselves in the midst of oppression and injustice it will still bring them no joy. All that the ‘have-nots’ can do is accept their fate; there is nothing that they can do to better the oppression they find themselves in. They cannot change the structures of society. It is, therefore, better to see the relative good in life and to enjoy it though it will not bring a change to your status. This is rather fatalistic advice.

“Obey the king’s command, I say, because you took an oath before God. Do not be in a hurry to leave the king’s presence. Do not stand up for a bad cause for he will do whatever he pleases. Since a king’s word is supreme, who can say to him, What are you doing?” (Ecclesiastes 8:2-4 [NIV])

Murphy (1992:82) states that verses two to four may be regarded as traditional court wisdom, but they definitely display relevance to the day and age of Qoheleth. Qoheleth is following the formula of the doctrine of retribution; good deeds will bring good results. Therefore, the wise will know how to conduct themselves in the court of the kings. An important fact that should also be taken into consideration is that Qoheleth is “relativising the role and prestige of the sage” (Murphy 1992:83). He is therefore not only speaking to the subjects of the king but also to the sages who populated the king’s court. The sage, with all of his wisdom, is not safe from trouble in the king’s court; he is always confronted with the authority of the royal power and is therefore sworn to loyalty and allegiance.

Obedience, loyalty and reverence for the royal authority of the king have always been a characteristic of traditional wisdom. We find examples of this in Proverbs 24:21 (NIV): “Fear the Lord, and the king my son...”. Proverbs 25:6 states that the king’s subjects are always to respond to the king with total honesty. An important factor to avoid and guard against is the royal displeasure of the king. This is found frequently throughout the book of Proverbs (Prov 14:35; 16:14; 19:12; 20:21). The reference to the “sacred oath” could mean that God made an oath with the king that makes the king a sacred person. So, the admonition is clear that individuals are to obey and revere the king.
In verse three, Qoheleth teaches that one should not be hasty to leave the presence of the king. Again it could be taken as an admonition to the sages who bear office in the king’s court. They are not to be disloyal and desert their posts but should be cautious in making rash decisions. Proverbs 16:14 (NIV) states that “A king’s wrath is a messenger of death, but a wise man will appease it”. This basically means that the words and actions of the wise may simply be a remedy in the face of royal displeasure. Another aspect of Qoheleth’s admonition is that one is not to speak out against the oppression of the king. Again there is a call to loyalty; even in the face of great injustice one is simply to accept the authority of the king and be obedient. The king and his court can do as they please because of the authority of his office - no one can stand against his actions and decisions.

Qoheleth asks a rhetorical question in verse 4. Considering that the king is all-powerful and his subjects are to be loyal and obedient, who can actually call the king to reason and take responsibility for his actions. This rhetorical question echoes that of Job in Job 9:12 where Job asks the same question but, in this instance, the question is directed at God. So, in this instance, it is clear that there can be no undermining of royal authority for nobody can defy the will and the whims of the king. Therefore, it should be concluded that the wise would not have any protection before the king; not even wisdom will protect them.

The conclusion that can be made in this specific scripture is that one is to accept the authority of the hierarchy – i.e., in this instance, the authority of the king. A king is free to do as he pleases and nobody can call him to order. However, there is a slight chance that the wise might appease the wrath of the king. It is also clear that one is to understand the link between God and the earthly king that has always been a tenet of Old Testament theology. Thus, this passage gives no hope to either the “haves” or the “have-nots”; no one is safe under the authority of the king, and he can do as he pleases. Therefore, again, it should be noted that Qoheleth is condoning the actions of the hierarchy and, in this instance, the aristocracy. Everybody should accept his or her fate in terms of the actions of the king.
“I also saw under the sun this example of wisdom that greatly impressed me: there was once a small city with only a few people in it. And a powerful king came against it, surrounded it and built huge siegeworks against it. Now there lived in that city a man poor but wise, and he saved the city by his wisdom. But nobody remembered that poor man. So I said, Wisdom is better than strength. But the poor man’s wisdom is despised, and his words are no longer heeded”. (Ecclesiastes 9:13-16 [NIV])

Qoheleth starts this section as he started so many before commenting on an observation that greatly impressed him. The difference with this introductory observation is that it is a direct and unrestrained attack on traditional wisdom. All the events of this specific passage illustrate the fact that wisdom is not always strength - a fact that strongly denies traditional wisdom’s stance. Again he is saying that he has observed a certain event in life that greatly impressed him; this event has to do with the application of wisdom. He is well aware of the fact that wisdom is desirable but he is going to show that wisdom does have its limitations.

In verses fourteen to fifteen, Qoheleth tells the story of a small city that was under attack from a powerful king. However, the city was saved from destruction by a wise man but the description of this wise man is that he was poor. Traditional wisdom states that wisdom is greater than strength and the might of military weapons (Prov. 21:5 and 24:25). So, the value of wisdom is extolled by Qoheleth; yes it is greater than strength and weapons. The great twist in the story is that it is the wisdom of a poor man that actually saves the city. This means that his great achievement was readily forgotten and unrecognised because of his economic status. Traditional wisdom teaches that wisdom brings wealth, but when wisdom is associated with poverty, it will not be given its rightful place. The poor man was forgotten and despised because of his status - in this the value of wisdom is then greatly questioned.

Qoheleth highlights the value of wisdom in verse sixteen and is even in agreement with traditional wisdom but laments the fortunes of the poor that display great wisdom. It can be concluded that if the man who saved the city with his display of wisdom were
wealthy, he would be extolled as a hero. As a poor man, his wisdom is not recognised because the notion that wisdom is not necessarily connected with the wealthy would make a mockery of traditional wisdom.

The conclusions that can be made with regard to this passage are clear: wisdom is devalued when the poor show themselves to be wise. Wisdom and poverty then, cannot be connected; no one will give the poor the recognition that they deserve even when they have demonstrated themselves to be wise. Poverty also counts for nothing and again the poor have to accept their fate as unimportant and unrecognised. Qoheleth is telling the story and highlighting the injustice but he does nothing to correct the wrong. All he is doing, as he always does, is contradict the teachings of traditional wisdom with Protestant Wisdom. He does not endeavour to change the circumstances but calls for acceptance of one’s economic status and the acceptance of the status quo.

“There is an evil I have seen under the sun, the sort of error that arises from a ruler: Fools are put in many high positions, while the rich occupy the low ones. I have seen slaves on horseback, while princes go on foot like slaves”. (Ecclesiastes 10:5-7 [NIV])

Again Qoheleth begins with the recognisable feature of his writing: the observation that he made in regard to the situation of his time. The confusing conditions of verses six and seven, according to Qoheleth, are the direct result of the observation that he makes in verse five. It is clear that Qoheleth is definitely not in favour of the events that are playing out in his time; it is confusing for him but he knows where to lay the blame.

In verse five, Qoheleth states that the particular events of his time are the direct result of the ruler of his day. Qoheleth even goes as far as to call it an error on behalf of the ruler of the land. Seow (1997:324) states that Qoheleth realises that something terribly wrong has taken place in society and the person he blames is the ruler of the land. This is also a teaching on Qoheleth’s behalf that one is not to trust the people who are placed in positions of power because they seem to disappoint miserably.
In verses six and seven, Qoheleth clearly sets out the turmoil that he is witnessing in his society. He states that the fool is honoured with the position that is rightfully reserved for the wealthy. It is clear, from Qoheleth’s disdain for this socioeconomic anomaly, that he shares the opinion of the traditional wisdom teachers. The “haves”, and not the “have-nots”, are supposed to have the positions of honour. This anomaly should be blamed on the ruler because he is giving honour to those individuals who do not deserve it. Here, again, it needs to be said that wisdom will not bring one honour or wealth.

The socio-economic conditions of Qoheleth’s world indicate only turmoil. Those in government were not competent and efficient in ruling and were losing control. Wealthy and wise individuals were over-looked and competent fools occupied their “rightful positions”. All of this points to the fact that Qoheleth expects that the status quo should be properly preserved and adhered to. This means that the wealthy should be honoured with positions of power and the poor should stay repressed socio-economically. Therefore, Qoheleth esteems the rich above the poor; the poor are not meant to be in any positions of power. Qoheleth then is not promoting the rights of the poor but rather the wealthy.

“Woe to you, O lands whose king was a servant and whose princes feast in the morning. Blessed are you, O land whose king is of noble birth and whose princes eat at a proper time—for strength and not for drunkenness. If a man is lazy, the rafters sag; if his hands are idle, the house leaks. A feast is made for laughter, and wine makes life merry, but money is the answer to everything. Do not revile the king even in your thoughts, or curse the rich in your bedroom, because a bird of the air may carry your words, and a bird on the wing may report what you say”. (Ecclesiastes 10:16-20 [NIV])

The actual verse that is of importance in this passage is verse twenty. It has been placed within the pericope to highlight the fact that it cannot stand on its own but belongs to a whole unit. Qoheleth is again questioning the relativity of wealth and classism as well as traditional wisdom teaching. Again the wise and the wealthy are seen to occupy places of lowliness whereas the poor and the unwise are seen as occupying places that rightfully
belong to the wealthy. Another factor is Qoheleth’s derision of royalty; the ruler therefore is again responsible for the socio-economic turmoil of the society.

The focus here must turn to verse twenty. Viviers (1999:755) states that in the turmoil of his society the best advice is to accept the rule of the despotic king and to not pass judgement. Passing judgement or criticism should be avoided at all cost because, by some accident, the king may hear of it. Qoheleth says that birds might overhear the criticism and carry it to the ears of the king. This will then result in negative consequences for the individual who criticises the king. Therefore the best advice that he can give is to keep quiet and simply accept the king and his despotic rule.

One can question the advice that Qoheleth is giving because he is again turning a blind eye to the realities of his day. It is clear that Qoheleth is teaching that one is to accept the status quo, which is accepting the institutionalised classism. There will be “haves” and there will be “have-nots” in society - in every society - and this, he teaches, must be accepted. Another fact that comes across in his teaching is respect and adherence to the hierarchy, especially the king. Sages were advisors to the king and therefore Qoheleth knew the importance of accepting the decrees of the king. Nothing then changes: Qoheleth is teaching the same message over and over; life should be accepted as it happens.

### 4.3. Conclusion

These few pericopes have only scraped the surface of Qoheleth on the issue of the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots’ but hopefully confirmed his ideological stance concerning this matter. Qoheleth’s main message is clear throughout this section. All is vanity. Qoheleth is a protestor protesting against the doctrine of retribution but not the anomalies of society. As a sage, he was considered as the elite of society, standing between the institutionalised classes, the “haves” and the “have-nots”. He is non-committed on taking a stance for both, as doing so will lead to rejection by both classes. The main emphasis is that good deeds are not followed by good results; there are too many uncertainties in life.
These uncertainties Qoheleth concludes are fate, death and ultimately God. All of these uncertainties must be accepted. As for the uncertainty of fate, one has to accept that there will be “haves” and “have-nots” in society - the two classes must accept it as well as social commentators. In accepting one’s fate, one’s class is also to accept the oppression that, particularly; the “have-nots” are facing. They have no one who is willing to fight their cause; no one who will come to their aid and this they have to accept. Although Qoheleth shows sympathy for their oppression even he does not demonstrate a willingness to champion their cause.

Therefore it is also possible to conclude that fate can alter the reality of both classes. Fate can work in such a manner that the “have-nots”, in this case, may be able to acquire wealth. Also, through the workings of fate the “haves” may even lose their wealth. In contrast, the “haves” may even acquire more wealth and land - this is also the working of fate. It must be concluded that Qoheleth is right in asserting that all life’s activities are relative and that therefore wealth is purely relative.

Qoheleth teaches the acceptance of the status quo - i.e. institutionalised classism - and, more importantly, the acceptance and adherence to the hierarchy. The acceptance of the hierarchy is recommended even when that hierarchical system is guilty of oppression. No one can question the decisions and actions of the king and one should accept that he would never take responsibility for his actions, as he does not have to.

The only glimpse of hope that is afforded to all by Qoheleth is the reality of death. Death is one of the greatest uncertainties of life. In death Qoheleth teaches that all of mankind and the animal world is the same. There are no “haves” and no “have-nots” in death; everyone is equal. Therefore, he prescribes that particularly the “have-nots” should desire death, because it will save them from oppression. Again this shows Qoheleth’s reluctance to take a definitive stance on institutionalised classism.

It has been concluded that Qoheleth does not have anything significant to say about land issues nor does he endeavour to change the anomalies that existed in his society.
Institutionalised classism, and the consequent oppression, does not bother the sage; he teaches the acceptance and maintenance of classism. He is not a social reformer in that he does not fight for the oppressed. In this regard he disappoints.

To ask Qoheleth to champion social reform is to ask Paul, in the New Testament, to comment on slavery. All that Paul teaches in the New Testament is that slaves must endeavour to be good slaves and to adhere to the directives of their owners. Similarly, Qoheleth teaches that there will always be “haves” and “have-nots” in society and that is to be both expected and accepted. The “have-nots” actually have to accept their fate and should rather strive to live right for who knows if fate may lead them to a position of privilege. It is therefore perhaps better to concentrate on the prophets who were real social reformers and championed the cause of the ‘have-nots’. They, the prophets, will be more meaningful in exposing injustice with regard to land issues.
Chapter Five

Summary

5.1 Summary of Study

In chapter one the reader was introduced to the study. The problem, with the various questions that are raised in this study, is set forth. Overwhelmingly the problem constitutes the impact of institutionalised classism on the land debate. Problems arising are the ownership of the land, land claims and land restitution. We are however also interested in classism, the haves and the have-nots and mainly on whose side Qoheleth and Protest wisdom stand. The purpose (and aim) of the study was to establish Qoheleth’s view on institutionalised classism and how it impacts on the land debate. The way to achieve this purpose was through a specific methodological approach, namely an ideological appreciation. The study incorporated the social rhetorical criticism of Vernon K Robbins and concentrated mainly on Ideological texture. Ideological texture states that the primary point of contact is people and is built on individual location, relation to groups, modes of intellectual discourse and the various spheres of ideology.

In chapter two the importance and centrality of land in the Old Testament was highlighted. Land was discovered to be important and central to the theology of Israel in the Old Testament. It is the land that grounded their relationship with God, and He was believed to be the divine owner of the land. As the owner of the land, it was then God’s decision to whom He gave the land. Israel therefore was called into a relationship with God through the giving of the land to them as a gift. Another important aspect that was highlighted in this chapter, was the origin of wealth and poverty as well as classism in Israel’s history. Israel began as a tribal society that was in subjugation to the great city-states of Canaan. Peasantry marks the early beginnings of Israel whereas the Canaanites were the merchant elite. Eventually Israel evolved into a state that was ruled by the monarchy. Here too the divisions of society were apparent, the haves and the have-nots.
This was important, as it laid the foundation for the ideological perspective of Qoheleth on wealth and poverty as well as classism.

In chapter three, Qoheleth and the other wisdom books were placed in perspective. Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes were looked at separately to highlight the distinct differences in the wisdom development that each book represents. The three phases of wisdom development are the unproblematic phase that is featured in Proverbs, the phase of rigidity featured in Job (cf. friends) and lastly the phase of protest wisdom, characterised in Ecclesiastes. Qoheleth is the main exponent of protest wisdom. It was pointed out that Qoheleth forms part of the protest wisdom tradition, and the protest was led against the doctrine of retribution. Qoheleth’s structure, message and other stylistic features were concentrated on to build the platform for chapter four. The main message of Qoheleth is, all in life is meaningless. This means that there are too many uncertainties in life and one just has to make the most of the opportunities that one receives.

5.2 Conclusion: Qoheleth’s contribution?

Qoheleth does not have anything significant to say about the land issue. Also, he seems non-committed in taking sides for either the haves or the have-nots. He ironically emphasises their equality but in death! What about life, how does one keep on living a meaningful life amidst institutionalized injustice? Qoheleth is disappointingly silent on this. All “revolutionary” sounds Qoheleth makes are that of an intellectual revolutionary. The revolt he leads is not against the institutionalised classism that was so entrenched in the Israelite society of his day. As an intellectual revolutionary, the revolt is against the dominant ideology that was so entrenched in the traditional wisdom ideas alive in Israelite society.

This ideology that was so entrenched in every sphere of Israelite existence was the teaching of the doctrine of retribution that was rigidly observed. This doctrine was built on the action-consequence formulae. Therefore, every action brought a definite result, however at the core of this doctrine is the desire for favourable results. Righteous people
were deemed righteous when they observed this doctrine and then everything that is favourable and good will happen to them. On the flip side of the coin the wicked will only reap bad results in their lives and this cannot be changed.

Qoheleth, the leading exponent of protest wisdom alongside Job in the Old Testament is questioning the validity of the doctrine of retribution. He successfully renders it null and void and argues that it cannot be adhered to. Individuals are taught to seize the day, but this must be wearily done in the face of the many uncertainties that permeate life. All activities in life, whether it is specifically the pursuit of wealth and pleasure, are in vain in the end. This is the message of Qoheleth. Man can enjoy his life, but at the end of the day it is all in vain.

Qoheleth’s greatest contribution in this study is his teachings on the relativity of life. Life is full of uncertainties and therefore every human being must make the most of life as the opportunities present themselves. Again it must be stressed that Qoheleth is silent on matters of social reform, the have-nots must accept their fate and obey and adhere to the status quo. The injustices of institutionalised classism is of no concern to Qoheleth, life is unfortunately filled with injustice and therefore should not come as a surprise but should rather be accepted.

5.3 Qua vadis?

This mini-dissertation did not propose to be anything but an ideological appreciation of Qoheleth on wealth, poverty and land issues. It is therefore not an exhaustive work in that it proposes to answer the questions that are raised concerning land issues. I have proposed that Qoheleth raised expectations that he might contribute meaningfully to the land debate, seeing that he is not your average sage with his pessimistic view on life. The debate on land issues will have to continue without a contribution from Qoheleth, to expose classism. In actual fact it seems that Qoheleth is not interested in land issues as we feature them today or any social reform programme. He teaches that people have to make the most of what they have and accept their fate in life, and along with this the institutionalized hierarchies.
As is the case in our modern times, as with the times of Qoheleth, our society is permeated with various classes. This study is however preoccupied with only two distinguishable classes, that is the haves and the have-nots. Firstly, the haves are the wealthy and also in terms of the land debate, landowners and the have-nots are the poor, the landless. To take Qoheleth literally in our times is to agree with him then that both classes will be better served to accept their standing as well as fate. There will always be haves (the wealthy) and there will always be have-nots (the poor), this is inevitable. Even if oppression and injustice is leveled at the have-nots, this too must be accepted, for the oppressors are just protected by higher officials than they are. This is not acceptable in modern times.

Therefore the land debate will have to continue. I am, however, of the opinion that the Church must make its voice heard and stand up for those that are being oppressed. Social reform programs should become an integral agenda for the church, this means that we should not only provide shelter, food for the oppressed but champion their cause. The rich component of the Church should lead the way in this regard.

However, we are faced with another grave danger, this in regard to the land issue. The incessant crime of land grabbing by both the landless and the powerful landowners is at the heart of the danger. At the end of the day both the haves and the have-nots are guilty of land grabbing and the Church must speak out against both. I am of the assertion that the Church can be a mediator between the haves and the have-nots, the landowners and the landless. Our revolt should not only be against unjust ideologies that permeate our society, but also against the institutionalised classism that wreaks havoc on grassroots level.

I must strongly express my opinion the Church should play a leading role in social reform. Therefore the Church must be relevant to the needs of society and provide answers to the many questions, antidotes for the numerous ills that permeate our society. Future studies should tackle the difficult ethical questions that are raised almost everyday in our societies. Investigating wealth and poverty and land issues must be conducted on
the whole of the Old Testament (and rest of the Bible). The various genres of literature that forms the Old Testament Canon will be studied as to provide real insight into what the Old Testament have to say about land and class issues. The prophets of the Old Testament promise to provide much food for thought in this regard.
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