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QOHELETH AND SOGGY BREAD: THE ENIGMATIC EXHORTATION OF ECCLESIASTES 11:1

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## Introduction

As he nears the end of his autobiographical pontification, Qoheleth considers some of the uncertainties of life in Ecclesiastes 11:1-6. This small subsection begins with the puzzling exhortation to “cast your bread upon the waters, for you will find it after many days.” Unsurprisingly, no small amount of confusion has resulted from this unusual proverb. Understood in its proper context, however, it is just the sort of advice one would expect the “under the sun” thinker to give. In this paper I will argue Qoheleth’s exhortation in Eccl 11:1 is to engage in acts of giving as a means of protecting oneself against future uncertainties. First, I will examine the proverb in its immediate literary context. After establishing the proper context I will critique the most prominent views which have been put forward to explain the proverb.<sup>1</sup> Lastly, I will argue for the view of giving to insure against future disaster and conclude with brief application.

## Context

Two contextual considerations must be taken into account in order to properly understand v.1. First, it must be understood in connection with vv.1-6. These verses form a coherent group and will shed important light on Qoheleth’s exhortation in v.1. Especially relevant is v.2. Its structural and thematic parallels are key to understanding v.1. Second, Qoheleth’s outlook as a whole in the book must be considered. As with all other passages of

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<sup>1</sup> The relatively recent theory that Qoheleth is referring to beer production has not received much acceptance in the scholarly community and will not be treated here. See Michael M Homan, “Beer Production by Throwing Bread into Water: A New Interpretation of Qoh. Xi 1-2,” *VT* 52 (2002): 275–78. Pinker has proposed an alteration to the text, arguing that an earlier *Urtext* was changed in transmission. See Aron Pinker, “A New Approach to Qohelet 11:1,” *OTE* 22 (2009): 618–45. Even if the alteration is accepted, it still does not explain the text as is and why someone left it as such.

Ecclesiastes, how we understand Qoheleth's perspective will fundamentally shape our understanding of v.1.

Commentators disagree on precisely which verses v.1 is most properly grouped with. Murphy considers it in light of v.2, but not vv.3-6, taking 10:16-11:2 a single unit. This unit is united on the basis of the phrase “not know” (לֹא תָדַע).<sup>2</sup> However, this use of לֹא תָדַע is rather arbitrary and ignores other, more important marker phrases such as “under the sun.” In fact, 10:16-11:2 do not really show any discernible thematic connection.<sup>3</sup> The change in subject between 10:20 and 11:1 is particularly abrupt. Verse 1 seems to work better as the beginning of a new section, focusing on the uncertainties of life.<sup>4</sup> This is addressed more specifically in vv.1-6 in which Qoheleth observes “an element of risk” in life's endeavors.<sup>5</sup> Most commentators concur that v.6 especially acts as a theme verse for the subsection.<sup>6</sup> Life is uncertain, so action must be taken. The most relevant context, then, is vv.1-6.<sup>7</sup>

Verses 1 and 2 are properly taken together.<sup>8</sup> The structural parallels are evident:

**11:1**

שְׁלַח לְחַמְדָּה עַל־פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם  
כִּי־בָרֵב הַיָּמִים תִּמְצָאָנּוּ

**11:2**

תִּוְחַלֵּק לְשִׁבְעָה וְגַם לְשִׁמוּנָה  
כִּי לֹא תִדְעַ מַה־יְהִיָּה רִעָה

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<sup>2</sup> Roland E. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, WBC (Waco, TX: Word, 1992), 105. Provan also sees a unity in the “lack of knowledge” uniting these verses, although he understands this theme to unite vv.1-6. See Iain W. Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs: From Biblical Text...to Contemporary Life*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 205.

<sup>3</sup> Ernest Lucas, *Exploring the Old Testament: A Guide to the Psalms & Wisdom Literature* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2002), 154.

<sup>4</sup> Richard P. Belcher, *Finding Favour in the Sight of God: A Theology of Wisdom Literature*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018), 167.

<sup>5</sup> James L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes: A Commentary*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), 178.

<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, Craig G. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, BCOTWP (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), E-Book Edition, 335.

<sup>7</sup> For a full treatment of the structural unity of vv.1-6, see Graham S. Ogden, “Qoheleth 11:1-6,” *VT* 33 (1983): 222–30. That is not to say that vv.1-6 have no relationship with what follows. See Graham S. Ogden, “Qoheleth 11:7-12:8: Qoheleth's Summons to Enjoyment and Reflection,” *VT* 34 (1984): 27–28.

<sup>8</sup> R.J. Kidwell and Don DeWalt, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*, Bible Study Textbook (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1977), 262.

Each begins with an imperative,  $\text{חֲשֵׁב}$  in v.1 and  $\text{תֵּן}$  in v.2. These are then followed by a parallel line in which  $\text{כִּי}$  introduces a motive for the imperative.<sup>9</sup> Thus, a proper understanding of v.1 must take into account the structural parallels of v.2. It should also be noted that with this structure there is a parallel between  $\text{מִלֵּךְ}$  (v.1) and  $\text{מִלֵּקַח}$  (v.2), two words with close thematic connections in Ecclesiastes.<sup>10</sup>

Our understanding of 11:1 will also be deeply affected by our understanding of Qoheleth himself. Early interpreters saw him as a perfectly orthodox Jew and understood his statements as such.<sup>11</sup> However, a more proper understanding of the text shows his outlook on life is by no means that of a devout Jew. He is heterodox at best. His relationship with God is by no means intimate. The lack of use of the sacred tetragrammaton makes God seem remote.<sup>12</sup> This transcendence of God is the consistent emphasis of the book (cf. 3:11; 5:2; 11:5).<sup>13</sup>

Qoheleth's view of God as distant is clearly displayed in his epistemology. While not truly deistic, he does approach wisdom autonomously, without the help of traditional knowledge.<sup>14</sup> By leaving aside traditional knowledge and an imminent God, Qoheleth restricts his view to life "under the sun." It is a purely earthly plain of observation, independent of divine revelation or heavenly realities.<sup>15</sup> This is further evident in one of the key words of the book,  $\text{הֶבֶל}$ , which has been understood in a variety of ways. Its precise nuance may change from place to place, but whatever precise translation is given it certainly points to the futility of

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<sup>9</sup> Thomas Krüger, *Qoheleth: A Commentary*, ed. Klaus Baltzer, trans. O. C. Dean Jr., Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 192. Krüger notes similar structures may be found in 4:17-5:6; 11:6, 9-10.

<sup>10</sup> See below.

<sup>11</sup> See Svend Holm-Nielsen, "On the Interpretation of Qoheleth in Early Christianity," *VT* 24 (1974): 168-77.

<sup>12</sup> Harold Bloom, *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?* (New York: Riverhead, 2004), 23.

<sup>13</sup> Lucas, *Guide to the Psalms & Wisdom Literature*, 166.

<sup>14</sup> Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 271-72.

<sup>15</sup> Belcher, *Finding Favour*, 142.

Qoheleth's quest.<sup>16</sup> He is not writing as a devout, orthodox Jew, but as someone who is struggling as he considers life apart from divine revelation and apart from God.

## Proposed Interpretations

### *Maritime Trade*

One of the most commonly held views is that Qoheleth is referring to maritime trade.<sup>17</sup> In this understanding, Qoheleth urges readers to be willing to take financial risks. Since life is to be taken from the hand of God with all its trials and perplexities, risks are unavoidable and must be taken.<sup>18</sup> Bread, in this view, is a way of speaking of our means of making a living.<sup>19</sup> To send it out onto the waters is to risk business ventures overseas. By being willing to take risks and send goods overseas, one may make a profit (i.e. "you will find it after many days").<sup>20</sup>

This view is widely held and its merits must be seriously considered.<sup>21</sup> First, it handles well the contextual factors. The parallel with v.2 does suggest that Qoheleth has in mind protection against uncertainty. Garrett notes v.6 seems to suggest a concern for financial strategy, which would be consistent with maritime commercial ventures.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, this

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<sup>16</sup> R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, and Bruce K. Waltke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 205. See also Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 42–44.

<sup>17</sup> Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 337; Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 178; F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 392; Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman, 1993), 338; Tremper Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 256; R.B.Y. Scott, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes*, AB (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965), 252.

<sup>18</sup> Michael A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Nottingham, England: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 140.

<sup>19</sup> Delitzsch, *Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, 392.

<sup>20</sup> Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 178.

<sup>21</sup> Though no position on Qoheleth's identity is here taken, we must note that if he is identified with Solomon, the idea of maritime trade would be further strengthened by Solomon's known activities in such areas. See Delitzsch, *Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, 392.

<sup>22</sup> Garrett, *Ecclesiastes*, 338.

view has a degree of consistency with Qoheleth's outlook on life without regard to what is "above the sun." It keeps Qoheleth's instruction grounded and leaves out the divine. Ross also notes a parallel with the virtuous woman in Prov 31:14, who "is like the ships of the merchant; she brings her food (לֶחֶם) from afar."<sup>23</sup>

Several issues with this view must be noted, however.<sup>24</sup> First, the terms do not carry the obvious meanings this view requires. לֶחֶם is indeed used metaphorically in Scripture (Prov 4:17; 20:17; Isa 30:20), but there is no other precedent for its metaphorical use as goods for trading.<sup>25</sup> The closest the verb שָׁלַח comes to being used in the sense of sending ships out to sea is in 1 Kgs 9:27. Yet even in that case, Solomon sends (וַיִּשְׁלַח) his servants, not the ships themselves. Second, the idea that one would simply receive back the bread cast out does not make sense with commercial maritime investments. To risk material goods in the uncertainties of overseas trade and only receive back what one sent brings no financial profit and is inconsistent with the proposed interpretation.<sup>26</sup>

The parallel with the virtuous woman of Proverbs 31 is indeed a close parallel, but not as close as Ross proposes. In Prov 31:14, her bread is brought in, not sent out. She is also not literally engaging in maritime trade, but *like* (כְּ) a merchant ship. Even if taken literally, it seems better to understand her as buying from maritime merchants, not sending out goods for trade herself.

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<sup>23</sup> Allen P. Ross, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary. Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), E-Book edition, "Ecclesiastes."

<sup>24</sup> See also Pinker, "New Approach," 625–29.

<sup>25</sup> A brief survey of TWOT shows לֶחֶם is almost universally used for physical food. Even in the above cited examples physical bread is still in view. See Harris, Archer, and Waltke, *TWOT*, 477.

<sup>26</sup> Richard P. Belcher, *A Study Commentary on Ecclesiastes* (Darlington: Evangelical Press, 2014), 301; Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 192.

## *Christian Generosity*

Numerous commentators have understood Qoheleth to be exhorting some form of benevolent, Christian giving.<sup>27</sup> Qoheleth, in this understanding, is teaching a spiritual lesson in vv.1-2. To cast one's bread upon the waters is to be generous in giving material help to the poor and needy. Even if one's money or goods seem lost, like bread thrown onto water, Christians must still give generously.<sup>28</sup> Verse 2 in this view supports this view by either exhorting to abundant generosity or by invoking the principle of sowing and reaping (2 Cor 9:6), though these are not necessarily mutually exclusive.<sup>29</sup> Casting bread upon the waters, then, is to engage in charitable Christian giving, generously and with anticipation of a great harvest (material or spiritual).

There are several strengths to this view that must be noted. First, it takes into account the parallels between vv.1 and 2. It appropriately notes that v.2 must be used to elucidate v.1. Second, its placement in a Christian canonical context is consistent with more explicit Christian teaching pertaining to generous giving (Matt 25:40; 2 Cor 8:1-4). Third, it notes that for Qoheleth, there is a charitable aspect to sending one's bread and giving one's portion.<sup>30</sup>

Contextually, this view does not work. First and foremost, it misunderstands Qoheleth's outlook in the book. He is considering life "under the sun," apart from divine

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<sup>27</sup> Charles Bridges, *An Exposition of the Book of Ecclesiastes* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1960), 263; Eric S. Christianson, *Ecclesiastes Through the Centuries*, Blackwell Bible Commentaries (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007), 219; Christian Ginsburg, *Qoheleth, Commonly Called the Book of Ecclesiastes: Translated from the Original Hebrew, with a Commentary, Historical and Critical* (London: Longman, 1861), 447; Matthew Henry, *Job to Song of Solomon*, Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, n.d.), 1042 (while Henry opts for Christian charity, he does see an allusion to maritime trade in v.1); J. Vernon McGee, *Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon* (Nashville: T. Nelson, 1991), 83; Crenshaw notes that in "ancient and medieval Jewish circles this interpretation became standard." See Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 178.

<sup>28</sup> Henry, *Job to Song of Solomon*, 1042.

<sup>29</sup> For the former, see Henry, *Job to Song of Solomon*, 1042. For the latter, see G. Wolff, "The Eternal God Is Our Refuge: A Brief Commentary on Ecclesiastes: Chapter X-XII," *WLQ* 79 (1982): 201.

<sup>30</sup> For  $\text{מִן־הַלֶּחֶם}$  and  $\text{קִלְקִיל}$  in Ecclesiastes, see below.

revelation. Spiritual concerns lie beyond his purview.<sup>31</sup> In context, Qoheleth seems much more concerned for self-preservation than selfless giving.<sup>32</sup> So while consistent with other biblical teachings, the view of charitable Christian giving must be rejected.

### *Metaphor for Senseless Action*

A third main option is that Qoheleth uses the casting of bread upon the waters as a metaphor for senseless action.<sup>33</sup> Our limited knowledge of the future and its many uncertainties means we will never know when something may return to us for our benefit. Even a senseless act, in light of an uncertain future, may bring a favorable outcome. The paradoxical workings of life may lead to a good result from something as silly as throwing bread on water. This is, as Murphy puts it, “vintage Qoheleth.”<sup>34</sup>

This view has much to commend it. Most importantly, it handles well the relevant contextual factors. Verses 3-6 do seem to address the issue of the uncertainty of the future, of what we do and do not know.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, this view properly takes into account Qoheleth’s outlook on life “under the sun.” There is a pessimistic view of life that does not even trust uncertainties. The primary issue with this view is that it requires an adversative וְ. The structure of vv.1 and 2 (imperative + וְ + indicative) makes this highly unlikely.<sup>36</sup> So while thematically promising, grammatically it does not work well.

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<sup>31</sup> Belcher, *Ecclesiastes*, 300.

<sup>32</sup> See below.

<sup>33</sup> Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 107.

<sup>34</sup> Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 107.

<sup>35</sup> Daniel C Fredericks, “Life’s Storms and Structural Unity in Qoheleth 11:1-12:8,” *JSOT* 16 (1991): 98–99.

<sup>36</sup> Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 192.

## Giving as Insurance

Although none of the above proposed solutions perfectly fit, there are elements that must be noted. The idea of benevolent giving in particular works well, with adjustment. The idea of giving must be placed “under the sun.” Christian charity may not be in Qoheleth’s purview, but self-enjoyment certainly is. What he does appear to be exhorting is giving as protection against possible disaster. In this understanding, he is indeed urging giving, but for personal benefit. Instead of giving as an act of charity, giving should be seen as a way of protecting against unpredictable disaster.<sup>37</sup>

First, the contextual factors must be taken into account. Qoheleth views life “under the sun” so we would expect his advice to be “earthly.” In light of the subsection of vv.1-6, he would also appear to be most concerned with protecting against uncertainties in life. Especially when considered in parallel with v.2, the motivation seems to be protection against disaster. This suggests he is not particularly concerned so much with showing selfless, Christian love but with self-preservation.

We must also consider how Qoheleth understands *לֶחֶם* in the context of the Ecclesiastes. As noted above, *לֶחֶם* almost certainly means physical food, and is not some metaphorical image.<sup>38</sup> Bread is also heavily connected to the frequent calls to enjoyment.<sup>39</sup> Both 9:7 and 10:19 directly involve bread. The very act of “eating and drinking” also implies bread.<sup>40</sup> In 9:7, Qoheleth gives the exhortation to “eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart.” This exhortation follows his contemplation of the leveling power of death over all in

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<sup>37</sup> Belcher, *Ecclesiastes*, 302.

<sup>38</sup> Harris, Archer, and Waltke, *TWOT*, 477.

<sup>39</sup> For calls to enjoyment, see Belcher, *Finding Favour*, 139–40.

<sup>40</sup> Belcher, *Ecclesiastes*, 301.

9:1-6. The call to eat  $\text{אָכַל}$  with joy is a call given in light of the end that comes with death. It is a call to simply enjoy life as much as possible while it is still enjoyable.<sup>41</sup> In 9:11, Qoheleth observes that the deed-consequence relationship has broken down.<sup>42</sup> “The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise.” Just as it is appropriate for the swift to win a race or the strong to win a battle, so is it appropriate for the wise to have bread. Qoheleth commands enjoyment of life again in 10:19.<sup>43</sup> “Bread is made for laughter.” It parallels his earlier exhortations to enjoy the good life.<sup>44</sup>

The association of bread with calls to enjoyment is further strengthened by the parallel in v.2. Qoheleth there urges his readers to “give a portion,”  $\text{תֵּן חֶלֶק}$ . This  $\text{תֵּן חֶלֶק}$  is frequently associated with the calls to enjoyment (3:22; 5:18-19; 9:6, 9; 11:2) as what is left to a man to enjoy after his labor.<sup>45</sup> Particularly notable is the call to enjoyment of 9:7-9. This is the only call to enjoyment where bread and  $\text{תֵּן חֶלֶק}$  are explicitly grouped together.<sup>46</sup> Along with wearing fresh, white garments (v.8), and enjoying one’s wife (v.9), bread is a part of one’s  $\text{תֵּן חֶלֶק}$ , a means of having what limited enjoyment one can in this life. Bread, for Qoheleth, is what is naturally due the wise (9:11), and a means of limited enjoyment, a part of one’s  $\text{תֵּן חֶלֶק}$ . To “cast your bread” or to “give a portion” in the context of vv.1-6 would then be to use these things to protect against an uncertainty-laden future.

If Qoheleth is concerned with protecting against the uncertainties of the future and potential disaster, and one’s means of enjoyment in life are to be used to protect against it, the

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<sup>41</sup> Delitzsch, *Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, 362.

<sup>42</sup> Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 164.

<sup>43</sup> Lucas, *Guide to the Psalms & Wisdom Literature*, 158.

<sup>44</sup> Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 106.

<sup>45</sup> Belcher, *Finding Favour*, 140.

<sup>46</sup> Although, we must note again bread is implicitly associated with every call to “eat and drink.”

question then is what activity does Qoheleth advise? How should one use these things? The idea is not economic investment, since that would, as previously noted, bring in more than what one put out. The terms  $\text{שָׁלַח}$  and  $\text{לָקַח}$  have no clear connection with agricultural concepts such as sowing or seeds, either, so farming must not be in view.<sup>47</sup>

Since vv.1-2 are a single unit, the activity of v.2 must shed light on that of v.1. Seow notes that the giving in v.2 is not *among*, as would be expected in investment plans, but *to* (לְ). The portion is not divided like an investment, but given like a gift.<sup>48</sup> A parallel use is found in Josh 14:4, “they did not give a portion to the Levites (וְלֹא־נָתַנוּ חֵלֶק לְלֵוִיִּם).” There the point is not that the Levites were to share a portion, but to be given their own.<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, outside Ecclesiastes food is associated with a portion in Deut 18:8 and Hab 1:16.<sup>50</sup>

For Qoheleth, the portion being the means of enjoyment in this life, to give a portion would be to engage in an act of (at least outward) kindness. It would be to give someone something to enjoy. Considering the same activity is likely in view in vv.1-2, and the close connection between  $\text{לָקַח}$  and  $\text{חֵלֶק}$  for Qoheleth, the activity seems to be giving others a means of enjoyment, specifically bread in this case. We must note, again, that this is done under the motivation of self-preservation against an unpredictable future, and thus is not ultimately concerned with the welfare of others. Longman has argued that understanding v.1 as an exhortation to giving applies a meaning foreign to the words themselves, and charity does not seem to be in mind.<sup>51</sup> However, if we understand the portion properly, then in the specific

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<sup>47</sup> Pinker, “New Approach,” 629–31.

<sup>48</sup> C.L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 342.

<sup>49</sup> Seow, *Ecclesiastes: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 335.

<sup>50</sup> Seow, *Ecclesiastes: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 335.

<sup>51</sup> See Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 256.

context of Ecclesiastes giving to others is an acceptable meaning for v.1, especially when it is ultimately self-directed giving.

A number of parallel ANE texts have been proposed as aids to illuminating the meaning of the proverb.<sup>52</sup> The *Instruction of Onchsheshonqy* is particularly helpful here. The author gives the exhortation, “Do a good deed and throw it in the water; when it dries you will find it.”<sup>53</sup> Fox calls it a “demetaphorized version of Qohelet’s [proverb].” If one does a good deed, in hard times it may unexpectedly pay off.<sup>54</sup> Like casting bread upon water, a charitable deed such as giving one’s portion may seem like a waste and an unnecessary risk. In the end, though, it may return back to the one who thought he had wasted it.

If the act of casting bread upon the waters is a form of (at least outwardly) charitable giving, and the motivation behind it is self-preservation against uncertainties, then the mechanism by which giving protects against uncertainty is given in v.1b and 2a. The hope is not that one’s bread will remain out upon the waters, but that “you will find it.” How it is found is by receiving back from those aided in v.2a. In times of difficulty, those one has befriended through acts of giving will in turn come to help. The bread which was given in good times will be returned in the bad.<sup>55</sup> The more one gives, the more people one befriends.<sup>56</sup> The more people

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<sup>52</sup> See George A. Barton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes*, repr., ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1959), 181. His proposed parallel of the young boy Mohammed accidentally saving another’s life by throwing bread on the water does not work in Qoheleth. As previously noted, Qoheleth’s concern is with self-preservation, not benevolent charity.

<sup>53</sup> *Ancient Egyptian Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 3:174.

<sup>54</sup> Michael V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 312.

<sup>55</sup> Note, again, the parallel with the *Instruction of Onchsheshonqy*, where the good deed returns in hard times (“when it [the water] dries”).

<sup>56</sup> The figure “seven or eight” should not be taken literally. It is a biblical Hebrew literary device used to express “many.” See Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, 182.

one befriends, the greater the security against disaster because of the greater likelihood of finding someone to help. It is a selfish form of the sowing and reaping principle.

### **Application**

Qoheleth's advice in Eccl 11:1, like all his other exhortations, must be understood in its proper "under the sun" context. It is, in fact, ultimately selfish. This does not make the proverb entirely useless; we may place it "above the sun" and glean wisdom from a despairing Qoheleth. There is great wisdom in Qoheleth's observation that the uncertainties of life must be prepared for. It is true that if one gives generously, more people will be befriended and more likely to help in times of trouble. Understood in a complete, biblical perspective, however, this is not the final motivation. As Christians, we give out of a joyful heart (2 Cor 9:7) motivated by the love of God (2 Cor 8:9) and love for others (Gal 6:10). Does Qoheleth's understanding of sowing and reaping principle apply to us? Yes. But rather than seeking to merely preserve ourselves through our own efforts and the return of good deeds from others, we look to God as the one who will supply our every need "according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus" (Phil 4:19). Our hope is not in debts owed or earthly portions, but in the God who has promised to provide our needs. One of the ways he may well supply our needs is by returning to us what we have given out of an abundance of joy.

### **Conclusion**

Though certainly enigmatic at first, Qoheleth's exhortation to cast one's bread upon the waters must be understood in its proper context. To give one's bread or portion is to be truly

generous and kind in life “under the sun.” Considering the many uncertainties in life, it is wise to be willing to take the great risk of giving these up and befriending those who will help in times of trouble. Qoheleth does understand the principle of sowing and reaping on an earthly level. As Christians, though, we look at life “above the sun.” We give out of an abundance of love and joy, trusting life’s future uncertainties to the God who has made us rich in Christ.

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