

RIGHTEOUSNESS AND WICKEDNESS IN ECCLESIASTES 7:15-18

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Good and evil, righteousness and wickedness, virtue and vice—these are common subjects in the Scriptures. The poetical books, especially, are much concerned with the acts of righteous and unrighteous persons. Qoheleth, in Ecclesiastes, declares that “there is nothing better . . . than to rejoice and to do good in one’s lifetime” (3:12, NASB). In fact, he concludes the book with the warning that “God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil” (12:14).

But how righteous should one try to be, and for what purpose? Qoheleth sets forth what appears to be a strange answer in Eccl 7:15-18:

I have seen everything during my lifetime of futility; there is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his wickedness. Do not be excessively righteous, and do not be overly wise. Why should you ruin yourself? Do not be excessively wicked, and do not be a fool. Why should you die before your time? It is good that you grasp one thing, and also not let go of the other; for the one who fears God comes forth with both of them. (NASB)

1. *Common Interpretations of Ecclesiastes 7:15-18*

Walter C. Kaiser contends that “few verses in Ecclesiastes are more susceptible to incorrect interpretations than 7:16-18.”¹ In fact, interpreters of Ecclesiastes tend to view the argument of 7:15-18 in a variety of ways, depending upon whether they are willing to attribute to the author a sense of relativity and “moderation” in moral conduct.²

¹Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Ecclesiastes: Total Life* (Chicago, 1979), p. 85.

²The Jewish Targum seems to interpret the word “righteous” here in a technical sense as an admonition to judges not to be too severe in their judgments,

The Golden Mean

Kaiser has also observed that "for many, Solomon's advice is the so-called golden mean; it is as if he had said: 'Don't be too holy and don't be too wicked. Sin to a moderate degree!'"³ Indeed, almost every commentator speaks directly or indirectly of Qoheleth's "doctrine of the golden mean."⁴ Those commentators who understand the author of Ecclesiastes to be advocating the idea of this sort of "golden mean" between virtue and vice usually date the book quite late, since the concept of a "mean" by which to guide one's life is thought to have gained popularity during the time of Aristotle, or even of the Stoics.⁵

To many, Qoheleth's apparent failure to exhort his readers to totally righteous behavior seems to leave him open to the charge of teaching immorality and misconduct.⁶ They believe that he was advocating a "middle way" between righteousness and wickedness, because, as stated by R. N. Whybray, "(i) his [Qoheleth's] experience had taught him that neither necessarily has any effect on men's

but this is a minority view and is certainly not consistent with the context; cf. A. D. Power, *Ecclesiastes or The Preacher* (London, Eng., 1952), p. 94; Christian D. Ginsburg, *Coheloth* (1861; reprint, New York, 1970), p. 379.

³Kaiser, p. 85; the arguments and conclusions presented here are valid regardless of one's view of the authorship of Ecclesiastes, as long as one accepts the unity and positive perspective of the book; this latter problem is important, but cannot be discussed in this article.

⁴R. N. Whybray, "Qoheleth the Immoralist? (Qoh. 7:16-17)," in *Israelite Wisdom: Theological and Literary Essays in Honor of Samuel Terrien*, ed. John G. Gammie (New York, 1978), p. 203, n. 4.

⁵See n. 2, above; cf. Robert Gordis, *Koheleth: The Man and His World*, 3d ed. (New York, 1968), pp. 178, 276. Aristotle said, "Virtue lies in a mean between opposite extremes" (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 2.6.7), a golden mean that was constantly advocated by Greek and Latin writers (see Power, pp. 94-95). Confucius also advocated a type of "common sense" which resembled the Aristotelian mean (see Harold H. Watts, *The Modern Reader's Guide to Religions* [New York, 1964], p. 540). Buddha recommended his "Middle Way," which sought to avoid the two extremes of self-indulgence and self-mortification; this "Middle Way" involves an eightfold path toward detachment from life, the elimination of desire, and thus the cessation of suffering (see Watts, p. 480; and J. N. D. Anderson, *The World's Religions* [Chicago, 1950], p. 121).

⁶Whybray, p. 191.

fortunes in terms of divinely imposed reward or punishment"; and "(ii) it had also taught him that extremes of any kind are in practice more likely to lead to disaster than is moderation."⁷

Is this what Qoheleth is urging? Is he suggesting that since personal righteousness is no guarantee of long life or happiness (7:15), the reader should become "amoral,"⁸ steering a middle course between right and wrong? Or is he warning against becoming "too goody-goody or too impossibly naughty"?⁹

G. A. Barton, who concludes that Qoheleth's warning against "extreme righteousness" is a reproof of the excessive legal observances of the "*Chasidim*," states further that "some interpreters . . . hesitate to admit that Qoheleth really implies that one may sin to a moderate degree. That, however, is what he undoubtedly implies."¹⁰

Loyal Young takes the meaning of the passage to be that if "one would avoid premature death, let him be neither too righteous nor too wicked"; he refers to a number of Hebrew and Christian martyrs, on the one hand, and to the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah, on the other hand, and then concludes: "The first class were too righteous for their own safety:—the last class were too wicked to be spared. This seems to be the only *satisfactory* explanation of the verses."¹¹ He adds, however, that "every man, judging for himself, is consoled in his short-comings by the supposition that those more godly or more moral than he are too righteous," and that the true explanation seems to be that "if there is no future world, let us make the best we can of this, avoiding the extremes of too much zeal for God, and too much wickedness."¹²

Some commentators who recognize the "golden mean" in Eccl 7:15-18 do so because they believe that the author is speaking as a mere "man under the sun." Samuel Cox, for example, concludes

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid., p. 102, n. 3.

⁹Power, p. 95.

¹⁰George A. Barton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes*, ICC (New York, 1908), p. 144.

¹¹Loyal Young, *A Commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes* (Philadelphia, 1865), p. 170.

¹²Ibid., p. 171.

that the author permits a "temperate indulgence both in virtue and in vice, carrying neither to excess (ver. 18)—a doctrine still very dear to the mere man of the world."¹³

J. N. Coleman suggests that the word "saying" belongs at the end of 7:15, so that the passage should read: "And there is a wicked man who prolongs his life through his iniquity (saying), 'Be not righteous overmuch, neither make yourself overwise; why should you destroy yourself?'"¹⁴ Coleman thus declares that "this worldly maxim is the counsel of the wicked man, not the maxim or teaching of Solomon"; and consequently, the inspired reply of Solomon, then, is at vs. 17: "Do not be overmuch wicked"—that is, do not add to original sin actual rejection of God and his will.¹⁵

R. B. Y. Scott contends that the "mean" of 7:16-17 follows from the assertion in 7:15 that "men do not receive their just deserts." It is therefore "as unprofitable for men to exhaust themselves in struggling for moral perfection as it is to hasten their demise through folly"; and while wisdom is important, he says, no one can be perfect.¹⁶ On the other hand, Robert Gordis interprets the passage as a warning that "both extremes of saintliness and wickedness lead to unhappiness"; what is best is a moderate course between both extremes.¹⁷

According to C. D. Ginsburg, it is impossible to make the passage conform to orthodoxy.¹⁸ The author teaches that one should be "as moderate in the indulgence of sin" as he should be "temperate in the practice of virtue."¹⁹ Ginsburg adds, however, that this viewpoint is not the final opinion of the author; that opinion comes later, at the end of the book, and it should not be anticipated in this passage.²⁰

¹³Samuel Cox, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, The Expositors' Bible, ed. W. Robertson Nicoll (New York, n.d.), p. 200.

¹⁴John N. Coleman, *Ecclesiastes* (Edinburgh, 1867), p. 37.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 38.

¹⁶R. B. Y. Scott, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes*, AB (Garden City, N.Y., 1965), p. 237. He attributes the Greek maxim, "nothing too much," to Solon (ca. 600 B.C.).

¹⁷Gordis, p. 179.

¹⁸Ginsburg, p. 379.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 380.

²⁰*Ibid.*

Fanaticism and Legalism

Other commentators, while perhaps acknowledging an exhortation to moderation in Eccl 7:15-18, see the author as warning especially against fanaticism. Edgar Jones, for instance, says that the passage is "reporting that the fanatical extremist does run into trouble."²¹ And Franz Delitzsch holds a somewhat similar opinion, declaring that the author teaches that one should not exaggerate righteousness; for "if it occurs that a righteous man, in spite of his righteousness, perishes, this happens, at earliest, in the case in which, in the practice of righteousness, he goes beyond the right measure and limit."²²

Certain other commentators see in all of this a reference to the legalism of the Pharisees. A. D. Power, for example, suggests that possibly "religious" would be a better understanding of the word "righteous" here, "for K. might have been thinking of the Pharisees who paid tithes of mint and anise and cummin, but overlooked such matters as judgment, mercy and faith (cf. Matt 23:23), so perhaps the writer here meant religious or ritualistic, like the Pharisees who strained at a gnat and swallowed a camel. . . ."²³

This view understands the words of Qoheleth to refer to an excessive concentration on legal observance or pious practices. H. C. Leupold describes them as referring to "a righteousness that is beginning to go to seed, a righteousness that will flourish in its most distorted form in the days of Jesus, in regard to which Jesus will be moved to say: 'Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, etc.' (Matt 5:20)."²⁴

Whybray states that scholars have suggested two possible reasons for the giving of such advice:

- (i) Such striving after perfection is not a virtue, but rather a sin: that of pride or blasphemy. (ii) Such excessive behavior is not required by God, and is to be avoided: for on the one hand its

²¹Edgar Jones, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*, Torch Bible Commentaries (New York, 1961), pp. 319-320.

²²Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1950), p. 324.

²³Power, p. 95.

²⁴H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Ecclesiastes* (Columbus, Ohio, 1952), p. 164.

goal is beyond man's capacity and so it can achieve nothing; and on the other hand it makes life joyless, leading to narrowness and bigotry. So, in one way or another, the striving after perfection produces misery.²⁵

Overreaction to Truth

R. W. DeHaan and Herbert Vander Lugt explain Eccl 7:16-17 as a warning against overreactions to the truth of 7:15:

First, some conclude that everyone who goes to an early grave somehow must have fallen short of doing what pleases the Lord. Therefore they set about to make up this lack in their own lives by extreme legalism, ascetic practices, or some other form of works-righteousness. . . .

The second wrong reaction is that of going down the road of lustful living, giving oneself over to unbridled sensuality. . . . Many who see apparently good people suffer adversity or die young go down the pathway of a false and artificial works-religion while others go down the road of unrestrained wickedness. Both courses will lead to disaster.²⁶

This viewpoint explains the context (both 7:15 and 7:18) and is in concord with the rest of Scripture. The command not to be "overly wise" (7:16) would be interpreted similarly, as a possible overreaction to the failure of wisdom to provide the full answer to life (do not devote yourself fully to wisdom as if it *were* the only solution to life, but do not reject it to become a fool either).

Self-righteousness

An increasingly common interpretation has been to see in the word "righteous" a reference to hypocrisy, and to understand the author to be referring to "self-righteousness" rather than genuine righteousness.²⁷ As Power puts it: "It may be he [Qoheleth] had in mind those excessively religious people who spend all their time seeking out wickedness in others and have no time for real religion

²⁵Whybray, p. 191.

²⁶Richard W. DeHaan and Herbert Vander Lugt, *The Art of Staying Off Dead-end Streets* (Wheaton, Ill., 1974), pp. 107-108.

²⁷A. F. Harper, "Ecclesiastes," in the *Beacon Bible Commentary* (Kansas City, Mo., 1967), 3: 575.

themselves; another translation therefore might read as an injunction not to be self-righteous."²⁸

According to Kaiser, what most commentators miss is that "verses 16-17 are not cautioning against possessing too much real righteousness." Rather, the danger is that men might delude themselves and others through "a multiplicity of pseudoreligious acts of sanctimoniousness; ostentatious showmanship in the art of worship; a spirit of hypercriticism against minor deviations from one's own cultural norms, which are equated with God's righteousness; and a disgusting conceit and supercilious, holier-than-thou attitude venerated over the whole mess."²⁹ He states, further, that the real clue to this passage is that the second verb in 7:16 ("to be wise") must be rendered reflexively, as "to think oneself to be furnished with wisdom."³⁰

G. R. Castellino, in a careful analysis of the Hebrew forms, comes to a similar conclusion: namely, that 7:16 refers to "passing oneself off as righteous" (self-righteousness) and "passing oneself off as wise" (intellectualization). Vs. 18 then urges the reader to "grasp true wisdom" and not to let go of "the avoidance of foolishness," both of which are achieved through the fear of God.³¹

Whybray argues from the structure, grammar, and meaning of the passage as a whole that what is in view is "the state of mind which claims actually to have achieved righteousness or perfection."³² He advances the following arguments:

1. In 7:16 the use of the construction *haya* + adjective (*ʔal-t ʿhī šaddiq*—"do not be overly righteous") instead of the cognate verb *ʔal-tiṣdāq* is not due to chance or to purely stylistic considerations, but has a deliberate purpose: in order to give some special meaning to the word *šaddiq* which could not be conveyed by the use of the verb. The phrase "refers to the self-righteous man, the would-be *šaddiq*, the man who claims to be, or sees himself as, exceptionally righteous."³³

²⁸Power, p. 95.

²⁹Kaiser, pp. 85-86.

³⁰Ibid., p. 86.

³¹George R. Castellino, "Qohelet and His Wisdom," *CBQ* 30 (1968): 24.

³²Whybray, p. 191.

³³Ibid., pp. 192-195.

2. The word *ṣaddiq* ("righteous") has an ethical sense, and the author recognizes that in the strict sense there is no *ṣaddiq* in existence (7:20). He does not distinguish between "righteous" and "perfect," but uses the same term for both. Whybray concludes, therefore, that in 7:16 he must be using the term in an ironical sense: "Do not be a self-styled *ṣaddiq*."³⁴

3. The word *harbēh* (7:16) always means "much, many, greatly, very," etc., and does not express any value-judgment such as "too great, or too much." The word is best taken as qualifying the whole preceding phrase. Qoheleth thus "uses the qualifying adverb *harbēh* to indicate that he recognizes a tendency in human nature towards self-righteousness." His meaning is "Do not allow self-righteousness to become your dominating characteristic." It is "a gentle warning which takes account of human weakness."³⁵

4. In 7:16b the phrase "be overly wise" is simply the hithpael of the verb *ḥkm*. Whybray contends that of the meanings generally attributed to the hithpael, only three would make any sense at all here: "to conduct oneself in a particular way"; "to imagine/set oneself up to be"; or "to pretend to be." The first possibility would mean "Do not act with great wisdom," which cannot be what the author is saying. The last two options have a similar meaning: "Having first warned his readers against setting themselves up to be, or pretending to be, absolutely righteous, Qoheleth now warns them against similar pretensions to wisdom."³⁶

5. Vs. 17 states, "Do not be very wicked." Here again the word *harbēh* is a concession to human frailty. Qoheleth adds a warning not to go to the other extreme and throw off all restraints and all striving towards these virtues, abandoning oneself to a life of folly. But "he knows that one cannot entirely avoid either wickedness or folly (cf. vs. 20), and so he adds the word *harbēh*: what is to be avoided is the carrying of them to extremes." It is not an encouragement to immorality, but merely a recognition of the frailty and inherent sinfulness of man.³⁷

³⁴Ibid., p. 195.

³⁵Ibid., p. 196.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Ibid., p. 197.

Charles Bridges likewise understands Qoheleth's words as a warning against self-righteousness: "To whom then, and to what, does the admonition apply? We have seen that it does not warn us against true righteousness. But it is a wholesome caution against the 'vain affectation of it.' Every right principle has its counterfeit."³⁸

2. Exegesis of Ecclesiastes 7:15-18

In Eccl 6:8, Qoheleth introduces the question, "What advantage does the wise man have over the fool?" Throughout the second half of the book, he deals with the futility, benefits, and limitations of *wisdom*, focusing especially on the issue, "Who knows what is good for a man during his lifetime?" (6:12).

In chap. 7, the author points out that no one can really understand the work or the ways of God, or of the future. "Who is able to straighten what He has bent?" he asks (7:13b). God has made adversity as well as prosperity, and both must be accepted from him (7:14). Human beings cannot *really* know for certain what the future holds for them during their lifetime.

What Qoheleth Has Seen—7:15

At this point a question surely enters Qoheleth's mind: "I have already said that in place of righteousness there is wickedness [3:16], and that man can expect both prosperity and adversity from God [7:14]. What, then, of the age-old principle that righteousness brings blessing [prosperity], and wickedness brings cursing [adversity]? Is that principle invalid?"

This question clearly relates closely to the central problems of the Book of Job. Qoheleth has neither the problem with God's justice that Job had, nor the faulty view of reality that Job's friends demonstrated. He sees clearly (with Job) that the principle of righteousness→prosperity is only a general principle and has many exceptions. Qoheleth thus states from his experience: "There is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs [אָרַךְ—"lengthen," "prolong"] his life

³⁸Charles Bridges, *An Exposition of the Book of Ecclesiastes* (London, Eng., 1960), p. 163.

in his wickedness" (7:15). *In spite of* their righteous character, some men die young. And *in spite of* their wickedness, some evil men live long, prosperous lives.

The Law stated time after time that those who obeyed God and lived righteously would "prolong" (אָרַךְ) their days and receive blessing (Deut 4:26, 40; 5:16, 33; 6:2; 11:9; 17:20; 25:15; 30:18; 32:47). Solomon in his wisdom had also made similar promises (cf. Prov 28:16). But the problem of exceptions persisted.

Job recognized the same problem when he asked, "Why do the wicked still live, continue on, also become very powerful?" (Job 21:7). They have many children, safe houses, prosperity, and many days of rejoicing (21:8-12). "They spend their days in prosperity," Job complains (21:13), while many righteous men are suffering or dying.

The psalmist also "saw the prosperity of the wicked" (Ps 73:3), and it nearly caused him to stumble (73:2). He complains: "Behold, these are the wicked; and always at ease, they have increased in wealth. Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure, and washed my hands in innocence" (Ps 73:12-13). This was very "troublesome" to him (73:16), until he went to God's sanctuary and finally understood the end of the wicked (73:17). God would destroy them, sooner or later (73:18-20). The psalmist's solution is to focus all his desires on God: "Whom have I in heaven but Thee? And besides Thee, I desire nothing on earth. . . . God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever . . . as for me, the nearness of God is my good" (Ps 73:25-28; cf. Matt 6:33).

Qoheleth himself explains the problem and its principle more in detail in the following chapter (Eccl 8). The general principle is valid, he says, that "it will not be well for the evil man and he will not lengthen his days like a shadow, because he does not fear God" (8:13). And, on the other side, it is still true generally that "it will be well for those who fear God, who fear Him openly" (8:12).

However, judgment for evil does not come quickly; and because of that, many are inclined to give themselves over to do evil (8:11). Qoheleth declares further that "there are righteous men to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked," and, on the other hand, "there are evil men to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous. I say that this too is futility" (8:14).

This is the same problem that he relates in 7:15. Righteousness does not *necessarily* bring prosperity, and wickedness does not *necessarily* bring suffering and death.

Qoheleth's Advice—7:16-17

The following two verses must therefore be understood as Qoheleth's counsel in the light of vs. 15. It is here that the two major exegetical problems of the passage arise: (1) Do the expressions "excessively righteous" and "overly wise" really refer to self-righteousness and pretended wisdom, as Kaiser, Whybray, Castellino, and others contend? Or do these expressions imply, instead, an exaggerated "striving after" righteousness and wisdom? (2) Does Qoheleth in 7:16-17 intend to warn against a possible overreaction (on the part of some) to the statement in 7:15 that righteousness does not guarantee prosperity, nor wickedness death (i.e., deciding to strive fanatically for perfection or to slide cynically into foolish immorality)? Or does he instead begin a new, unrelated section, discussing the nature of true righteousness and true wisdom, in order that the reader might be able to evaluate inner character?

Before embarking on a detailed consideration of these questions, the unusual structure of this passage must be noted:

- 7:16a אֶל־תְּהִי צַדִּיק הַרְבֵּה
do not be excessively righteous
- 7:16b וְאֶל־תְּחַכֵּם יוֹתֵר
and do not be wise to excess
- 7:16c לָמָּה תִשׁוּמָם
why should you cause yourself desolation?
- 7:17a אֶל־תִּרְשָׁע הַרְבֵּה
do not be excessively wicked
- 7:17b וְאֶל־תְּהִי סָקֵל
and do not be a fool
- 7:17c לָמָּה תָמוּת קִלְא עִתְּךָ
why should you die before your time?

Each verse consists of three parts, each of which begins with the same word: אֶל, וְאֶל, and לָמָּה, respectively. Each verse begins with a *pair* of negative warnings ("do not"), these four warnings

generally containing a negative particle (אֵל), a verb or verbal clause, and an adverb (the adverb is lacking in 7:17b). The *third* part of each verse consists of an interrogative sentence introduced by the word לְמָה followed by a verb. And in each case, the interrogative sentence implies a positive concept or result.³⁹

At this point, several of the more controversial words in the passage must be defined. Lexically, the word צַדִּיק in 7:16a means "just" or "righteous" in conduct and character, either toward God or, ethically, toward others. Nothing more than this can be read into the statement from the term itself. The form הִרְבָּה is the hiphil infinitive absolute of the verb רָבָה ("to be many, much, great"), and is here used adverbially to mean "greatly," "exceedingly."⁴⁰ It is used, for instance, in Neh 2:2: "Then I was *very much* afraid." In Eccl 7:16a, this word modifies the adjective "righteous," so that the sentence should read, "Do not be exceedingly righteous." The meaning of the statement will depend on the nuance which the context gives to the expressions "exceedingly" and "righteous." If "righteous" refers to inward character, then an inordinate striving for perfection may be in view. If, however, "righteous" refers to outward conduct, then the warning probably has to do with excessive occupation with some sort of Pharisaic externalism.

In 7:16b, חָכָם is the hithpael form of the verb חָכַם ("to be wise"), and, according to Whybray, means "to pretend to be wise" or "to make great pretensions to wisdom."⁴¹ In the Brown-Driver-Briggs *Lexicon*, it is rendered as "make or show thyself wise."⁴² A. B. Davidson states that the hithpael is reflexive of piel⁴³ (in this case, "to make wise," "to teach wisdom"). Thus, the hithpael would mean "to make oneself wise" or "to teach oneself wisdom." But Davidson adds that "it very often implies that one shows himself as, or gives himself out as, performing the action of the

³⁹Whybray, p. 192. Another interesting aspect of this structure is the fact that there is a 3:2:2 decrescendo in the meter of vs. 16, followed by a 2:2:4 crescendo in the meter of vs. 17, indicating, perhaps, the comprehensive, yet parallel, nature of the passage.

⁴⁰Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs, eds., *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford, 1906), s.v. רָבָה, p. 915. (This title hereinafter cited as *BDB*.)

⁴¹Whybray, pp. 196-197.

⁴²*BDB*, s.v. חָכָם, p. 314.

⁴³A. B. Davidson, *An Introductory Hebrew Grammar*, 25th ed. (Edinburgh, 1962), p. 107.

simple verb.”⁴⁴ In this case, the verb in Eccl 7:16b could mean “to show oneself to be wise,” or perhaps even “to pretend to be wise.”

Several factors argue against the latter meaning of the word in the passage at hand. First, there is absolutely no reason from the context to understand the verb as a reference to pretense. Second, grammatically the hithpael form may just as easily mean “to make oneself wise” or “to teach oneself wisdom,” as noted above. Third, the only other use of the hithpael of **חָכַם** is in Exod 1:10, where it refers to wise conduct—“Let us deal wisely with this people”—and there is no reason to treat it in any other way in Eccl 7:16. (The appeal made by some exegetes to Prov 3:7 [“Do not be wise in your own eyes”] is invalid, since the reference there has the modifying expression [“in your own eyes”] spelled out; and, moreover, the verb is not hithpael, but rather “to be” with an adjective.)

The word **יִתְרָה** (Eccl 7:16b) is common in Ecclesiastes, usually meaning “superiority,” “advantage,” or “excess.”⁴⁵ As an adverb it means “to excess,” or perhaps “to a superior degree.” It is used in Eccl 2:15, where Qoheleth asks himself, “Why then have I been extremely wise?” In 7:16b, he is apparently saying that there is no need for anyone to try to become the wisest person on earth. It is not worth the trouble.

In 7:16c, the verb **הִשְׁוִימָה** is the hithpael form of **שָׁמַם**, which means “to be desolated.” As a reflexive, the word means “to cause oneself desolation or ruin.”⁴⁶ Qoheleth asks, “Why should you cause yourself ruin by such extreme reactions?” This cannot refer primarily to either a divine judgment or societal sanctions, as Whybray suggests,⁴⁷ since the reflexive makes the ruin self-caused.

The verb **תִּרְשַׁע** in 7:17a is simply the Qal imperfect of the verb **רָשַׁע** (“to be wicked,” “to act wickedly”). It is important to note that on this negative side of the coin, no process is in view (such as was the case with “make yourself excessively wise”). The word simply looks on the actions of wickedness.

It is perhaps obvious by now that Whybray’s interpretation of the passage depends almost entirely upon a highly questionable

⁴⁴Ibid.; Ginsburg, p. 380, notes, however, that the wisdom under consideration must be real, since the antithesis speaks of real, not affected, foolishness. He thus concludes that the piety referred to is also sincere and genuine piety.

⁴⁵BDB, s.v. **יִתְרָה**, p. 452.

⁴⁶BDB, s.v. **שָׁמַם**, p. 1030.

⁴⁷Whybray, p. 198.

meaning of *one word* in the passage: **דַּבְּרֵי חָכְמָה** (7:16b). Having concluded that this word refers to “pretensions of wisdom,” he reasons that 7:16a is parallel and that it should therefore read, “Do not pretend to be righteous” or “Do not be self-righteous.” This is an unwarranted leap.

Whybray’s solution fits neither the context nor the details of the passage. He is forced to conclude that 7:15 is totally disconnected from 7:16, and that 7:16–17 in *no* way provides counsel for the problem of 7:15.⁴⁸ He is also forced to treat the questions of 7:16c and 7:17c as extremely vague references to a possible future calamity, and in the process he violates his own explanation of the *hithpael/hithpoel* form. In addition, Whybray completely boxes in 7:16–18 as a separate passage almost totally unrelated to the rest of the chapter,⁴⁹ since he has divorced himself from any sort of correct contextual meaning.

What, then, is the conclusion of the matter? (1) The expressions “excessively righteous” and “make yourself overly wise” are best understood as an exaggerated striving and seeking after perfection and super-wisdom. Qoheleth’s point is that these things are not *really* of value; he had discovered that himself—both experientially and through observation. (2) Vss. 16 and 17, therefore, have a very close relationship to vs. 15. As DeHaan and Vander Lugt suggest, if the principle that righteousness brings prosperity does not always hold (7:14-15), and if wisdom cannot really discover everything that man needs to know for his life (6:10-7:14), many people would have one of two types of reaction: (a) They might decide that if they could reach perfection in character and knowledge, their problems would be solved; or (b) they might decide that God is unfair and simply devote themselves to immorality and foolish living as the best they can get out of life. Qoheleth warns them against both of these options, since both of them lead to disaster. The best life, he says, depends on the fear of God.

The Spiritual Conclusion—7:18

Following the negative admonitions of 7:16-17, Qoheleth now describes positively a “good” in life. Though neither righteousness nor wisdom can guarantee prosperity or unlock the mystery of the future, they are nevertheless good and necessary. It is good to hold

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 202.

⁴⁹Ibid.

on to righteousness, and not to let go of wisdom. Both wickedness and foolishness lead to disaster.

Both righteousness and wisdom are achieved through the *fear of God*. It is through trust in, and obedience to, God that righteousness and wisdom can actually be balanced and made worthwhile.

3. Conclusion

In Eccl 7:15-18, Qoheleth discusses the problem of the value and balance of *righteousness* and *wisdom*. He has concluded that human wisdom cannot really explain all of life nor the future (6:10-7:14), and that even the principle that righteousness brings prosperity has many exceptions (7:14-15). Thus, he notes in 7:15 that some righteous people die *in spite of* their righteousness, and some wicked people live long lives *in spite of* their wickedness.

How would a concerned human react to this admission of reality? Many would tend to overreact either toward striving harder, or toward ending all efforts and slipping into identity with those who do not know God. Qoheleth offers some helpful counsel: Do not strive for exaggerated righteousness or try to make yourself the wisest person on earth, for these are not really worthwhile goals; and in the end, such striving will ruin your life. Likewise, do not turn to immorality or act like a fool, since God's principles do still operate and you will put yourself in danger of premature death. God is still in control.

What then of righteousness and wisdom? What good are they? Qoheleth answers that they are both of great benefit. Grasp them both. If you learn to *fear God* (which is the important thing), you will come out right in both areas.