

What Happens in Qohelet 4:13-16

Michael V. Fox

University of Wisconsin

1. The Text

Qohelet's anecdote about the foolish old king and his successors is full of ambiguities. The multiplicity of possibilities for resolving them has given rise to a considerable variety of interpretations.¹ Nevertheless, most commentators agree that the point of the story is that wisdom's practical value is limited and transient. The following exegesis supports the gist of this reading but offers some new proposals as to the identification of the personages involved and the sequence of events.

13. טוב ילד מסכן וחכם ממלך זקן וכסיל אשר לא ידע להזהר עוד

14. כי מבית הסורים יצא למלך כי גם במלכותו נולד רש

15. ראיתי את כל החיים המהלכים תחת השמש

עם הילד השני אשר יעמד תחתיו

16. אין קץ לכל העם לכל אשר היה לפניהם

גם האחרונים לא ישמחו בו כי גם זה הבל ורעות רוח

(13) Better a poor but wise youth than a king who is old

but foolish, who no longer knows how to be wary. (14)

For from prison he came forth to rule, although in his

reign too a poor man was born.² (15) I saw all the living, those who go about under the sun, with the next youth³ who arose in his place. (16) There was no end to all the people, all those whom he led. Likewise, later people would not take pleasure in him. This too is absurd and senseless.

The ambiguity in almost all the pronouns and in the subjects of the verbs causes considerable interpretive difficulties. There are syntactical ambiguities as well, especially in vv. 15-16. Also uncertain is how many youths enter into the events: one (the old king's immediate successor, “youth¹”); two (the wise youth, “youth¹”, and *his* successor, “youth²”); or three (these two and a third, “youth³”, called הַיָּלֵד הַשְּׁנַיִם). I will argue for the third alternative, which, I believe, has not been proposed elsewhere, including in my earlier study.⁴

2. The Problem

A. What wisdom can accomplish (13-14)

1. A “better than” saying praising wisdom (13)
2. An event that supports the saying (14)

B. The ephemerality of such accomplishments (15-16a)

1. The outcome (15)
2. The exacerbation of the outcome (16a)

C. Judgment: this is absurd (הַבְּלִי) (16b)

3. Comments

4:13. מֶלֶךְ זָקֵן וְכֹסִיל “a king who is old but foolish” - not “... and foolish.” The king's age is not mentioned as the cause of his folly, but as a strength that is overcome by his folly. This is the reverse of the young man's situation, in which a weakness (imprisonment) is overcome by wisdom. Age was universally thought to be associated with wisdom in the ancient world. Since the king's stupidity is marked by a lack of circumspection, and since his successor was in prison, we may surmise that the latter had been incarcerated because he presented a danger to the old king.

4:14. The subject of “came forth” is youth¹, not the old king, for there would be no point in describing the king's past. This verse motivates the previous one by stating that the wisdom of youth¹ enabled him to attain the throne from a position of great lowliness and incapacity.

“A poor man was born [נִוְלַד רָשָׁ]”: Most commentators assume that רָשָׁ is adverbial to נִוְלַד and describes the situation into which youth¹ was born (“was born poor”). This, however, makes no sense of כִּי גַם, whether it is construed as concessive (“although”) or causal (“for also”). Nothing is added by saying that the poor youth who came out of prison was “born poor,” and בְּמַלְכוּתוֹ, whether meaning “in his kingdom” or “in his reign,” adds nothing to the fact that youth¹ was “born poor.” (Of course he was born poor in the old king's *kingdom*. Otherwise his foreignness would be a factor. And it is impossible that he was born other than in the old king's *reign*, since he was younger.

I suggest that שר is a noun meaning “a poor man,” referring to a new character, youth². The adverb גם indicates that the sentence comments on another reign (“in his reign too”) in addition to the old king's, namely, the reign of youth¹. So far there is a series of an old king, succeeded by a former prisoner (youth¹), who is succeeded by another formerly poor man (youth²). (In fact, “in his reign too” implies that youth¹ also was born poor.)

D. Rudman has offered a fresh proposal to the old crux.⁵ He vocalizes לְמֶלֶךְ “to the king” instead of MT's לְמֹלֵךְ “to rule” and translates v. 14 as “For out of prison he shall come [שׂוֹנֵי] to the king, even though born poor in his kingdom” (p. 57). Rudman interprets this to mean that this youth became the king's counselor, his companion or lieutenant (שׂוֹנֵי), who then used his wisdom for the benefit of society. הַיָּלֵד הַשֵּׁנִי in v. 15 would thus be the same person as the youth of 13f. He enjoys the king's patronage but eventually falls from public favor. Rudman's interpretation is an overreading of the story. For one thing, שׂוֹנֵי indicates motion from the standpoint of the place of origin, not the goal. (That would be בֹּא.) The phrase “go out to the king” says nothing about what happened when the youth arrived at the court. It does not in itself convey the idea that the youth became the king's protégé, and nothing else in the passage reinforces this notion.

4:15. הַיָּלֵד הַשֵּׁנִי, lit. “the second youth,” is neither youth¹ nor youth², but their successor, youth³. The phrase does not mean “the lad, who was second,” namely, the old king's successor (thus Gordis); שׂוֹנֵי alone never has this sense.

Nor is youth² “second” in rank, the deputy, a “Stellvertreter” to the king (thus Hertzberg), since if he arose from prison merely to that end, the old king's folly would be irrelevant. On the contrary, choosing a wise viceroy would demonstrate wisdom on the king's part. וְשֵׁנִי here means “next” (cf. Ex 2:13; Judg 20:24f.; thus Ellermeier p. 232, who, however, thinks of only two youths). This young man is “second” to the previously mentioned one (youth²) but third in the sequence.

“The next youth” (youth³) is not a specific person and does not yet exist from Qohelet's standpoint. He is whoever comes next in line. The switch to *yiqtol* in וְעַמֵּד in v.15 also indicates the introduction of another person in the story, since it implies that the arising “in his place” occurs after the events of v.14. (Qohelet never uses *yiqtol* for simple past tense.⁶) The change in tense also suggests that Qohelet's temporal perspective is contemporaneous with the reign of youth². From that perspective, the ascendancy of the *next* young man is yet to come.

The essence of this sentence is not “I saw X going with Y,” but rather “I saw X with Y” (thus MT, which places the strong disjunctive at הַשְּׂמֵשׁ). The words הַחַיִּים הַמְּהַלְכִים תַּחַת הַשְּׂמֵשׁ are a relative clause modifying הַחַיִּים (Ellermeier, 231f.). It is equivalent to וְיָשָׁא הַשְּׂמֵשׁ (7:11). The prepositional phrase “with ...” is an adjunct to the main clause, not to the relative clause. In other words, the focus of Qohelet's seeing is not “the living” but rather the fact of their *being with* the next youth. Being “with” (עִם) someone indicates alliance

and support (e.g., Gen 28:20; 26:3; 1 Kgs 8:57; cf. 2 Kgs 6:16; 9:32 [using the synonym **לְכָל**]). The phrase “under the sun” emphasizes the universality of the phenomenon: *everyone’s* loyalties attach themselves to whatever ruler comes along and are thus very erratic. The phrase also underscores the contrast between these people, who are alive (at the time to which the statement applies), and the previous rulers (youths¹ and ²), who will by then be dead.

Qohelet “sees”--that is, foresees--that all the living would be on the side of whoever comes to power next. Though Qohelet is looking to the future, he calls the supplanter (youth³) a **יָלֵד** “youngster,” to imply that the people’s loyalty is so unreliable that they will flock after anyone, *even* a mere stripling.

4:16. The phrase **לְכָל אֲשֶׁר הָיָה לִפְנֵי יָהִם** does not mean “to all who existed before them,” for it is irrelevant how many people lived before the events of this anecdote. Rather it means, literally, “all those before whom he [youth³] was”; in other words, all those whose leader he was (thus the Targum, Ginsburg, Delitzsch, and Pödehard). This clause refers to the same group as “all the living” (v. 15a). The subject of **הָיָה** is youth³.

“Would not take pleasure in him” (**לֹא יִשְׂמְחוּ בּוֹ**): that is, in youth³. The phrase **שָׂמַח בּוֹ** is used of a king pleasing his subjects and being accepted by them (Judg 9:19). This sentence says that even youth³, though leader of limitless masses, would not be popular with later people, for everyone is soon forgotten. Hence, youth³ represents everyone who will come in the endless series of power-holders.

4. Ambiguities Resolved

The following paraphrase resolves the ambiguities:

(13) A poor youth [y^1] who is shrewd is better off even than an old king, if the latter is puerile and no longer has the sense to take precautions. (14) For it happened that one such youth [y^1] went forth from prison to rule. Yet in *his* reign too a poor man [y^2] was born.

(15) I saw that all the living who go about on earth would join the following of whichever young man would take over next [y^3]. (16) All the people--all whom such a young man [y^3] would lead, would be beyond number. But, by the same token, subsequent generations wouldn't care a whit about *him* [y^3]. This situation is absurd and senseless.

5. Contexts

4:13-16, as interpreted here, is not isolated from its closer or broader context. It is linked to its immediate context in several ways, as noted by Rudman (58f.): the concern for oppression of the poor in 4:1-3; the divisiveness of human strivings implied in 4:4; the importance of companionship, described in 4:8-12; and the recurring the “better than” formula in vv. 3, 6, 9, and 13. These connections do not, however, reinforce Rudman's idea that the first youth was the king's favorite and served as his counselor.

Another anecdote, 9:13-15, makes much the same point as 4:13-16. The protagonist in the former is a “poor wise man” (אִישׁ מִסְכֵּן חָכָם); in the present passage he is a “poor but wise youth” (יָלֵד מִסְכֵּן וְחָכָם). In both, the

poor man is smarter than the king. In both cases the protagonist's wisdom “works” (for wisdom *is* effective), but neither protagonist reaps the full rewards of his wisdom and both are forgotten, and “no one remembered that poor man” (9:15). The failure that Qohelet points to here (and throughout the book) is not so much wisdom's efficacy (which is significant though limited) but the way it is treated: people do not give it the attention it deserves, and “in the days to come, both [wise and fool] are soon forgotten!” (2:16a).

Another verse expressing a related thought is 6:8, “What advantage has the wise man over the fool?⁷ What good is it for the poor man to know how to get along with the living? לַהֲלֹךְ נִגְדָה (in 6:8) is equivalent to לֵךְ נִגְדָה in Prov 14:7, where it means “go about with.” נִגְדָה in turn is nearly synonymous with לִפְנֵי, so we can compare the phrase הֲלֹךְ/הִתְהַלֵּךְ לִפְנֵי, “go before,” usually used of human loyalty to God. It is also used of a leader *visa vis* the people (1 Sam 12:2 and Qoh 4:16), and of a priest *visa vis* the king (1 Sam 2:35). Since these comparisons show that לַהֲלֹךְ נִגְדָה is something one does with other people, הַחַיִּים in 6:8 probably means “the living” rather than “life.” In 6:8, then, as in the passage before us, Qohelet casts doubt on the value to a poor man of a special form of wisdom: knowing how to lead, or just to get along with, people. This is the wisdom possessed by the youths in 4:13-16.

6. The Message

Qohelet's message emerges not from the details of the story but from its typical and recurrent features, above all the recognition that prized

accomplishments, whether in wealth or power, even if obtained through wisdom, will be passed on to someone else (cf. 2:18-26; 6:2). What Qohelet regards as valuable (and vulnerable) in rulership is esteem and favor, the possibility that innumerable people will follow a leader and “take pleasure” in the ruler. This popularity is the large-scale counterpart of the companionship that Qohelet prizes in 4:9-12.

In the anecdote, the old king's loss of power was the expected and appropriate result of folly. The subsequent transfers of power, however, have no such rationale. As Qohelet will remind us, “favor does not belong to the knowledgeable” (9:11). The first transfer of power demonstrates the power of wisdom, the second its frailty. It is the instability of accomplishment, rather than the loss of power as such, that Qohelet finds so disturbing.

7. Endnotes

¹These are summarized and carefully evaluated by Friedrich Ellermeier, *Qohelet* (Herzberg: Erwin Jungfer, 1967), I.1, pp. 217-28.

Commentaries referenced ad loc.:

- D. Ginsburg, *Coheloth*, 1861; repr. New York, KTAV, 1970.
- Franz Delitzsch, *Koheloth*. Leipzig 1875; transl., repr. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1989.
- Robert Gordis, *Koheloth—the Man and His World* (2nd ed.) New York: Bloch, 1955.
- W. Hertzberg, *Der Prediger* (KAT n.F. XVII, 4) G, tersloh.
- Podechard, *L'Ecclésiaste*. Paris: V. Lecoffre, 1912.

²Most: “he was born poor.”

³Most: “the second youth”

⁴M. V. Fox, *Qohelet and his Contradictions* (JSOTSup 71; Sheffield, 1987) 205-209.

⁵Dominic Rudman, “A contextual reading of Ecclesiastes 4:13-16,” *JBL* 116 (1996) 57-73.

⁶B. Isaksson (*Studies in the Language of Qohelet* [Studia Semitica Upsaliensia, 10].

Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1987: 130-33) ascribes the following functions to the *yiqtol* in Qohelet: generalized cursive aspect (expressing a universal truth or ongoing event or action), actuality or facticity, the gnomic present, future (or future-in-past), and modal nuances.

⁷The construction *mah l-X* + indefinite participle is a Mishnaic-type locution meaning “why should X do Y?,” a rhetorical question expressing surprise and usually disapproval; cf. Jon 1:6; m. Ker. 5:2; m. Middot 2:2; and Mekilta VII, 135ff.