Cast Your Bread Upon the Waters (Eccl 11:1): A Call to Bold Action

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The book of Ecclesiastes has proved notoriously complex and polarizing from an interpretive standpoint. Beyond larger questions of whether Qohelet is a jaded skeptic or a cautious optimist, individual passages often elude interpreters. One such passage includes Qohelet's imperative to throw bread upon water in Ecclesiastes 11:1, part of his larger counsel concerning risks and rewards in 11:1–6. In this paper I analyze the passage, including the meaning of Qohelet's confusing imperative. I begin by establishing the passage, followed by an overview of the suggested interpretations. I argue that the best reading of the passage sees it as a call to bold action in the face of uncertainty and risk so as to balance prudence with courage.

The Text and Structure of the Passage

Qohelet begins a new unit in Ecclesiastes 11:1 with a turn from focusing on the conduct of kings and subordinates in 10:16–20 to advising bold and tenacious industry in the face of uncertainty and risk. The former unit is marked off by the inclusio of "king" (מֶלֶךְ) and the framing of "woe" (אִי) and "curse" (קלל) in vv. 16 and 20. Qohelet transitions now to set the table for his concluding exhortation (12:1–8) while reprising themes and catchwords from the opening poem on the cycles of nature (1:4–11) and the royal autobiography (1:12–2:26). Here he offers his final pieces of instruction in the form of proverbs. The unit of 11:1–10 is marked by the framing of imperatives, with two imperatives in vv. 1–2 (שַׁלַּח, "cast"; תֵּן, "give") and five imperatives in vv. 9–10 (שְׂמַח, "rejoice"; הַלֵּךְ, "walk"; דָּע, "know"; הָסֵר, "remove"; and הַעֲבֵר, "put away"). This frame hinges in the middle, with imperatives/jussives in vv. 6 (זְרַע, "sow"; תַּנַּח, "rest") and 8 (יִשְׂמָח, "rejoice"; יִזְכֹּר, "remember"). The unit comprises three sub-units: (1) be daring and diligent because no one knows the future (vv. 1–6); (2) enjoy God-given life while remembering the dark days and enigmatic future (vv. 7–8); and (3) rejoice in the fleeting pleasures of youthful vigor (vv. 9–10).

Literary Structure

The first sub-unit (vv. 1–6) carries three parts: (1) Take risks but minimize harm since no one knows what may happen on earth (vv. 1–2). (2) Accomplish tasks even in imperfect and uncertain conditions (vv. 3–4). (3) Work hard since no one knows God's work or the success of your ventures (vv. 5–6). Here the theme of "not knowing" pervades, with references to humans' ignorance of misfortunes ahead (v. 2), the way of the wind/bones (v. 5a), the work of God (v. 5b), and the likelihood of success (v. 6). Lack of knowledge should motivate bold action rather than paralyze the practitioner in crippling worry. The sayings use a concatenation of catchwords to bind them. These include "know" (ידע) (vv. 2, 5 [2x], 6); "earth" (אֶרֶץ) (vv. 2, 3); "clouds"

(עָבִים) (vv. 3, 4); "fill/full" (מלא) (vv. 3, 5); "wind/spirit" (רוּחַ) (vv. 4, 5); and "sow" (זרע) (vv. 4, 6 [2x]).

The proverbs follow a loose chiastic pattern in terms of verbal mood:

Imperative ("cast") + rationale ("for you may find it") (v. 1)
Imperative ("give") + rationale ("for you do not know") (v. 2)
If (protasis) ("if the clouds are full") + then (apodosis) ("they empty") (v. 3a)
If (protasis) ("if a tree falls") + then (apodosis) ("there it lies") (v. 3b)
Gnomic (participles) ("whoever watches," "whoever looks at") (v. 4)
Gnomic (participle) ("you are not knowing the wind's way") (v. 5a)
Gnomic (*yiqtol*) ("you do not know God's work") (v. 5b)
Imperative ("sow," "don't rest") (v. 6a) + rationale ("for you do not know") (v. 6b)

This coincides with a thematic structure:[1]

A Call to action with foresight (vv. 1–2) (Bread)
B Inevitability of the future (v. 3) (Rainstorm)
C Warning against exaggerated caution (v. 4) (Sowing-Reaping)
B′ Impenetrability of the future (v. 5) (Wind/Bones)
A′ Call to action with foresight (v. 6) (Sowing)

The sub-unit of verses 7–8 functions as a hinge closing the previous sub-unit's counsel on persevering in the face of adversity (vv. 1–6). It also transitions to the final call to joy (vv. 9–10) with an eye to the concluding instruction and poem (12:1–8). The opening *waw* in v. 7 links it to the proverbs of vv. 1–6. Catchwords "see" (ראה) (vv. 4, 7) and "good" (טוֹב) (vv. 6, 7) are repeated. The theme of "many days" of darkness (v. 8) harks back to the "many days" after which you will find your bread (v. 1). Verses 7–8 form an inclusio with the merism "light" (v. 7) and "darkness" (v. 8). The two jussives of v. 8 ("let him rejoice," "let him remember") anticipate the lead imperatives of the final two parts of the main body of the book: "*rejoice* in your youth" (v. 9) and "*remember* your Creator" (12:1). I consider these imperatives the programmatic commands of the book: to "rejoice" and to "remember" are the twin guardrails guiding the whole wisdom pursuit.

Life carries unexpected changes and calamities, so Qohelet advises a multi-dimensional approach that uses flux to one's advantage in 11:1–6. The first two proverbs open with imperatives toward decisive, resolute action. Rather than throwing up his hands, the wise person takes prudent risks and diversifies his energies and ventures (vv. 1–2). The successive aphorisms counsel perseverance in the face of such adversities. There are realities in a fallen world which must be expected, so the worker should pay attention to patterns (v. 3). Nevertheless, waiting for the perfect conditions can be paralyzing (v. 4). Certain mysteries attend the events of a fallen world where God is working behind the scenes (v. 5). One must constantly work hard in the hopes that some ventures will succeed (v. 6).

Translation

11:1 Cast your bread upon the waters,
for after many days you may find it.
2 Divvy a portion to seven, and even to eight,

[1] Schwienhorst-Schönberger, 509.

for you do not know what misfortune may happen on earth.
3 If the clouds are full of rain,
they pour out upon the earth.
If a tree falls to the south or to the north,
in the place where the tree falls, there it will remain.[2]
4 He who watches the wind will not sow;
and he who looks at the clouds will not reap.
5 Just as[3] you do not know[4] the way of the wind
or how the bodily frame[5] comes together in the womb of a pregnant woman,
so you cannot know the work[6] of God, who makes everything.
6 In the morning sow your seed and by evening do not let your hand[7] rest,
for you do not know[8] which way will succeed, whether this or that, or whether
both will be equally good.

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[2] The unusual form יְהוּא was read by the versions as a verb. Gordis (330–31) suggests a conflation of הוּא and יֶהֱוֶה to preserve the MT tradition, with a basic meaning "it will be." Others view the root as הוה, appearing also in 2:22, and see the formation as יֶהֱוֶה (יֶהֱוֶה) > יְהוּ, written defectively as יְהוּא (Delitzsch, 394) or updated by a later scribe to the MT form (Podechard, 445). The verb הוה has two homonyms, הוה I, "to fall," and הוה II, "to become" (*HALOT*, 241). Interpreters divide here over the sense. HCM (286) argue for a by-form of the root היה, which would provide a meaning similar to הוה II. I prefer to see the root as הוה II. As Goldman (109*) notes, Qohelet shows a tendency for writing III-ה verbs as III-א.

[3] The versions may have read בַּאֲשֶׁר in place of MT's כַּאֲשֶׁר: LXX (ἐν οἷς); α′ (ἐν ᾧ); σ′ (ἐπεί). Goldman discusses the variations in these renderings and commends caution in emendation due to uncertainty (82*). I concur and follow MT.

[4] Goldman (109*) drops the 2ms suffix on אֵינְךָ to correlate with LXX: οὐκ ἔστιν γινώσκων ("one does not know"). He attaches the opening clause of v. 5 to the end of v. 4 to render the two verses: "(4) He who watches the wind will not sow and he who looks at the clouds will not reap, for he does not know. (5) Just as the path of the spirit in the bones inside the womb of the pregnant woman, so you cannot know the deeds of God who creates all things." The mss and versional evidence for emending is slim. LXX may reflect translation technique. The other versions support MT, including α′, σ′, Vg., Tg., Syr., and Jerome. I follow MT on the basis of textual support and the difficulty of the reading.

[5] On the basis of his earlier emendation, Goldman (109*; cf. Graetz, 130) follows Tg. and a variety of mss in emending the כְּ in כַּעֲצָמִים ("as the bones") to בַּעֲצָמִים ("in the bones"). Tg. is paraphrastic and supports instead the בְּ in בְּבֶטֶן ("in the womb"). Part of the rationale for adopting this reading is to render רוּחַ as "spirit" (relating to the growth of the fetus) rather than "wind." However, the reading of MT is superior and finds support in LXX, Vg., and Jerome.

[6] LXX reflects the plural form with τὰ ποιήματα τοῦ θεοῦ ("the works of God") in place of MT's singular מַעֲשֵׂה הָאֱלֹהִים ("the work of God"). Elsewhere LXX reflects the plural in place of MT's singular with the same phrase (cf. 7:13; 8:17). Syr. and Vg. support LXX, but probably are dependent on it. I follow MT.

[7] Many Hebrew mss record the pluralized יְדֵיךָ ("your hands") in place of MT's יָדְךָ ("your hand"). MT is more difficult and preferred.

[8] Leningrad Codex has an error in preserving יוֹדֵעַ without the final *patakh*, as reflected with יוֹדֵעַ in the Cambridge ms 1753 (M^{Y}) and St. Petersburg ms EBP (II.B.34) (M^{L34}).

Exegetical Analysis of Ecclesiastes 11:1–6

Our survey begins by noting the exegetical issues arising from Ecclesiastes 11:1 and the pericope's subsequent verses. In vv. 1–2 Qohelet commends the advantage of intrepid, diverse initiatives. The verses form a geographical merism, with "upon the surface of the waters" (v. 1) corresponding to "upon the earth" (v. 2). Decisive enterprise in the former sphere, though seemingly counterintuitive, best prepares for eventual disaster in the latter.

Take Risks but Minimize Harm since You Do Not Know What May Happen on Earth (11:1–2)

The opening imperative comes from the D-stem verb שׁלח, "to send away," "throw forth," "cast out."[9] The *qal* appears often with persons as the object in the sense of commissioning a representative. The *piel*, however, denotes persons or entities that are cast out or sent away ("expel," "banish").[10] The latter hints at compulsory removal. Often this occurs in the context of divorce (Deut 22:19, 29; 24:1, 3; Jer 3:1; Mal 2:16). Here then the casting out of "bread" is a decisive, intentional act (i.e., more like frisbee throwing than accidental dropping). "Bread" (לֶחֶם) is associated with joy elsewhere, whether laughter (10:19) or pleasure (9:7). In 9:11, Qohelet advises that the wise do not always have "bread," meaning their daily sustenance is not guaranteed. The sense is that one intentionally throws forth that which provides daily sustenance and a source of happiness. Bread was often a circular loaf, thin and flat in comparison to modern loafs (shaped as a rounded disc). Thus, bread could remain on the surface and be carried by the current, although it would eventually disintegrate after getting wet.[11]

The sphere upon which one casts it is "the water" (lit. "upon the surface of the waters"). "Water" (מַיִם) appears elsewhere only in the royal autobiography, where Qohelet constructs pools of water to irrigate his trees (2:6). Water represents a number of different fluids and connotations (e.g., primeval waters, the underworld, seas, drinking water, rainwater, tears, urine, or semen).[12] Metaphorically the term connotes abundance (Amos 5:24), refreshment (Isa 32:2), weakness (Josh 7:5), instability (Gen 49:4), or tempestuousness (Isa 28:2). In prophetic literature "waters" symbolize foreign nations (Isa 8:7; 17:12–13; 23:2–3; Jer 47:2; Ezek 32:2; cf. Rev 17:15). "The surface of the water" appears elsewhere in contexts related to divine acts: creation (Gen 1:2; Job 26:10) or judgment (Gen 7:7, 18; Exod 32:20; Isa 19:8; Hos 10:7). This connection to the sphere where God works may hint at giving up one's resources to whatever God brings about.

The rationale for casting out one's bread comes in the final clause. The conjunction כִּי is causal ("for"). "In many days" is the timeframe, with בְּ signifying a temporal window within which an event or state of affairs is positioned.[13] "Many days" has connotations elsewhere in the book of a lifetime, often tinged with frustration and grief (5:17 [16]; 6:3; 11:8). The sense is that

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[9] *HALOT*; *DCH*, s.v. "שׁלח." *HALOT* suggests the casting of bread signifies "to make it float."

[10] C. J. Collins, s.v. "שׁלח," *NIDOTTE* 4:120; Gesenius, s.v. "שָׁלַח."

[11] Delitzsch, 392.

[12] SDBH; *HALOT*; *DCH*, s.v. "מַיִם."

[13] Williams §242; *BHRG* §39.6.2.

a lengthy time, perhaps even a painful period of delay, may pass before the return is discovered. The term מצא has a wide range of connotations, especially in the light of cognates (see 7:26), and here probably connotes its basic sense of "reach" or "attain," as a subset of "find." The *yiqtol* is irrealis ("may attain"). The "boomerang" principle means that one throws out what he may eventually gain again (i.e., it comes full circle).

There is difficulty in determining what Qohelet means by the proverb, and interpreters have offered at least nine suggestions, with the first two being most popular.

(1) Commerce: conduct business in foreign countries and after some time you may expect a profit.[14] Sea-faring ventures were a staple of the ancient world (Ps 107:23). The wise woman is "like the ships of the merchant; she brings her bread from afar" (Prov 31:14). Solomon's ships traded with Tarshish and Ophir (1 Kgs 10:11, 22), much as Jehoshaphat planned to do before his fleet's untimely demise (1 Kgs 22:48; 2 Chron 20:37). Some have commented that the "after many days" signifies a lengthy wait, corresponding better to a business venture than to the other options.[15]

(2) Charity: be generous to others so that they will help you in your time of need.[16] This arises from retributive justice: whereas 10:20 shows that punishment follows evil deeds, 11:1 shows that blessing follows good deeds.[17] Generosity to the poor is a means of blessing (Ps 37:21; Prov 14:31; 19:17; 28:8; cf. Acts 20:35). Other ANE proverbs counsel charity, such as an Arabic proverb: "Do good; cast your bread in the water: you will be repaid someday."[18] A Turkish proverb states: "Do good, throw it into the water; if the fish does not know it, God does."[19] The Ptolemaic Instruction of Ankhsheshonq advises: "Do a good deed and throw it in the water; when it dries you will find it."[20] The Middle Kingdom Egyptian Story of Sinuhe relates how Sinuhe gave alms to please the gods:

A laggard lagged from hunger—
I gave bread to my neighbor.
A man left his land in nakedness—
I have bright clothes, fine linen.[21]

A modern equivalent is "pay it forward." Rabbinical and Arabic legends recount shipwrecked or marooned people who survived on floating bread. This understanding comports well with the following verse, with נתן meaning "to give" to others (to seven, even eight).

(3) Daring enterprise: engage boldly in opportunities that may bring a return someday.[22] This view is close to number 1 (some interpreters combine them). I distinguish this view not as commerce per se but a call to bold enterprise in whatever sphere of life there is an opportunity for decisive action. A subset sees the command as entailing an action that appears risky, useless,

[14] Hubbard, 225–27; McNiele, 84; Bollhagen, 382.
[15] Delitzsch, 392.
[16] Targum; Rashi; Ginsburg, 447; Wildeboer, 159–60.
[17] Rose, 454–58.
[18] Knoebel, 332.
[19] Wright, 226.
[20] *AEL*, 785.
[21] *COS* 1.38:80.
[22] Podechard, 443; Murphy, 106; R. F. Johnson, "A Form Critical Analysis of the Sayings in the Book of Ecclesiastes" (PhD diss., Emory University, 1973), 192–93.

or counterintuitive.[23] The point is that seemingly senseless acts will sometimes bring positive results (v. 1), while seemingly prudent acts will not always succeed (v. 2). The waters represent not trade with foreign nations but the "full-circle principle" in that the tide returns whatever is thrown into the sea. This view fits well with the context, especially vv. 4 and 6, which counsel intrepid initiative under imperfect conditions. A similar saying would be "fortune favors the bold." This view accounts well for the merism between "waters" and "land" in vv. 1–2.

(4) Asset protection: send your fortune over the water to protect it from corrupt officials who wish to confiscate it.[24] In keeping with a Ptolemaic provenance, Levy sees a coded directive to protect assets from the acquisitive Egyptian king bent on seizing the money of Qohelet's Jewish readers. Tsukimoto sees the admonition generally as advising to protect oneself and possessions from unexpected happenings.[25]

(5) Divination: discern clues to the future so that you may have a favorable outcome.[26] In the Sumerian cylinders of Gudea (ca. 2112–2050 BC), the king watches a diviner perform extispicy by casting grain/flour upon moving water (aleuromancy), after which Gudea follows dream incubation protocol to receive a message from the gods for a prosperous venture.[27] This view fits with a possible divination background in the rest of the passage, especially vv. 3–4.

(6) Divine providence: abandon yourself to divine providence by willingly giving up your daily sustenance to depend on God's provision.[28] This view relates to the charity view (2) but differs in seeing the directive as *not* linked indissolubly to generosity. The phrase "surface of the waters" often relates to divine acts, so the imperative would relate to human actions done in view of God's sovereign work.

(7) Agriculture: plant your crops near water so that you obtain a better harvest.[29] Here the notion is that well-irrigated fields are more productive. The setting for the admonition is often interpreted as Egypt, where the Nile inundates croplands.

(8) Procreation: build up your family by begetting children, who will be born in due time.[30] Graetz sees v. 6 as the key to the passage with a veiled message that commends building households by having large families. Perry sees this more generally as directing sexual energies toward procreation.[31] He compares the casting bread to the casting stones in chapter 3, often taken as a metaphor for sexual relations.

(9) Beer production (*carpe diem*): throw dough on water in order to brew beer and enjoy life. Casting bread on water refers to the process whereby leavened dough is placed in jars of

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[23] Lauha, 201; Murphy, 106; J.-J. Lavoie, "'Laisse aller ton pain sur la surface des eaux': Étude de Qohélet 11,1–2," in *The Language of Qohelet in Its Context: Essays in Honour of Prof. A. Schoors on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday*, ed. A. Berlejung and P. Van Hecke, 75–89 (Leuven: Peeters, 2007), 88.

[24] Levy, 127.

[25] A. Tsukimoto, "The Background of Qoh 11:1–6 and Qohelet's Agnosticism," AJBI 19 (1993): 43.

[26] A. Pinker takes a view similar to divination, but his conclusions are too far-fetched to be persuasive. He renders the verse: "Whisper your dream upon the water, in many seas you will find it" ("A New Approach to Qohelet 11:1," *OTE* 22 [2009]: 618–45).

[27] *COS* 2.155:428.

[28] Stuart, 269.

[29] Jerome; Sa'adiah; H. A. J. Kruger, "Old Age Frailty Versus Cosmic Deterioration: A Few Remarks on the Interpretation of Qohelet 11,7–12,8," in *Qohelet in the Context of Wisdom*, ed. A. Schoors, 399–411 (Leuven: Peeters, 1998), 405.

[30] Graetz, 128–29.

[31] Perry, 161.

water so that the maltose sugars are converted to alcohol.[32] Qohelet's advice is to seize the day by getting together with friends to drink beer in light of the coming calamities on earth.

Which view is preferable? Several views can be dismissed as unlikely. The last view (9), although clever, relies too heavily on a narrow interpretation. The Hebrew word for "dough" (בָּצֵק) would be more suitable to the process of beermaking. It is unclear what is to be "found" after many days, since beer does not improve with age and was often consumed immediately.[33] Qohelet has a clear method of commending joy in the book, usually at the conclusion of units. A *carpe diem* proverb at the outset of a unit would break the pattern. The procreation view (8) is obscure. It mixes metaphors (flowing water is a biblical metaphor for sexual activity, not throwing bread/grain; cf. Prov 5:15–16) and assigns a meaning to "bread" as "seed" that is unattested. Furthermore, "casting stones" in chapter 3 is not a reference to sexual activity.

View 7 falters for similar reasons: "bread" never means "seed," and the bread is cast *upon* the waters not *by* the waters. This view adopts a meaning which is actually its opposite: the bread is to be cast *on water*, not *on land near water*. Such a connection has in view crops that are irrigated, but the Levant depends on rainfall. View 6 is too pietistic for the book's themes; Qohelet is a realist. View 5 may correlate to divination themes within the passage but again is too obscure. This verse would have Qohelet commending divination, whereas in the following verses he criticizes it. View 4 is unlikely because the bread is to be cast *upon* the waters, not *over* the waters. "Bread" never means "fortune." This reading is too dependent on a Ptolemaic setting.

This leads to the two traditionally favored options of commerce (view 1) and charity (view 2). View 1 suffers from a few deficiencies. "Bread" never means "fortune" or "wealth" in the OT. "Waters" connotes a variety of nuances, not only "ocean/seas." "Upon the waters" is not the same thing as "over the waters." "Finding it" is an inadequate outcome for the trader who seeks back not just what he put in but a profit.[34] This view potentially conflicts with v. 2, which may relate to gift-giving rather than diversification. There is no hint in the proverb of "ships," which are mentioned in the allegedly parallel texts.[35] Moreover, foreign trade was an expensive undertaking sponsored by kings; it is unclear that the common person would have undertaken such ventures.

View 2 also has several challenges: if a misfortune falls upon the whole land (v. 2), charity recipients will be unable to aid the benefactor. Charity is not mentioned elsewhere in the book, and such an idea goes against the context.[36] Often this view focuses on the advantage to the beneficiary rather than the donor. To expect a reward from charity is to reduce the act to cause-and-effect moralism, which Qohelet repudiates. Moreover, of the comparable proverbs cited, only one actually advocates throwing bread on water. These proverbs are a likely reflection on the present verse (e.g., the Arabic proverb), or they espouse the theme of patronage, common in the ancient world.

This leaves the daring enterprise interpretation (view 3) as the preferred option. This view fits best with the context and takes account of the merism in "on the waters" (v. 1) and "on the land" (v. 2). Qohelet advises bold and intrepid actions given the uncertainties of the world: one should at times undertake seemingly counterintuitive actions, even risks, because such actions

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[32] M. M. Homan, "Beer Production by Throwing Bread into Water: A New Interpretation of Qoh. XI,2," *VT* 52 (2002): 275–78; Homan, "Beer and Its Drinkers: An Ancient Near Eastern Love Story," *NEA* 67 (Jun 2004): 84–95.

[33] Homan, "Beer and Its Drinkers," 86.

[34] Podechard, 443.

[35] A. Pinker, "A New Approach to Qohelet 11:1," 625.

[36] Podechard, 443.

may mitigate risk in the long run (fortune favors the bold). Later he commends action even when conditions are imperfect (vv. 4, 6).

The second proverb (v. 2) offsets the first. Plurality in scope is the basic idea, but the details accord with the interpretation of the previous verse. Those who champion the commerce view see here diversification in investment, a wise strategy given the volatility of the market.[37] Those who argue for charity favor a persistence in giving generously to anyone in need because no one knows the future.[38] The daring venture view sees v. 2 as joining boldness with *balance*. Take risks but minimize harm. An English equivalent would be "don't put all your eggs in one basket." Qohelet counsels allotting ("give," נתן) a portion to "seven" or "eight." The verb נתן, when collocated with חֵלֶק ("portion") and the preposition לְ ("to"), signifies the distribution of a gift or allotment to a specific recipient (Josh 14:4; 15:13; 18:7; Eccl 2:21; 5:19 [18]). Seow infers from this that the core meaning is "give a gift" rather than "divide a portion" and so should be viewed not as an imperative to diversify but a call to liberality. Against this, there are few parallel passages, and they all have to do with property distribution in the conquest. Divvying one's holdings is the idea.

The keyword חֵלֶק, meaning "portion," "allotment," or "share," appears here for the final time. The term signifies both provision and limitation: the portion is God's sovereign gift but it is measured and finite. Ascending parallelism (7 + 1) is a staple of biblical wisdom and prophecy (Job 5:19; Prov 6:16; 30:15; Amos's eight oracles [7+1] [Amos 1–2]). The only other text to use seven/eight parallelism is Micah 5:5 (4), where Cathcart sees a parallel to Ugaritic texts that favor this device.[39] He concludes that the formula hints at magic, with its wide use in incantation texts, and that here Qohelet advises protecting oneself from disaster by sharing with seven or eight.[40] The number more likely signifies indefinite multiplicity, hinting at fullness and certainty. The *waw* highlights the ascending parallelism ("and"), while the גַּם particle is asseverative ("even"). The sense is to be shrewd in doling out to others parts of what God has gifted you.

The rationale comes in the final clause. The conjunction כִּי is causal ("for") as in the previous verse. The reason for sharing one's portion is that no one knows what future misfortunes may come. These grounds are the flipside of v. 1b—in both scenarios one may benefit or avert disaster, but no one knows. The theme of "not knowing" is a key motif in the sub-unit, appearing in vv. 2, 5, and 6. The *yiqtol* form of ידע carries a gnomic sense: "you do not know." The *yiqtol* verb היה is irrealis and connotes what "may happen." The subject is "evil" (רָעָה), which carries in the OT four distinct senses (ethical evil, personal/bodily evil, natural/systemic evil, or subjective evil).[41] This usage is natural/systemic evil—calamity, distress, or misfortune. The sphere in which the misfortune occurs is "upon the earth." The word אֶרֶץ is a catchword with the following proverb, where rain falls on the earth. The term corresponds too with "waters" in the previous verse to form a merism. Here it is a terrestrial statement—as opposed to a localized one—meaning that misfortune can occur anywhere and affect anyone. The wise person plans ahead for disaster so that when it comes he is not surprised.

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[37] Delitzsch, 393.
[38] Seow, 335.
[39] K. Cathcart, "Notes on Micah 5:4–5," *Bib* 49 (1968): 511–14.
[40] K. Cathcart, "Micah 5,4–5 and Semitic Incantations," *Bib* 59 (1978): 45.
[41] SDBH; *HALOT*; *DCH*, s.v. "רָעָה."

Accomplish Your Tasks even in Imperfect and Uncertain Conditions (11:3–4)

The sequence turns in vv. 3–4 from the imperative + rationale sequence to the conditional (if + then) framework. The theme turns to practical wisdom concerns, especially in coordinating right timing with divine sovereignty. Qohelet derives principles from reflecting on the creational order, a common source of insight for biblical wisdom. The theme may build on the previous verse to stress the inevitability and irrevocability of events that happen in a fallen world.

The two parts of the verse carry two if/then statements, marked by the particle אִם occurring three times. In the OT there are three kinds of conditional statements: (1) content conditionals (predictions about a possible state of affairs in the world: "If you make too many errors, you will lose the game"); (2) generic or habitual conditionals (generic statements that ascribe properties to members of a class and are predictive: "If you heat water to 212 degrees, it will boil"); and (3) speech-act conditionals (fulfillment of an expected state of affairs in the protasis triggers a speech-act in the apodosis: "If you get hungry, there is food in the refrigerator [i.e., you may eat the food in the refrigerator]").[42] Here the conditionals are generic conditionals (#2), which comprise about 5% of OT conditionals. These conditionals make statements about the members of a class and predict what they do (clouds rain and trees fall).

The first conditional concerns clouds: Clouds that are full of water empty on the earth. The term מלא (*niphal yiqtol* 3ms) means "to be full," "to be filled," or "to have one's fill (be satisfied)" and carries a present sense ("are full"). The term occurs in adjectival or verbal form nine times in the book and is a catchword in this sub-unit. The term עָב occurs for the first of three times in the book (cf. 11:4, 12:2) and means "clouds," "thick cloud," or "rain cloud(s)."[43] The word גֶּשֶׁם refers to "rain" or "showers."[44] The Masoretic accents link the word to the preceding "clouds" ("if the clouds *are full of rain*"), perhaps because clouds may also be "full" of snow or hail.[45] English versions divide over whether to follow the Masoretes: "if the clouds are full of rain, they empty themselves" (ESV, NETB, NKJV) or "if the clouds are full, they pour out rain" (CSB, NASB, NRSV). The choice makes little exegetical difference: the first option hews to the Hebrew although the second option makes for smoother English.

The clouds "empty themselves," with the *hiphil* verb ריק (a *hapax* for the book) meaning "to pour out," "pour down," or "empty out."[46] The term "earth" links to the previous verse as a catchword. Showers are usually associated with divine blessing (Deut 11:11–14; Zech 10:1), as water is vital to life in an arid climate.[47] The Ugaritic storm/rain god and divine warrior Ba'lu/Hadad was known by the epithet "Rider of the Clouds."[48] More widely in the ANE clouds

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[42] See W. E. Bivin, "Domain-Based Conditionality in Biblical Hebrew," *Bib* 100 (2019): 190–92.

[43] SDBH; *HALOT*; *DCH*, s.v. "עָב."

[44] SDBH; *HALOT*; *DCH*, s.v. "גֶּשֶׁם."

[45] Delitzsch, 394.

[46] *HALOT*; *DCH*, s.v. "ריק."

[47] M. Futato, s.v. "גשׁם," *NIDOTTE* 1:900–1. Contra Hengstenberg (237), who sees clouds and rain as symbols of divine judgment.

[48] Frayne and Stucky, *Handbook of Gods and Goddesses*, 43–44.

were formed by the breath of the gods and emitted thunder from their roaring.[49] Yet the arrival of rain is contingent on what the clouds do: blessing and misfortune carry a measure of unpredictability.

The second conditional refers to trees. Trees that fall in a given direction remain in that direction.[50] The *yiqtol* of נפל carries a present sense as in the previous conditional and means "to fall," "fall down," or "collapse."[51] "Tree" (עֵץ) is a catchword back to the occupational hazards of the previous chapter (10:9) and to the royal autobiography in which Qohelet plants flourishing groves (2:5–6) (cf. "water" in 2:6; 11:1). Several terms correspond to the opening poem on the monotonous cycles of the created order (1:5–7), including "south" (דָּרוֹם), an infrequent geographical designation in the OT, "north" (צָפוֹן), and "place" (מָקוֹם). "North" and "south" are a geographical merism for "any direction."[52] Given the possible link to divination in v. 4, some see here a veiled allusion to rhabdomancy (the use of a divining rod).[53] The point, however, is the unpredictability of events rather than a criticism of divination for determining the future.

The preposition בְּ denotes sphere. There are repetitive realities that comprise the created order. This is evident in the language of the proverb, in which "tree" and "falls" are each repeated twice. The final phrase provides Qohelet's summation: wherever the tree falls, there it remains. The final verb is an unusual formation of the root הוה (יְהוּא) with two homonyms: הוה I "to fall" and הוה II "to become." I prefer the latter. Whether felled by an act of God (rainstorm) or humanity (lumberjack) is unclear. There is an eventuality and finality in the events of a fallen world that one must be prepared for.[54]

The proverbs turn now to gnomic principles marked by participles expressing continuous action. Verse 4 is the pivot of the series, concluding the first part of the chiastic structure and containing four of the series' eight catchwords ("clouds," "wind," "sow," and "see"). Sowing and reaping form a merism for the entire agricultural cycle. The first clause concerns one who is immobilized by watching the wind. Given that seeds were often scattered in the field by hand, the sower needed calm weather. The verb שׁמר (*qal* active participle) means "to guard," "keep," or "watch," with the latter connoting close observation (cf. ראה in the parallel clause).[55] The phrase is distinct from but redolent of the frequent "chasing the wind" from the royal autobiography (1:14, 17; 2:11, 17, 26)—watching or chasing wind both stand for futile activity.

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[49] C. E. Watanabe, "Composite Animals in Mesopotamia as Cultural Symbols," in *Composite Artefacts in the Ancient Near East: Exhibiting an Imaginative Materiality, Showing a Genealogical Nature*, ed. S. Di Paolo, 31–37 (Oxford, UK: Archaeopress, 2018), 34.

[50] Hengstenberg (237) and Leupold (261) see the falling tree as an allegory for the coming downfall of the Persian empire. While trees can represent kingdoms in the OT, this understanding goes against the context. Schwienhorst-Schönberger (513–14) suggests the falling tree is a metaphor for death.

[51] SDBH; *HALOT*; *DCH*, s.v. "נפל."

[52] HCM, 286.

[53] McNiele, 85.

[54] I must mention here that this (most unusual) verse brought the late theologian R. C. Sproul (1939–2017) under conviction of sin during his college years and ultimately to faith in Christ. He notes that he may be the only Christian ever converted by Ecclesiastes 11:3 (available online at https://www.ligonier.org/posts/rc-sprouls-awakening-christian-faith).

[55] *HALOT*; *DCH*, s.v. "שׁמר."

The farmer observes the wind, with רוּחַ best denoting "wind" rather than "spirit" given the meteorological context. In view of what he sees, the farmer abstains from "sowing" (זרע) his seed. Winds can also signal the change of seasons or weather, with a northern wind bringing colder weather (Job 37:9). Southern or western winds heralded the onset of storms. Observing wind patterns formed part of the protocol for celestial divination in ancient Mesopotamia.[56] Given the arid climate of the Levant, farmers depended on the seasonal rain cycles for planting and harvesting. Wheat and barley were sown before the autumn rains (October–November), millet and beans in January or February, and the summer fruits after the spring rains (March–April).[57] The point is that farmers may overcompensate for the weather patterns—awaiting perfect conditions—and fail to follow wisdom practices of diligence and perseverance. Wisdom should evoke practical action, as crippling overthought can negate wisdom's value.

The second clause concerns observation of clouds. The verb ראה, parallel to שׁמר, means "to see," "look at," "inspect." The preposition בְּ governs the accusative. "Clouds" (עָבִים) is a catchword with the previous verse. The *yiqtol* verb from קצר appears only here and means "to reap," "harvest," or "gather in."[58] Harvesting took place after spring rains, so watching for rainclouds was part of the farming season. Harvesters would wait for dry weather before reaping. Observation of clouds also constituted an aspect of ANE divination.[59] The proverb is perhaps equivalent to our English aphorism "just do it." Those who wait for perfect conditions will miss vital opportunities. Wisdom discerns the elusive convergence between divine sovereignty and advantageous conditions.

Work Hard Since You Cannot Fathom God's Work or the Right Timing of Successful Ventures (11:5–6)

The theme of not knowing the future continues with an aphorism (v. 5) regarding the impenetrability of God's work. The MT has two illustrations of this impenetrability: the wind's path and the child's formation in the womb. The opening conjunction "just as" (כַּאֲשֶׁר) ties the verse to the preceding themes. The collocated negation particle (אֵין) + 2ms suffix + *qal* active participle (יוֹדֵעַ) ("you do not know") points to persistent and pervasive ignorance (i.e., "you are never going to know"). "Wind/spirit" (רוּחַ) is a catchword connecting back to v. 4. Debate centers around which nuance is most likely, given the meteorological context of the previous verses (favoring "wind")[60] or the analogy of the unborn child in the second clause (favoring

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[56] E. Gehlken, *Weather Omens of Enūma Anu Enlil: Thunderstorms, Wind and Rain (Tablets 44–49)*, CM 43 (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 208–9; J. L. Cooley, *Poetic Astronomy in the Ancient Near East: The Reflexes of Celestial Science in Ancient Mesopotamian, Ugaritic, and Israelite Narrative*, HACL 5 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 67–68. On the divinatory background to this passage, see Tsukimoto, "The Background of Qoh 11:1–6," 34–52; A. Bühlmann, "Qoheleth 11.1–6 and Divination," in *Magic in the Biblical World: From the Rod of Aaron to the Ring of Solomon*, 55–65, JSNTSup 245 (London: T&T Clark, 2003).

[57] R. K. Harrison and E. M. Yamauchi, s.v. "Agriculture," *DDL*, 36–37.

[58] *HALOT*; *DCH*, s.v. "קצר."

[59] Gehlken, *Weather Omens of Enūma Anu Enlil*, 121.

[60] Stuart, 271; Wright, 231.

"spirit/breath").[61] Related is a textual issue: most interpreters that prefer the latter sense emend the כְּ in the following phrase כַּעֲצָמִים ("as the bones") to בַּעֲצָמִים ("in the bones"), based on the Targum. This leads to a translation such as Graetz's: "You cannot know how the spirit of life comes into the bones of the fetus."

Yet the MT is preferred, as the *kaph* preposition is resumptive of the opening כַּאֲשֶׁר. "Wind" is the better connotation, given the theme of weather in the preceding and following verses as well as the meaning of רוּחַ in v. 4. Inability to control the wind is a theme of biblical wisdom (Ps 147:18; Prov 27:16; 30:4), while chasing the wind stands for futility (Eccl 1:14, 17; 2:11, 17, 26; Hos 8:7). This is the only OT passage to speak of the wind's *path* or *way* (דֶּרֶךְ), although earlier Qohelet speaks of the wind's circuit (1:6). In the ANE, wind was produced by the gods, and mankind was powerless to control it (see 8:8). Likewise in biblical wisdom Yahweh creates and commands the wind (Job 26:13; 28:25; 38:24; Prov 30:4). Human inability to discern the wind's path implies a brokenness in the creation mandate (Gen 1:28; 3:17–19), as humanity can understand fully only that which he subdues.[62] I argue elsewhere for an echo of this verse in John 3:8 through the comparison of the invisible, sovereign work of the Spirit to the wind's enigmatic procession during Jesus's conversation with Nicodemus.[63]

The second analogy is the formation of a child in the womb. The opening preposition כְּ ("as," "like") compares this analogy to the previous one while also marking a distinction ("or"). The term עֶצֶם denotes "bones," "skeleton," or "bodily frame."[64] Delekat proposes that the masculine plural form עֲצָמִים connotes "limbs," which may be an appropriate gloss,[65] but the preferred sense is Driver's gloss "bodily frame."[66] The word בֶּטֶן means "belly" or "womb."[67] It stands in a construct relationship with the substantival feminine adjective הַמְּלֵאָה. The latter adjective מָלֵא means "full," "full of," connoting only here in the OT a "pregnant woman." The term is a catchword to the clouds "full of" rain in v. 3. There is a certain inevitability in the fact that things that are full eventually empty out.

In the ANE divine mystery shrouded the formation of the body in the womb. Ancient Egyptian medicine discerned cosmic justice (*ma'at*) within the body's system of bones, muscles, vessels, and fluids to create balance (pleasing to the gods) or imbalance (displeasing to the gods).[68] In the case of imbalance, sickness would ensue. The creator god Khnum receives praise for knitting together human bones at their creation:

> He has fashioned gods and men.…
> He knotted the flow of blood to the bones,

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[61] Graetz, 130; Levy, 129.

[62] Delitzsch, 396.

[63] K. C. Dunham, "The House of Feasting and the House of Mourning: Intertextual Links between Ecclesiastes and John in Establishing Jesus as the Consummate Sage," *DBSJ* 30 (2025): 89–110.

[64] *HALOT*; *DCH*, s.v. "עֶצֶם."

[65] L. Delekat, "Zum hebräischen Wörterbuch," *VT* 14 (Jan 1964): 50. *DCH* views the difference between the masculine plural and feminine plural as having to do with whether the bones describe the living (masc) or the dead (fem).

[66] G. R. Driver, "Problems in the Hebrew Text of Proverbs," *Bib* 32 (1951): 175.

[67] SDBH; *HALOT*; *DCH*, s.v. "בֶּטֶן."

[68] L. M. Zucconi, *Ancient Medicine: From Mesopotamia to Rome* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019), 70.

Formed in his workshop as his handiwork,
So the breath of life is within everything,
Blood bound with semen in the bones,
To knit the bones from the start.[69]

The Hittites viewed the bones as one of the body's twelve parts, referenced in incantation texts that appeal for divine healing.[70] The Targum interprets the mystery involved as God's work in determining the sex of the child. The psalmist too gives place to the wonder of God's formation of the child's bones: "I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well. My frame (עֶצֶם) was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth" (Ps 139:14–15).

The point of comparison is the impenetrability of God's work. Humanity's inability to "know" or "find out" God's work is a repeated theme (3:11; 7:13; 8:17). The conjunction "thus" (כָּכָה) marks the verse's point of emphasis. The *yiqtol* of ידע is irrealis and moves from the generic modality of the earlier participle to dynamic modality: "you cannot know."[71] Finite humanity is simply incapable of penetrating the divine mystery. The phrase "work of God" appears four times in the book as a cipher for the hiddenness of divine sovereignty (3:11; 7:13; 8:17; 11:5). God is the sovereign Creator who has made everything (cf. 3:11) and the sovereign Sustainer who continues—*yiqtol* form of עשׂה—to oversee and sustain all events (i.e., divine providence). Qohelet's point is that divine sovereignty should not be an impediment to human action because humans will never fathom what God is doing.

Qohelet concludes the sub-unit (v. 6) with a call to action in light of God's sovereignty. The imperative and jussive tie back to the opening imperatives of vv. 1–2 to frame the sub-unit. "Morning" and "evening" are a merism for "all day long." As in 10:16, the morning is the time for working with alacrity to accomplish the day's tasks. "Sowing" (זרע) is a catchword link to the "sowing" and "reaping" of v. 4. Sowing seed is the necessary first step in getting the bread that will be cast on the water (v. 1), bringing one's efforts back to their inception. This cycle suggests an actual—not figurative—sowing, although interpreters have offered figurative senses such as siring children (Targum) or sowing good deeds.[72] Agricultural labors stand for every sort of work humans engage in.

"Evening" (עֶרֶב) appears only here in the book and means "sunset," "dusk," or "evening."[73] The לְ preposition signifies a temporal point ("by" or "at"), and interpreters divide over whether to render "until evening"[74] or "towards evening."[75] The first implies constant action, while the second repeated action. The former is preferred since the darkness of evening precludes work and requires rest. The advice is an exhortation to continual effort while there is opportunity (i.e., while daylight lasts; "make hay while the sun shines"). The *hiphil* form (here jussive) of נוח appears elsewhere in the book (2:18; 5:12 [11]; 7:18; 10:4) and carries connotations of (1) "leave behind" or (2) "cause to rest." Here the latter sense is clear. "Hand" is

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[69] *AEL*, 715.
[70] Zucconi, *Ancient Medicine*, 165.
[71] HCM, 288.
[72] Plumptre, 207.
[73] SDBH; *HALOT*; *DCH*, s.v. "עֶרֶב."
[74] Zapletal, 219; Barton, 194.
[75] Ginsburg, 452; Graetz, 131.

metonymy for all the effort the laborer puts forth. Even with the onset of twilight, the worker must not get lazy or self-satisfied.

The rationale for such industry is marked by the conjunction כִּי (“for”). The collocation of the negation particle (אֵין) + 2ms suffix + *qal* active participle (יוֹדֵעַ) (“you do not know”) frames its use at the beginning of v. 5. The idiom of the interrogative particle אֵי (“where?” “what?”) + the demonstrative pronoun זֶה (“this”) emphasizes uncertainty (“which one?” or “which way?”). The verb כשׁר occurs only in Ecclesiastes, here the *qal* and the H-stem in 10:10. The verb is usually glossed “to be suitable” or “be useful.”[76] The cognate *kṯr* in Ugaritic means “to be in good strength,” while the Akkadian *kašāru* means “to succeed,” “to achieve.”[77] As in 10:10 the verb follows the sense of the Akkadian cognate, to mean “achieve” or “succeed,” with an emphasis on the advantage gained. The interrogative particle marking the phrase “this or this” (הֶזֶּה אוֹ־זֶה) means “whether this or that.”

The *waw* marking the final phrase is alternative (“or”). The conditional marker “if” (אִם) marks the uncertainty of the situation. The phrase “the two of them” refers back to the “this” or “that” alternatives. One does not know if both paths will be “good,” one as the other, or not. The adjective “good” is a catchword to v. 7. “As one” (כְּאֶחָד) means “alike” or “equally.” Lauha argues that the sense pertains not to which will succeed but the viability of one or the other.[78] Success of the tasks, however, is embedded in the verb כשׁר. Daring and diversification (vv. 1–2) are necessary ingredients to work because our inability to know the future means we are constantly in the dark as to which of our ventures will succeed. The antidote is to work diligently in every domain where there is an opportunity. Qohelet advises balancing intrepid action (vv. 1, 4, 6) with cautious forethought (vv. 2–3, 5). The alternation follows this sequence:

Intrepid action: take bold risks (cast your bread upon the waters) (v. 1).

Cautious forethought: divide a portion to seven or eight (v. 2).

Cautious forethought: pay attention to conditions because the fallen world carries unpredictability (v. 3).

Intrepid action: just do something, even if conditions are imperfect (v. 4).

Cautious forethought: there are certain mysteries such as God’s providence that you cannot understand (v. 5).

Intrepid action: work hard at every opportunity because you do not know which venture will succeed (v. 6).

The sequence reinforces the notion that casting bread upon the water (v. 1) is a call to bold action in the face of uncertainty and risk. In doing so, some negative hazards in a fallen world may be neutralized for those prudent and courageous ones willing to undertake them.

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[76] SDBH; *HALOT*; *DCH*, s.v. “כשׁר.”

[77] For Ugaritic, see Aistleitner, 159. For Akkadian, see *CAD*, s.v. “kašāru B,” 8:285.

[78] Lauha, 203.