

## QOHELET 11,1–6 OR HOW TO SURVIVE IN AN UNSURE WORLD

FRANCESCO BIANCHI

*francesco\_bianchi@hotmail.com*

*Associazione Biblica Italiana*

*Rome, Italy*

### **Abstract: Qohelet 11,1–6 or How to Survive in an Unsure World**

This paper aimed at examining Qo 11,6–6 in order to ascertain the literary and rhetorical features of the unit and its single subunits with a particular look at Qo 11,1–2. After having reviewed the various solutions put forth for this subunit, my own will try to read it against the background of Hellenistic evergetism. A close examination of the rest of the unit will follow for showing as Qohelet calls man to work in the present time in spite of the ignorance about the outcome of the action and of the “right time” set by God.

**Keywords:** Book of Qohelet – Wisdom – Evaluation of Work – Evergetism – Human Ignorance about the Future

### **Resumen: Qohelet 11,1–6 o cómo sobrevivir en un mundo inseguro**

Este artículo tiene la intención de examinar Qo 11,1–6 para comprobar las características literarias y retóricas de la unidad y subunidades con una visión particular de Qo 11,1–2. Luego de haber examinado las varias soluciones anteriores para esta subunidad, mi propia intención será tratar de leerla en contra del trasfondo del evergetismo helenístico. Se seguirá un análisis cercano del resto de la unidad para mostrar como Qohelet llama al hombre a trabajar en el tiempo presente a pesar de la ignorancia sobre el resultado de la acción y el “tiempo adecuado” establecido por Dios.

**Palabras clave:** Libro de Qohelet – Sabiduría – Evaluación del trabajo – Evergetismo – Ignorancia humana sobre el futuro.

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper aims at offering a fresh examination of Qohelet 11,1–6 which is one of the most complex unit of all the book. As a painstaking bibliographical survey can easily show,<sup>1</sup> scholars have dealt at length more with the first two verses than with the overall meaning of the unit. Accordingly, a lot of questions stands still unsettled as for instance, the literary and theological function of Qohelet 11,1–6 within the general fabrics of the book, its historical and social context and in spite of them many solutions which have been put forth, the very meaning of Qo 11,1–2 as well. For answering these questions, I shall present at first the Hebrew text of Qo 11,1–6 along with an English translation of it and I shall discuss in the footnotes the textual problems. Then I shall move to establish the literary and the rhetorical borders of the unit, its place within the book and to individuate its subunits. At this point I shall examine them, giving a particular attention to the *vexatissima crux interpretum* represented by Qo 11,1–2. I shall examine the different solutions before advancing my own solution. The conclusion will present some new insights to understand the theological message of Qo 11,1–6.

## THE TEXT

שְׁלַח לְחִמָּד עַל־פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם כִּי־בָרַב הַמַּיִם תִּמְצָאֵנּוּ:  
 תִּרְחֹק לְשִׁבְעֵת־גַּם לְשִׁמְנָה כִּי לֹא־דַע מֵה־יְהִי רָעָה עַל־הָאָרֶץ  
 אִם־יִמְלֹאוּ הַעֵבִים גִּשְׁם עַל־הָאָרֶץ וְרִיקוּב־אִם־יִפֹּל עֵץ בְּדָרֹם־אִם בְּצִפּוֹן מִקּוֹם שִׁי־לֵל הַעֵץ שָׁם  
 יִהְיֶה

שֹׁמֵר רוּחַ לֹא יִנְרַע־רָאָה בְּעֵבִים לֹא יִקְצָר:  
 אֲשֶׁר אֵינָה־דַע מֵה־יִנְרַד הַרוּחַ כַּעֲצָמִים בְּכֶטֶן הַמְּלֹאָה כִּכָּה לֹא־דַע אֲ־מַעֲשֵׂה הָאֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה  
 אֲ־הַפֶּל

בְּבִקְרֹר יָרַע אֲ־יִנְרַע־לְעָרֹב אֶל־תִּפְנֹחַ יָדָה כִּי אֵינָה־דַע אֵי זֶה יִקְשֶׁר הַזֶּה אֶ־יִתֶּה־אִם־יִשְׁנִיָּהֶם כְּאֶחָד  
 טֹבִים

<sup>1</sup> Besides of the standard commentaries, the following studies are worth of noticing: Staeck 1942/43: 216–218; Stoute 1950: 223–234; Ogden 1983; Ogden 1988; Fredericks 1991: 95–114; Tsukimoto 1993: 34–52; Kamano 2002, 213–219; Hoeman 2002: 275; Shields 2005; Wiegard 2005, 114–121; Lavoie 2007: 75–90; Pinker 2009: 618–645; Withwell 2009: 181–187. For a useful and insightful survey on Qohelet's studies in the last fifteen years, see Lavoie 2013: 95–113.

- (1) Send your bread upon the waters,<sup>2</sup> for you will find it after many days.
- (2) Divide a portion into seven, even into eight; for you know not what evil shall be upon the earth.
- (3) If the clouds be full of rain,<sup>3</sup> they empty themselves upon the earth; and if a tree<sup>4</sup> fall in the south, or in the north, in the place where the tree falls,<sup>5</sup> there shall it be.
- (4) He that observes the wind shall not sow; and he that regards the clouds shall not reap.
- (5) As you know not what is the way of the wind (life breath) in the bones<sup>6</sup> do grow in the womb of pregnant woman;<sup>7</sup> even so you know not the work<sup>8</sup> of God who does all things.
- (6) In the morning sow your seed, and in the evening withhold not your hand; for you know not which shall prosper, whether this or that, or whether they both shall be alike good.

<sup>2</sup> *השל* pi. usually means “to release,” occasionally “to send,” but only once “to throw” (see 1 Sam 20,20 “to shoot” (an arrow). Qo 11:1a suggests the image of someone placing or dropping his bread on the water and letting it float away, rather than throwing it into the water. This image is fostered by the preposition *’al penê*, literally “on the surface of” (rather than *bammāyīm* or *’el tokhammāyīm*). Fox 1989: 275 underlines the delicacy of the action. The alliteration between *hammāyīm* and *hayyāmim* could explain Qohelet’s use of the verb *šālah*.

<sup>3</sup> We follow here A. Lauha (1978: 199), who expounded *משל* “rain” as the accusative of *materiae* of the verb *שיל*.

<sup>4</sup> Within this verse, we can look at two examples of the erratic use of the determinative article before the word *es*: it is lacking in the first instance, but it is present in the second. For the article in Qohelet, see Schoors 1992: 164–169.

<sup>5</sup> The verse harbors the greatest difficult of the unit, as the Hebrew *הוא* can be understood both as the verb I *הוא* “to fall” or as the verb II *הורה* “to become.” Though some manuscripts read it as the pronoun subject of third person singular “he”, it is by far better to follow the ancient version and to explain it as the imperfect of the verb *היה* “to be.” The form which presents an *’alef* added is a sign of the late stage of Hebrew Language (see again Schoors 1992: 42–43; 98–99).

<sup>6</sup> The Hebrew *בצנאים* has been read by some manuscripts, by the Targums, BHS and modern commentators, as for instance Fox 1989:76, *בצנאים*, but it can be maintained as a *lectio difficilior*.

<sup>7</sup> My translation gives to *המלצה* the value of *nomen rectum* of *המלצה* and the meaning of “pregnant woman.” It is also possible, yet, to consider *המלצה* as an adjective referred to the womb (Yebamot 16: 1).

<sup>8</sup> All the ancient versions have here the plural.

## THE STRUCTURE OF Qo 11,1–6 AND ITS PLACE IN THE BOOK OF QOHELET

After having presented a translation of the unit, I would like to analyze its place within the book. There is a growing consensus on the fact that Qo 11,1–6 is an independent literary unit whose borders lie in Qo 10,20 and in Qo 11,7.<sup>9</sup> As far as Qo 10,20 is concerned, it ends the long and bewildering section that from 10,1 on described the strength and the feebleness of the wisdom and eventually invited to speak prudently before the king and the rulers.<sup>10</sup> At its turn, Qo 11,7 opens the very last section of the book where a praise for the sweetness of the light and for the youth (11,7–10) leaves soon room to the powerful description of the old age and of the impending death.<sup>11</sup>

Within this framework, Qo 11,1–6 shows a remarkably crafted structure. Three verbs at the 2 p.s. of the imperative stand at the beginning (1.2) and at the end of it (6). It is well known that the presence of the imperatives in Qohelet increases from the fourth chapter on and helps the author to condemn a point of view held by his contemporaries or to express, as it happens here, a positive advice about a behavior to keep in the life.<sup>12</sup> Not less remarkable are the use of the preposition *kî* in the vv. 1.2.6 for explaining the advice issued at the imperative or the various parallelism: numeric (v.1: seven //eight), antithetic (v. 2b: ignorance on the outcome of an action; always v. 2: water//earth; v. 6: morning//evening) and ascending (v. 5 As...so). Finally, there are many examples of alliterations (*māyîm* and *yāmîm*) and of word-plays (*rûah* as wind and spirit) as well. On a thematic level the stress falls upon the natural elements (water, earth, clouds, rains) and upon the process of human and vegetal generation), whereas the use of the verbs “to find” and “to know not” set the main theological theme of the book that’s to say the ignorance about the outcome of human deeds and of God’s work. These observations suggest for Qo 11,1–6 the following structure: a) an introduction made of vv. 1–2 and built in a chiasmic way (1a 1b 1b 2b), where the hearer is summoned to act but in a careful way, as he does not know what evil the future will bring about; b) an inquiry realized through the experience and showing

<sup>9</sup>The exceptions are Wright 1968: 330–332; Murphy 1992: 105–110 (10, 16–11,2 collection of proverbs and 11,3–11,6 “living on uncertainty and ignorance”); Pinker 2009 and Bonora 1992: 157–159 consider 11,8 as the end of the unit.

<sup>10</sup>For a thoughtful examination, see Crenshaw 1988: 168–178 and Fox 1989: 270–272.

<sup>11</sup>Still valuable are M. Gilbert 1981: 96–107 and Fox 1988: 55–57.

<sup>12</sup>See D’Alario 1992: 163–165.

another chiastic structure, underlines the never changing world of natural elements laws and the need to cope with them in spite of his ignorance about things (vv. 3–4); a comparison between the ignorance about the hidden generation of the man and the ignorance about God’s work (v. 5); d) Conclusion: man cannot refrain at any time from action in spite of the uncertainty of the its positive or negative outcome (v. 6).

### Qo 11,1–2

Bearing that structure in mind, we move to investigate the five subunits whose Qo 11,1–6 is made of. We have already pointed out as in the small chiastic unity composed by Qo 11,1–2 the v.1a matches the v. 2a and 1b the v.2b. Let us analyse closely its components. The first half of Qo 11,1 calls for the quite odd action of sending bread on the waters, whereas the second one—Qo 11,1b—assures that within a certain number of days it will be found it again. The apparently clear verse does not show any sign of textual corruption, but the search for its elusive meaning still defies the scholars. For the sake of brevity, we will summarize the principal proposals:<sup>13</sup>

- a) Since the Targum’s reading “Give your nourishing bread to the poor who go in ships upon the surface of the water, for after a period of many days you will find rewards in the world to come,” Qo 11,1 has been credited with the moral teaching of being kind, helpful and charitable towards the others. The Midrash to Qohelet,<sup>14</sup> some of the fore-

<sup>13</sup> Pinker 2009 provides the most detailed *status quaestionis* on the interpretation of Qo 11,1.

<sup>14</sup> According to this Midrash, Bar Kappara saved a man who was shipwrecked and left naked on the shore, by giving him food and new clothes. The man was a Roman proconsul who lately helped the rabbi to free some Jews being in jail: see Mancuso 2004.

most Jewish exegetes,<sup>15</sup> the Fathers of the Church,<sup>16</sup> Luther<sup>17</sup> and Grotius,<sup>18</sup> an handful of scholars lived between the end of 1800 and the beginning of 1900<sup>19</sup> followed that exegesis. In the course of the time it has been endorsed by M.V. Fox,<sup>20</sup> T. Longman,<sup>21</sup> Ch. Seow,<sup>22</sup> N. Kamano<sup>23</sup> and M. Shields.<sup>24</sup> Support to that interpretation has been often found in the Oriental Wisdom, as a learned work of H.F. von Diez (1751–1818) shows.<sup>25</sup> In his translation of *Qabusnameh*<sup>26</sup> the German

<sup>15</sup> For a short survey of Jewish interpretation, see Lavoie 2013: 105–106. Commenting Moses' behaviour with Yethro's daughters, Rashi (1040–1105) made this statement: "Do good, act kindly to the person whom your heart tells you, 'You'll never see him again'—like a person who throws his sustenance upon the surface of the water." Moses would have acted, though he was sure of not being repaid. As to Rashbam (1085–1158), he presented that paraphrases, "Do a favour for a man whom you never expect to benefit, because in the far future he will do a favour for you" (Japhet and Salters 1985: 185).

<sup>16</sup> The *Metaphrasis* of Gregory the Thaumaturgos (210–273) expressly speaks of philanthropy: on this work see Jarick 1989: 37–57. The same does the commentary of Saint Jerome (PL 23). As De Lubac (1976: 579–583) noticed, the Christian interpreters turned in the Middle Age to the typological sense, which saw Qohelet as a forerunner of Christ. Such an interpretation still surfaces in the proposal to consider the bread whose Qo 11,1a speaks as Christ, the Bread of Life, and the waters as the Gentiles (Stoute 1950: 222–226).

<sup>17</sup> M. Luther 1898: 184–185. On Luther's exegesis of the book that deny any human power and stresses God's will, see White 1987: 180–194.

<sup>18</sup> H. Grotius 1644: expounded Qo 11,1a in the following terms: 537 "*Ubi nulla spes sit recipiendi, Deus pro ista beneficentia in te conferet*" ("when nothing is expected to be received, God confers upon you beneficencies").

<sup>19</sup> Barton 1909: 181 lists i.a. A.W. Knobel (1807–1863), Chr. D. Ginsburg (1831–1914), O. Zöckler (1833–1906), C.H.H. Wright (1836–1909), Wilhelm Nowack (1850–1928), C. Siegfried (1830–1930) and J.T. Marshall (1850–1923).

<sup>20</sup> Fox 1989: 275 states that Qohelet 11,1a would teach "to do unto the others *that* they may do unto you."

<sup>21</sup> Seow 1997: 335–336.

<sup>22</sup> Fox 1989: 275.

<sup>23</sup> Kamano 2002: 214–218.

<sup>24</sup> Shields 2005: 224–225.

<sup>25</sup> Von Diez 1811: 106–116; the text is available at: <<https://archive.org/stream/denkwrdigkeiten00diezgoog#page/n146/mode/2up>>. The title of the work is *Denkwürdigkeiten* and not *Merkwürdigkeiten*, as it is often quoted (Crenshaw and Fox ad locum). Besides, the surname of the author is often misspelled as Diaz. For the German world see also Goethe's famous aphorism in *West-östlicher Divan*: "Was willst du untersuchen, Wohin die Milde fließt! Ins Wasser wirf deine Kuchen! wer weiss wer sie genießt?"

<sup>26</sup> See De Brujin 2010. Being a sort of "mirror of princes," the book was written by the prince Kaykavus b. Eskander (1030 C.E.) around 1082 for the son Gilanshah and earned a great popularity in the Islamic world.

erudite and diplomat presented the following story and its ties with Qo 11,1a. Once upon during the reign of Mutjakewil (847–861), a loyal servant of the Caliph, named Fettich used to swim in the Tigris near Baghdad. One day he drowned in the waters and the caliph unsuccessfully ordered to search for him. Lately, when someone reported to have seen the man alive and well in the river, the servants of the Caliph rescued him. Before him Fettisch revealed to him to own his survival to the bread flowing onto the Tigris and signed by Mohammed ben Hassan. This latter was summoned at court and revealed to follow this teaching: “Do the good; cast your bread on the water, one day you shall be rewarded.” Accordingly, the Caliph awarded him a diploma and some properties. After having paralleled this teaching to Qo 11,1a, Von Diez assumed his Salomonic origin through the Queen of Saba. In such a way it would have belonged to the memory of Arabs!<sup>27</sup> Although the explanation is obviously untenable and unaware of the historical context and of the theological realm of the book,<sup>28</sup> scholars willingly bring it as a parallel.<sup>29</sup> The examples coming from Egyptian wisdom draws closer to Qohelet’s world: the Instructions of Onkhsheshonqi, a wisdom text from Egypt<sup>30</sup> dating from the Hellenistic age, puts forth this advice: “Do a good deed and throw into the water; when it dries you will find it.”<sup>31</sup> As far as the parallel with Qohelet is concerned, it could be a fruit of a common international wisdom.<sup>32</sup>

As a critique to it, it has been widely noted as that interpretation goes quite beyond the scope of the author. As matter of fact, Qohelet’s relationship with humankind is not so terse and he never advocated such a liberality. In the familiar realm Qohelet had troubled relations with women or with leaving his wealth to a unskilled sons, whereas the broader and unsafe context of society makes him praise a friendly, but

<sup>27</sup> Shields 2005: 222 holds such an influence, but does not explain how it worked. Should we to postulate the presence of an Arabic translation of Qohelet around IX century A.D.? However, it may be, those translations were available: see Sasson 2007a: 603–606 and Sasson 2015b.

<sup>28</sup> The theological flawlessness of the argument has become self-evident in the so called “Prosperity Gospel” which establish a tight linkage between a good deed and the retribution.

<sup>29</sup> Barton 1908: 181 and Crenshaw 1988: 178.

<sup>30</sup> Fox 1989: 274–275 also remembers a similar advice to be found in the Wisdom of Ptahhotep about sharing his own wealth with others to be helped in time of disaster.

<sup>31</sup> Crenshaw 1988: 178–179.

<sup>32</sup> Uehlinger 1997: 225.

not disinterested friendship of two or three person for getting a profit and overcoming any danger or trouble (Qo 4,9–12) or to cast a cold eye on the misfortunes of the oppressed (Qo 4,1–3).<sup>33</sup> It is unclear, as Mark R. Sneed<sup>34</sup> remarked, if that observation aimed at showing more the injustices of the powerful than a genuine concern for the oppressed. Qohelet seemed more worried of the injustices undone to members of his own or higher class (e.g. Qo 6:1–6). At this juncture no scholar who support this hypothesis has never noticed the *exemplum* of liberality set by Salomon (1Kgs 5,1–5) and Nehemiah (Neh 5,18). Both of them hosted guests belonging to the members of the aristocracy or to the bureaucracy. Nehemiah boasts to have hosted at his table a group of officials and to have provided them, and at his own expenses with some good food. Did Qohelet dream the same, as a seemingly member of the affluent class?<sup>35</sup>

- b) A second proposal explored the possibility that Qo 11,1a was a sort of paradoxal teaching.<sup>36</sup> By means of it Qohelet would like to prepare the hearers to the absurdity of human life and to the impossibility to preview the future: accordingly an absurd behaviour may bring a good outcome, as the following verse (Qo 11,2) would confirm.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, everyone must be ready to cope with all eventualities, given their ignorance about the future and their incapacity to change the events. The only thing man can do is to adapt themselves in face of the several possibilities that life proposes them without worrying of the wisdom.<sup>38</sup> That solution seems improbable, as Qohelet always declares to have acted with wisdom. His solution would make Qo 11,1 closer to a Buddhist *koan* which aimed at putting men before an hard truth and at overcoming it.<sup>39</sup> The problem lays in the human ignorance upon the future and the times that God has set for, as already Podechard pointed out.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>33</sup> See Pinker 2009: 624.

<sup>34</sup> Sneed 2000: 150.

<sup>35</sup> De Jong 1994.

<sup>36</sup> Fox 1989: 273.

<sup>37</sup> Vilchez Lindez 1994: 388–389. See already Hertzberg 1932: 200 and Lavoie 1997: 88.

<sup>38</sup> Fox 1989: 273.

<sup>39</sup> For this aspect, see Lavoie 2013: 118 n. 140.

<sup>40</sup> Podechard 1912: 198.

- c) Being unsatisfied with the previous solutions, A. Pinker assumed that in an early stage of the transmission of the text, the *Urtext* of Qohelet 11,1a would have run as follows: “Whisper your dream upon the water, yea in many seas you will find it.” Accordingly Qo 11,1a would have continued the maxims about the dreams and about the relation with the rulers being in Qo 10,20. Uneasy with its teaching, a pious scribe gave to the text its actual form<sup>41</sup> thanks two simples moves: a) a change of place between *shin* and *lamed* to read *lāḥaš* instead of *šālah* and b) the substitution of the vowels in order to read *yāmmîm* “seas” instead of *yamîm* “days.” Although the hypothesis is clever and is well argued, it unfortunately lacks of the support of any textual witness<sup>42</sup> and it does not take into account the overall structure of the unit.
- d) Not less puzzling is M.H. Homan’s proposal to refer the verse to the fabrication of the beer also through the help of some Akkadian parallels.<sup>43</sup> Qohelet would have recommended both the production of beer by throwing bread into the waters and its consumption in perilous times.<sup>44</sup> Shields<sup>45</sup> has underlined the frailty of this hypothesis both on the Akkadian ground—brewing needed other recipients besides of the bread—or on the biblical one. As matter of fact, there is no trace of beer in Israel and in the Bible!
- e) Since the beginning of the past century, it has widely assumed that Qo 11,1a refers to the overseas trading.<sup>46</sup> This assumption has found its way in the works of R. Gordis,<sup>47</sup> J.L. Crenshaw,<sup>48</sup> T. Longman,<sup>49</sup> R.

<sup>41</sup> Pinker 2009.

<sup>42</sup> This kind of solution had a forerunner in F. Zimmerman’s hypothesis that the book of Qohelet would have been translated into Hebrew from an original Aramaic. Zimmerman assumed that the odd use of šlh and lhm betrayed the translator’s failure to properly understand the Aramaic verb *pāras* “to spread out” (*i.e.* the sails) or “to break.” The translator assumed the latter meaning, instead of rendering: “Set your sail upon the waters.” This solution too does not find support in the text and it provides a more obscure explanation (Whitley 1989: 92–93).

<sup>43</sup> Hoeman 2002: 275.

<sup>44</sup> Weeks (2012: 95) remarks the improbability of such an explanation.

<sup>45</sup> Shields 2005: 224–225.

<sup>46</sup> See Barton 1908: 181–182. Barton listed *i.a.* J.D. Michaelis, J.-Ch. Döderlein, F. Hitzig, F. Delitzsch, J. Renan G. Wildeboer, P. Haupt and A.H. McNeile

<sup>47</sup> Gordis 1988: 331–332.

<sup>48</sup> Crenshaw 1988: 176.

<sup>49</sup> Longman 1998: 256.

Murphy.<sup>50</sup> Almost all these interpreters rightly propose to read the v. 1 and v. 2 together, as expressing Qohelet's line of thought. As they stem from the same Qohelet, Qo 11,1a and Qo 11,1b cannot be popular sayings which he commented in v. 1b and 2b with a *ki explicativum* or *adversativum*.<sup>51</sup> In such a case, the quotations would have been composed of a stich alone and their conclusions would have been left to the imagination of the reader. Against this rhetorical background, scholars have read the advice of v.2a to divide the bread in seven or eight part<sup>52</sup>—a numeric parallelism being found only in Micah 5,4<sup>53</sup>—as an invitation to diversify the financial assets<sup>54</sup> in prevision of a future evil or as an invitation to engage in the maritime trade.<sup>55</sup> Qohelet 11,1–2 would call to go ahead and engage in this venture. The Hebrew *lehem*, translated as bread, thus, stands for any kind of commodity of trade, whence a gain may flow back to them in spite of the risks. All the scholars have been satisfied with a banalization of the teaching that is expressed in the following terms: “Do not put all the eggs in the same basket.” Given the uncertainty about the future, Qohelet would simply advice to diversify the investments. Pinker has arranged the most full-fledged critics to that hypothesis through fifteen (!) points. If it is true, on one hand that *lehem* never means “goods,” but “bread” or “food,” that the verse never speaks explicitly speak of ships and that Qohelet's main interest is the agriculture, on the other one Pinker seems to belittle the economic and historical data of the Hellenistic Age and of the Ptolemaic Period in Judah. As we will see below, grain became from the Achaemenid Period onwards a source of exportations and the Phoenician merchants seem to have played a certain role in it. Finally,

<sup>50</sup> Murphy 1992:106.

<sup>51</sup> See Michel 1988: 208. The presence of the imperative makes this choice preferable to the idea of a *ki adversative* (though) defended by Herzberg 2001 and Laura 1978.

<sup>52</sup> *hēleq* is one of the favourite terms in Qohelet's reflections to describe what belongs to men, but here the word just means “part” (see Pinker 2009: 624). Di Fonzo 1967: 304 remarks that the Fathers of the Church gave to this statement a typological interpretation: the charity done in the present life (the number seven would refer to the earthly life) would have been awarded in the future life to which the number eight points to.

<sup>53</sup> The messianic King will fight with success an Assyrian invasion with “seven shepherds and eight chiefs of men” who eventually will rule the lands of Assur and Nimrod. About this numeric parallelism, see Di Fonzo 1968: 303–304.

<sup>54</sup> See for instance Hubbard 1994: 341–349.

<sup>55</sup> Longman 1998: 256.

the textual and rhetorical situation of the unit clearly favours another solution.

- f) I would like to put forth my own solution that combines the idea of the overseas trade with the liberality. As far as the maritime trade is concerned, we cannot belittle two biblical allusions. The first refers to Is 18,2 where it is said that the Egypt “sends ambassadors on the Nile and in vessels of papyrus on the waters” (*haššōlēaḥ bayyām sîrîm ûbiklē-gōme ‘al-penê-mayîm*).<sup>56</sup> The second evokes the vivid description of the tireless *’ēšethaḥayîl* in Prov 31.<sup>57</sup> According to Prov. 31:14 the woman “is like the merchant ships, bringing her bread/food from afar.” It is uncertain if the author had in mind the trading enterprises of Salomon<sup>58</sup> or what Ezekiel wrote about the Phoenician town of Tyros, but this uncertainty does not change the reference to the sea trade. As matter of fact, since the V century B.C.E. onwards the inlands of Syria and Palestine started to export grain towards Greece and this trend became faster and soaring during the III century B.C.E. thanks to the safer commercial routes and the stable prices.<sup>59</sup> Although there were only two true harbours, that is to say Jaffa and Akko, the Phoenician cities were not far at all and it is not blatant to suppose that Qohelet visited them.<sup>60</sup> The reason of this undisputable maritime setting could be unveiled by an idea of N. Löhfnik<sup>61</sup> who suggested to explain Qo 11,1–2 against the background of the evergetism well known in the Hellenistic World. The kings, the rulers and the private citizens often helped the cities of the Continental Greece struck by famines, wars or natural havocs by means of grain supplies and on return they get several kind of honours. I wonder if the echo of such a practise would have also reached also the region of Coelesyria and the far Judah. Two concrete examples belonging to the kingdom of Ptolemy II could have

<sup>56</sup> See Crenshaw 1988:178–189. As concerning Is 18,2, Kaiser (1980: 92) labelled the verse as an ideal and unhistorical scene.

<sup>57</sup> As Ben Zvi 2015: 27–51 has recently pointed out, Prov. 31 seemingly refers to the late Achaemenid and early Hellenistic time.

<sup>58</sup> There is here another possible allusion to the Salmonid fleet coming back after a long while with exotic animals and metals.

<sup>59</sup> Hengel 1974: 32–57; 41–42.

<sup>60</sup> See Bellia 2001.

<sup>61</sup> Löhfnik 1997: 132.

inspired Qohelet's verse: this king sent in 248 B.C.E. a fleet of sumptuary navies to help the island of Delos struck by a devastating earthquake, whereas in 238 B.C.E., as the decree of Canopus stated, he imported grain from Syria, Cyprus and Trace<sup>62</sup> to fight the famine that struck the Egypt because a scarce flow of the Nile. According to K. Buraselis,<sup>63</sup> Ptolemy III received the title of Evergetes just between these two momentous events. It is self-evident that both of them could be labelled, in Qohelet's terms, as a *ra 'a*, that is to say the evil looming in the future. Bearing this possibility in mind, Qohelet would advise to exploit such a situation and to send onto the sea the food/the grain—stored before a crisis. What sort of outcome would come from this situation? For Qoheleth no kind of memory survives beyond the death. Have we to suppose that the key word could be *hēleq*, namely “the portion” that everyone can share as their own? The word has a mixed value in Qohelet's reflection: it embraces all that of good or bad, the man could enjoy in this very world, although there is no certainty about enjoying, getting, keeping it. In our case the summon to divide it assures the reference to the material possessions (Qo 2,21) that God let the man enjoy (Qo 3,22; 9,9).

As far as the second halves of Qo 11,1 and Qo 10,2 are concerned, they present an epistemological reflection about the “finding” and the “knowing not” which is at the heart of Qohelet's thought. The verb *māṣā* “to find” (16 x) reports a positive or negative data gained through a personal experience,<sup>64</sup> whereas the verb *yāda* “to know,” built with the negative particle *ʿen* and the participle or preceded by the negation *lō* states the human ignorance about the future or about the action of God.<sup>65</sup> This is one of the main and recurring themes of the section. As we have said above, another mark of Qohelet's thought is

<sup>62</sup> The decree of Canopus stresses Ptolemy III's care for his subjects during the famine. Besides of remitting taxes “they took care for importation of Corn into Egypt from the Eastern Rutennu (that's to say Canaan), from the land Kafatha, from the island Nabinaitt, which lies in the midst of the Great Sea, and from many other lands, since they expended much white gold for the purchase thereof. They transported the importation of provisions, to save those living in the land of Egypt, that these might know their goodness for ever...” (for this translation, see Birch 1878: 84 ll. 8–9).

<sup>63</sup> Buraselis 2013: 97–107; 101–102. About the relationship between the Hellenistic evergetism and the supplies of grain for Greece, see Moretti 1990: 319–422.

<sup>64</sup> Mazzinghi 2001: 176–187.

<sup>65</sup> Gorseen 1970: 282–324 and Piotti 2012: 92–93.

the presence of the word *rā'ā*. As to the psychological sphere it describes the pain for leaving the richness to someone who did not deserve (Qo 2,21) or whom did not do anything to create them (Qo 6,1–2) or a mishap of a father who condemns to the misery his son (Qo 5,12). In the psychological and moral world, it points at the destiny of death awaits the good and the bad men (Qo 9,5) on the earth (Qo 8,16). After having expounded these two verses, we can conclude that Qo 11,1–2 advises men to risk and to work. There is a hope for a profit, but a measure of caution due the human situation is always needed.

### Qo 11,3–4

The vv. 3–4 suddenly changes the setting, as the elements of nature come on the forefront. Gordis<sup>66</sup> pointed out the presence of a chiasmic structure, as these verses are arranged according the structure “clouds-falling tree-wind-clouds.” In point of fact, the clouds (*'ābîm*) stand at the beginning of the v 3 and at the end of the v. 4. In v. 3b the fallen tree works as the subject of the conditional sentence and closes it. It is also worth of noticing how the v. 3 is built upon two conditional phrases: the natural world provides the protasis, whereas the results of the actions are the apodosis. In the protasis Qohelet draws the attention of the reader on the clouds close to bring the rain. Nevertheless Qohelet does not use the word *'ānān* to which the Bible gives a deepest religious meaning, but the less common *'ab* at the plural *'ābîm*.<sup>67</sup> That latter word is to be found especially in the book of Job (Job 37, 1–30) where God celebrates both his power on the clouds, the rain and the blizzard<sup>68</sup> and he stresses Job's ignorance about how nature works. Qohelet lacks of any reference to the divine activity, but he simply refers to the human experience: it can consider the fall of the rain from the heavy clouds as a part of the unavoidable law fixed by God but

<sup>66</sup> Gordis 1968: 332.

<sup>67</sup> The noun *'ānān* to be found 87 times in Old Testament is late and has a strong theological and religious overtone. On the contrary, the plural *'ābîm* occurs 30 times and in spite of its poetical flavour, it mainly deals with meteorology.

<sup>68</sup> Garbini 1995: 85–91.

unknown to the manhood.<sup>69</sup> Accordingly, it is a waste of time watching the clouds, as they will give rain at the fixed time according a relationship of cause and effect unknown to the man.<sup>70</sup>

The second stich of v. 3 strengthens this argument through another *exemplum* from the natural world and linked to a cause-effect relationship. Accordingly, the fallen tree is neither the tree being in some cultures and ancient cosmologies as the axis of “Tree of the World,”<sup>71</sup> nor is a rod used as a divinatory mean.<sup>72</sup> It is just a tree: the falling down is probably due to the force of the wind blowing everywhere, as the merismus south-north so close to the turn of the wind in Qo 1,6, suggest and it comes out of the human power.

This situation makes it unuseful to watch over the wind and the clouds without doing anything else. In my opinion, the reference to the wind in the v. 4 has a multifarious meaning: no only it recalls Qohelet’s negative judgements about the human toil which he labels a “chasing the wind” or “hearing the wind” (Qo 1,14; 2,11.17.25; 4,4; 6,9), but also aims at the following verse.

## Qo 11.5

This verse represents a transition subunit which works as a bridge between the previous and the following ones. In point of fact *rûah* let Qohelet recall in the v. 4 the hidden action of the wind in the falling of the tree, the v. 5 faces us with an interpretative *crux* as to the meaning of ruah and the rest of the verse. The first solution is to give to *rûah* the simple meaning of wind and to explain the preposition *kaf* as a way to

<sup>69</sup> The clouds also stand in Qo 12 as an unavoidable sign of death.

<sup>70</sup> Whitwell 2009, 181–197 thinks on the contrary of the randomness of the nature.

<sup>71</sup> Kruger 2004: 191–194.

<sup>72</sup> Some Jewish interpreters (for instance S.D. Luzzato quoted by Lattes 1980: 125) and the same Crenshaw find here an allusion to a divinatory practise. Crenshaw 1988: 179 refers to Hos 4,12 which reads: “my people inquire with a rod.” Nevertheless, it is unclear if Hosea is thinking of divinatory tecnics as it does not use *matteh* (which has a magic meaning as far as Moses and Aaron are concerned), but the more general *maqêl*. Others scholars refer Hosea’s verse to the cult of Asherah. In any case, *eš* does not have a divinatory meaning, as at his time we do know very little about the Canaanite religion or popular religion.

strengthen the first comparison: just as (you do not know the bones of the pregnant woman), keeping the seemingly *lectio difficilior* of the Masoretic Text. The second solution is to translate *rûah* as it meant “the breath of life” and to read the preposition *beth* instead of *kaf*, as did many ancient versions and modern interpreters. Qohelet would stress that he as man does not know the path of the breath of life inside the bones (foetus) of the pregnant woman. The human ignorance about these natural phenomena is underlined by an ascending parallelism built upon the prepositions *ka’ašer* “as” and *kākā* “so.” By the way Qohelet is keenly interested of the process of human generation,<sup>73</sup> as the desperate reflection of Qo 6,3–6 about the fate of the abort to be preferred to that of the man unable to enjoy his richness. A handful of biblical texts deal with this topic. For instance, Ps 139,13–15 praises God for having wondrously created the man in mothers’ womb like a precious dress.<sup>74</sup> On the contrary Job 10, 8–22 mourns to have been created by God only to be swept out and accordingly he envies the fate of the unborn. In this debate Qohelet seems to stand halfway: on one side he shares what we could define the common biblical knowledge about the process of the human generation,<sup>75</sup> but he only stresses the human ignorance about how the process really works.<sup>76</sup> Accordingly, Qohelet does not join to the praise for the creation, but he plainly states the human ignorance in front of God’s deed (*ma’ašeh ’elohîm*). That expression has as subject almost always the man (16 times out of 21) who cannot find out either all the deeds of God 21 times (Qo 8,17) or can simply look at them without any change (Qo 7,13).<sup>77</sup> We wonder if the mysterious work of God could hide the global vision about the right time for every deed that escapes from the human mind and that Qohelet calls ‘ôlām in 3,15.

<sup>73</sup> See Sauneron 1960: 19–27 for the Egyptian ideas about the human generation. According to some Egyptian text coming from the Persian Period and close to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers, the bones were the seat of the masculine semen.

<sup>74</sup> Ravasi 1998: 325–326.

<sup>75</sup> Tosato 2001: 160–164.

<sup>76</sup> Ravasi (1998: 326) thinks that *rûah* could refer to the creation of man told in Genesis 1–2.

<sup>77</sup> Gorssen 1970: 282–324; Mazzinghi 2001: 411–412; Piotti 2012: 91–92.

**Qo 11,6**

The v. 6 plays the role of a general synthesis that underlines the need for the action. Once again the imperatives set the call to the action. The merism “morning-evening” serves to encompass all the day, although the preposition *kî* followed by a negation highlights the ignorance about the final outcome. The first imperative calls again to sowing,<sup>78</sup> a work usually done between October and November and once again between December and February, whereas the second imperative invites to refrain not from the work.<sup>79</sup> In spite of that tireless activity, nobody knows which of the two seed will fructify.<sup>80</sup> At this juncture it becomes evident the encounter and the conflict with the classical wisdom. As Frydrych<sup>81</sup> has remarked, the classical wisdom of the Proverbs and that of Qohelet agreed on the role of the wisdom to achieve a good life and they stressed the earthly horizon of the human life. Nevertheless, their ways parted first on the value given to experience. The book of Proverbs greatly esteemed the collective one, whereas in Qohelet’s opinion only the individual experience counts. Moreover, they also parted as concerning the ethics. Proverbs’ teaching takes together God’s rule and justice with human experience, whereas Qohelet does not show to have an ethics of his own. As concerning the work, it is worth noticing as the book of the Proverbs praises the toilsome man, compares him with an industrious ant and is sure that he will be rewarded. On the contrary the lazy one<sup>82</sup> is ridiculed and lashed. Qohelet does not share such a conviction. In his vision the man does not know anything about the death, the future and God’s work, and

<sup>78</sup> The ancient Jewish exegesis explained the verb *zāra* ‘ and the noun *zera* ‘ as an erotic allusion and as a reference to the begetting of children (S.D. Luzzato). Although other units of the work show such an interest (see the Salomonic fiction in Qo 2 and to the thousand sons in 6,21), Qo 11,5 clearly deals with the sowing.

<sup>79</sup> For some attempts of a comparison with the Chinese Wisdom tradition, see Lavoie 2013: 118 n. 140.

<sup>80</sup> See Di Fonzo 1968: 309 for a parallel with the Parable of the Talents (Mt 25,18.25). See also Glaeson 1983: 43–48 for an application to Wesley’s predication.

<sup>81</sup> See Frydrych 2002.

<sup>82</sup> Simian Yofre 1999: 138–145; Cimosà 2003: 30–36.

also the so called *'ólām* set by God for human deeds is beyond his power. Accordingly, the outcome of his work is relativized and it is limited to the only time which is into the power of the man that's to say the present.<sup>83</sup> In the present the man can work and take its part of joy, this is the only man's part in his life under the sun.

### **A WAGER ON BEHALF OF THE ACTION.**

### **A THEOLOGICAL CONCLUSION.**

At the end of paper let us explore which could be the theological implications of Qo 11,1–6 for the contemporary readers. Our paper has already shown how this unit does not herald any prosperity gospel and how its message is by far subtler than the standard explanations. In my opinion, a way for keeping the call for the action, the acknowledgement of the human ignorance and the stress on mysterious divine action together could be found in Blaise Pascal's argument of the wager.<sup>84</sup> As it is well known, Pascal made use of this argument in order to overcome man's uncertainties about the existence of God.<sup>85</sup> According to him, the wager was not optional, but it was necessary, as man's fate in present lifetime and in the eternity depended from accepting or refusing it. As far as I see, the same idea could be applied *mutatis mutandis* to Qohelet 11,1–2,26. As matter of fact, the Preacher calls the man to work tirelessly, although lacking of any certainty about the final outcome and knowing not the divine will. In Qohelet's eyes, that uncertainty cannot lead the man to an endless search for information in order to achieve a sure success. Being the human knowledge limited to the

<sup>83</sup> See the excellent work of Schellenberg 2002.

<sup>84</sup> On Pascal's though, see Cole 1995. Murphy 1955: draws a comparison between Qohelet and Pascal almost as far as the structure is concerned.

<sup>85</sup> The *Pensees* of Pascal hold some references to Qohelet, which was the favourite book of the skeptics and of the philosophers of his time. The fragment 389, to be read against the background of human *misere*, reads as follows: "Ecclesiastes shows that man without God is in total ignorance and inevitable misery. For it is wretched to have the wish, but not the power. Now he would be happy and assured of some truth, and yet he can neither know, nor desire not to know. He cannot even doubt." There is also a paraphrase of Qo 3,10.16 in a polemical fragment against the denier of the immortality of the souls (on the subject see again Cole 1995: 213).

mere experience and far from getting the *'ôlām* that is to say the right but mysterious time fixed by God for each action, this search will ultimately lead him to a sort of paralysis. The only thing the man can hope is that his work will match that *'ôlām* and that he will enjoy the part of its work. This eventually prompts some of the saddest reflections on human life. Qohelet's invitation could sound quite ironic in our contemporary world where our life often hangs on a flood of information that raise anxiety or fear and make us unable to live or to accomplish our work. In such a way, Qohelet's words appear both a tribute to a sound "ignorance" and a call for using our talents at the best, even to venture into risky enterprises as sending food overseas, without worrying about the future outcome. This idea relativizes the value of the work and stands against the danger of becoming workaholics that the so called Solomonic fiction of Qo 1,12–2,26 highlighted so well. Such a reflection also hits our contemporary image of the work which many see as a sort of idol to which an entire life can be sacrificed, without taking care of the family and the holydays. As God really is the ultimate maker of all, the tireless human work can only hope that the wager on the right *'ôlām* be the right one and that he can enjoy his part. Otherwise, the work will become a source of alienation and pain, as it will not match all of the efforts done and it will not give any gain. Eventually, it will reveal itself as another side of the *hebel* judgement on the reality. As J.-J. Lavoie<sup>86</sup> remarked, even in this unit Qohelet reveals himself once again as "l'avocat de notre dur metier: celui de vivre".

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<sup>86</sup> Lavoie 1995: 103.

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