

Reflections on Injustice (vv. 16-22)

VERSE 16 Furthermore, I have seen under the sun *that* in the place of justice

there is wickedness and in the place of righteousness there is wickedness (הַרְשָׁעָה)

וְעוֹד רָאִיתִי תַחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ מְקוֹם הַמִּשְׁפָּט שָׁמָּה הַרְשָׁעָה וּמְקוֹם הַצְדָּקָה שָׁמָּה [waw

w/part. udh return + Qal perf.1s. ra-ah see + part tachath under + d.a.w/noun both s.abs.

shemesh sun + noun m.s.constr. maqom place + d.a.w/noun m.s.abs. mishpat justice + adv

sham there + d.a.w/noun m.s.abs. resha wrong, wickedness + waw w/noun m.s.constr. maqom

place + d.a.w/noun m.s.abs. tsadeq rightness + adv sham there + d.a.w/noun m.s.abs. resha

wickedness]).

VERSE 17 I said to myself, "God will judge both the righteous man and the

wicked man," for a time for every matter and for every deed is there (הַמַּעֲשֵׂה שָׁם)

אָמַרְתִּי אָנִי בְּלִבִּי אֶת־הַצְדִּיק וְאֶת־הַרְשָׁע וְשֹׁפֵט הָאֱלֹהִים כִּי־עַתָּה לְכָל־חַפְצֵי וְעַל כָּל

[Qal perf.1s. amar say + pro.1s. ani + prep beth w/noun m.s.constr.w/1s.suff. leb heart + d.o. +

d.a.w/adj.m.s.abs. tsadiq righteous + waw w/d.o. + d.a.w/adj.m.s.abs. rasha wicked + Qal

impf.3m.s. shaphat judge + d.a.w/noun m.p.abs. Elohim + part. ki for + d.o. + prep lamed

w/noun m.s.constr. kol every + noun m.s.abs. chephets delight; "matter" + prep al above +

noun m.s.constr. kol every + d.a.w/noun m.s.abs. ma-asheh deed + adv sham there]).

VERSE 18 I said to myself concerning the sons of men, "God has surely tested

them in order for them to see that they are but beasts (שֶׁהֵם־בְּהֵמָה הַמָּוֶה לָהֶם)

אָמַרְתִּי אָנִי בְּלִבִּי עַל־דְּבַרְת בְּנֵי הָאָדָם לְבָרָם הָאֱלֹהִים וְלִרְאוֹת [Qal perf.1s. amar

say + pro.1s. ani + prep beth w/noun m.s.constr.w/1s.suff. leb + prep al “concerning” + noun

f.s.constr. dibbereth words + noun m.p.constr. ben + d.a.w/noun m.s.abs. adam + prep lamed

w/Qal infin.constr.w/3m.s.suff. barar to test or prove + d.a.w/noun m.s.abs. Elohim + waw

w/prep lamed w/Qal infin.constr. ra-ah see + rel.prefix w/pro.3m.s hem them + noun f.s.abs.

behemah beast, animal, cattle + pro.3m.p. hem they + prep lamed w/3m.p.suff.]”

VERSE 19 For the fate of the sons of men and the fate of beasts is the same (לָהֶם לְ

אָחַד כִּי מִקְרָה בְּנֵי־הָאָדָם וּמִקְרָה הַבְּהֵמָה וּמִקְרָה אֶחָד [conj. ki for + noun m.s.abs. miqreh

fate + noun m.p.constr. ben + d.a.w/noun m.s.abs. adam + waw w/noun m.s.abs. miqreh +

d.a.w/noun f.s.abs. behemah beast + waw w/noun f.s.abs. miqreh fate + adj.m.s.abs. eched one

“the same” + prep. lamed w/3m.p.suff.]”

As one dies so dies the other; indeed, they all have the same breath and there is

no advantage for man over beast, for all is vanity [מִן־הַבְּהֵמָה אֵין אֵין כִּי הַכֹּל הֶבֶל]

כְּמוֹת זֶה כִּן מוֹת זֶה וְרוּחַ אֶחָד לְכֹל וּמוֹתָר הָאָדָם [prep ki as w/noun m.s.constr.

maweth death + adj.m.s.abs. zeh this; “one” + adv ken so + noun m.s.constr. maweth death +

adj.m.s.abs. zeh + waw wnoun both s.abs. ruach breath + adj.m.s.abs. echad one + d.a.w/prep

lamed w/noun m.s.abs. kol all + waw w/noun m.s.constr. mothar advantage + d.a.w/noun

m.s.abs. adam + prep min from + d.a.w/noun f.s.abs. behemah beast + adv ayin no + part ki for

+ d.a.w/noun m.s.abs. kol all + noun m.s.abs. hebel vanity]).

VERSE 20 All go to the same place (הַכֹּל הוֹלֵךְ אֶל־מָקוֹם אֶחָד) [d.a.w/noun m.s.abs.

kol all + Qal part.m.s.abs. halaq walk; “go” + prep el to + noun m.s.abs. makom place + adj.m.s.abs. echad one; “same”]).

All came from the dust and all return to the dust (מִן־הָעֶפֶר וְהַכֹּל שָׁב אֶל־הָעֶפֶר)

הַכֹּל הָיָה [d.a.w/noun m.s.abs. kol all + Qal perf.3m.s. hayah “came” + prep min from +

d.a.w/noun m.s.abs. apha dust + waw w/d.a.w/noun m.s.abs. kol + Qal part.m.s.abs. shubh return + prep el to + d.a.w/noun m.s.abs. apha dust]).

VERSE 21 Who knows that the breath of man ascends upward and the breath of

the beast descends downward to the earth (הַבְּהֵמָה הַיֹּרֶדֶת הִיא לְמַטָּה לְאָרֶץ)

מִי יוֹדֵעַ רוּחַ בְּנֵי הָאָדָם הָעֹלָה הִיא לְמַעְלָה וְרוּחַ

[interrog. mi who? + Qal

part.m.s.abs. yada know + noun both s.abs. ruach spirit, breath + noun m.p.constr. ben sons +

d.a.w/noun m.s.abs. adam + d.a.w/Qal part.f.s.abs. alah ascend + pro.3f.s. it + prep lamed

w/adv. ma-al upward + waw w/noun both s.abs. ruach breath + d.a.w/noun f.s.abs. behemah

beast + d.a.w/Qal part.f.s.abs. yaradh descend + pro.3f.s. it + prep lamed w/adv mattah below;

“downward” + d.a.w/prep lamed w/noun both s.abs. eretz earth])?

VERSE 22 I have seen that nothing is better than that man should be happy in his activities, for that is his lot (יִשְׂמַח הָאָדָם בְּמַעֲשָׁיו כִּי־הוּא חֶלְקוֹ כִּי־הוּא חֶלְקוֹ)

וְרָאִיתִי כִּי אֵין טוֹב מֵאֲשֶׁר [waw w/Qal perf.1s. ra-ah see + part ki that + adv ayin nothing + adj.m.s.abs. tob “better” + prep min from w/rel.pro. asher “than that” + Qal impf.3m.s. samach be happy + d.a.w/noun m.s.abs. adam + prep beth w/noun m.p.constr.w/3m.s.suff. ma-asheh work; “activities” + part ki for + pro.3m.s.s hu his + noun m.s.constr.w/3m.s.suff. cheleq part; “lot”]).

For who will bring him to see what will occur after him (לְרִאוֹת בְּמָה שִׁיְהִיָּה אַחֲרָיו)

כִּי מִי יְבִיאֵנּוּ [part ki for + interrog. mi who? + Hiphil imperf.3m.s.w/3m.s.suff. bo bring+ prep lamed w/Qal infin.constr. ra-ah see + prep beth w/interrog. mah what? + rel.w/Qal impf.3m.s. hayah + adv.w/3f.s.suff. achar after]?)

ANALYSIS: VERSES 16-22

1. Verse 16 introduces an new train of thought introduced by the formula “Furthermore I have seen/observed.”
2. The writer shifts his attention to the issue of justice.
3. He states the issue of the paucity of justice in the world.
4. Here is yet another observation that supports his thesis that the present world is without profit and meaning.
5. He reports that he sees injustice in the place where you would expect justice—the law court.
6. Innocence and guilt are too often confused.
7. This opening verse is structured in poetic parallelism.
8. A single word is differentiates the two lines of the verse.
9. The verse reads: “Furthermore, I observed under the sin:
 “The place of judgment—injustice was there!”
 “The place of righteousness—injustice was there!”
10. The variant of the word (judgment and righteousness), and the abruptness of the Hebrew, confer a sense of outrage.
11. “The place” is the law court where the innocent should be declared innocent, and the guilty should be declared guilty.
12. Verse 17 begins with the expression “I said to myself” typical of the author’s reflections (1:16; 2:11).

13. Having addressed the widespread injustice found in human law courts, he ponders how all the injustice in the world can be set right.
14. Solomon draws upon what he was taught growing up in Israel (v. 17).
15. And that was that even though the miscarriage of justice was widespread, that divine justice would eventually set things right.
16. He doesn't tell us the how, or the when of the divine reckoning, only that it will transpire.
17. The timing is expressed by the words "for a time for every matter (*chephets* delight) and for every deed there is."
18. Here the phrase alludes to 3:1 and is applied to the time of divine intervention and judgment.
19. Although God has such times set, his creatures can't know them which often leads to frustration.
20. The author however is a doubting wisdom teacher who struggles with this divine intervention to set things right.
21. This is brought out in the verses that follow.
22. His internal dialogue continues in verses 18-22.
23. The phrase "I said to myself" is repeated from v. 17.
24. The internal struggle is between two opposing ideas.
25. In verse 18 his mind reflects on death.
26. He is not making a blanket comparison between men and animals: he speaks of one common experience—death.
27. Death signals the end, nothing comes after.
28. What are we to make of "God has surely tested them (e.g. humans) to see that they are beasts."?
29. The verb *barar* (lamed w/Qal infin.constr.) has the meaning 'to purge' or 'to test.'
30. Here the test imposed on humans is to show then that they are just like beasts.
31. One gets the impression that God is malicious or a cosmic bully.
32. The so-called proof that is presented in v. 19 where there is "no advantage for man over beast" since "the fate of the sons of men and fate of beasts is the same. As one dies so dies the other."
33. I get the sense that Solomon rises to a place where there is a solution and then falls back into a dark humanistic mode.
34. This section certainly illustrates the view of one who views the world with all its ills and turns cynical.
35. Men and animals do have the same fate—death.
36. But to say that there is no advantage for one over based on a common ending fails to take into account divine revelation.
37. Yes, both men and animals return to the dust (v. 20), but this overlooks the living soul that resides in humans and not animals.
38. Yes, both quit breathing at death (v. 21), but humans have a living soul and this is clearly taught in the creation account of Gen. 2:7.
39. This verse reads: "The LORD God formed man out of the dust of the earth, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being/soul."
40. All the author allows for is the fate of the physical bodies of men and beasts (v. 20).
41. Verse 21 perhaps allows for a difference in the death of man versus beast.

42. The reference to “the breath [spirit] of man ascends upward and breath of the beast descends downward to the earth” as a question “Who knows?” opens the door to the possibility of an afterlife.
43. At this juncture in the author’s journey out of spiritual darkness, we have him not at all convinced of divine justice, and not adjusted to the doctrine of the afterlife.
44. He is sure that God has set everything in motion, and that there is a time for everything, but he views it all as meaningless.
45. He is uncertain about the afterlife.
46. He holds that death will probably render justice null and void.
47. And so, he returns to the philosophy of the relative value of enjoying the present (v. 22a).
48. This reflects the language of 2:24-26 and 3:12-14 and in anticipation of 5:18-20 and 8:15.
49. The rhetorical question at the end of verse 22 “For who will bring him to see what will occur after him?” again highlights the author’s doubts about the afterlife.
50. Some think the question has to do with his pondering of an earthly future but not likely.
51. He reflects someone who in his thinking is confused and double-souled.

Summary of this Chapter

1. In the first section of this chapter (vv. 1-15) the author expresses the truth that the world is well ordered.
2. There is a time for everything and God is aware of the times.
3. But what is at first edifying, is actually quite depressing and frustrating since humans are in the dark.
4. With the wisdom quest undermined, the author advises them to enjoy the simple pleasures of life.
5. God’s purpose is to frighten people.
6. In the second half of this chapter (vv. 16-22) the question of justice is raised.
7. Injustice reigns in the place where there ought to be justice.
8. He entertains the possibility that divine justice will put things right in the indeterminate future.
9. Then he overturns his argument by suggesting that death will render it all a moot point.
10. Since the fate of humans and animals might very well be the same, what is left for people to do?
11. The conclusion: humans might as well just pursue the pleasures of life.

END: Ecclesiastes Chapter Three
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