

## **ECCLESIASTES 7:25-29 AND THE FEMINIST HERMENEUTIC**

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The origins of feminist hermeneutics are not difficult to ascertain. Apart from the *Zeitgeist* of the late 20th century, that is, the larger social context of secular feminism and the expanding job market for women in academia and industry, modern Christian women are distressed by what appears to be misogyny in the male-dominated church. Propelled with a zeal to correct what they believe to be centuries of injustice, feminist interpreters have radically challenged traditional views in the role of women. They therefore reject the interpretations which assert that the husband is to rule in the home and that only men can serve as pastors.

The reasons for the conservative reaction to feminism, moreover, are equally clear. While it is certainly true that, as many feminists claim, some Christian men reject the assertions of feminism because of their insecurity, traditionalism and latent misogyny, this is by no means true in all or even in a majority of cases. Something else must account for the wide unwillingness of conservative Christians (both male and female) to embrace the claims of feminism. That factor is the fear of entering into disobedience to what appears to be plain teachings of the Bible (e.g., 1 Cor 14:34; Eph 5:22). Therefore, while the conservative would admit that a great deal which has entered our view of the roles of men and women is more traditional than based on the teachings of the Word of God, in certain fundamental areas the distinctions between the roles must be maintained because they were ordained in divine creation and reaffirmed with divine commands.

For the conservative, therefore, the issue focuses at the point of obedience to God and conformity to creation.

Feminists respond to this in two ways. Conservative Christian Feminism agrees that the teachings of the Bible are absolutely authoritative but assert that traditional interpretations of the relevant texts are incorrect. A variety of lexical and historical arguments that are brought are arrayed with a view towards asserting, for example, that "head" in Eph 5:22 has nothing to do with authority or leadership but indicates to the contrary the role of sustainer and companion. Hence these feminists assert that the Bible is authoritative but that, rightly interpreted, it does not support traditionally held concepts of male authority in home and church.<sup>2</sup>

Radical Christian feminists, on the contrary, assert that the realities of the historical situation of the Bible indicate the need for an entirely new hermeneutic. The Bible, they assert, itself reflects and is thoroughly permeated by the patriarchal misogynist viewpoint of the world from which it came. Far from trying to save the Bible from the accusation of misogyny, these feminists are the Bible's foremost prosecutors. Numerous biblical passages are cited in evidence of biblical misogyny (e.g., Rev 14:4). The only solution, they assert, is to transform the Bible by passing it through the grid of feminism (i.e., "a feminist reading"). Anything, which reflects biblical patriarchalism, is to be rejected or transformed.<sup>3</sup> In this approach, God is often referred to by the pronoun "she" and Jesus' use of the term "Father" for God is not taken as proof that we should speak of God in the masculine gender.<sup>4</sup>

E. S. Fiorenza, a major spokeswoman for the movement, says, "A feminist theological hermeneutics of the Bible that has as its canon the liberation of, women from sexist texts, structures, institutes, and internalized male values maintains that solely those traditions and texts of the Bible that transcend their patriarchal culture and time have the theological authority of revelation if the Bible should not continue to be a tool for the patriarchal oppression of women."<sup>5</sup> In developing

<sup>1</sup> See S. T. Foh, *Women and the Word of God: A Response to Biblical Feminism* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979) and J. B. Hurley, *Men and Women in Biblical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981).

<sup>2</sup> See P. Gundry, *Woman be Free!* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972) and E. Storkey, *What's Right with Feminism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985).

<sup>3</sup> Literature in this area is growing rapidly, but two useful collections of essays are L. M. Russell, ed., *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985) and R. R. Ruether, *Religion and Sexism* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974).

<sup>4</sup> E. S. Fiorenza, "Luke 2:41-52," *Int* 36 (1982) 403.

<sup>5</sup> E. S. Fiorenza, "Feminist Theology and New Testament Interpretation," *JSOT* 22 (1982) 43.

her paradigm for biblical interpretation, Fiorenza asserts that, first, the need for evaluation of biblical teaching and tradition by the standard of the rule of faith and the teaching of the church has always been recognized. Second, she says that the norm for interpreting the Bible cannot be found in the Bible itself but only in and through the "struggle for the liberation of women and all oppressed people."<sup>7</sup> Third, she says that "the insight that the Bible is not only a source of truth and revelation but also a source of violence and domination is basic for liberation theologies."<sup>8</sup> Therefore her model of biblical interpretation is not that it is eternal archetype but ever in process of being improved prototype.<sup>9</sup> M. A. Tolbert similarly asserts, "Feminist hermeneutics stands over against patriarchal hermeneutics, an advocacy for the male-oriented, hierarchically established present cultural power system."<sup>10</sup>

The purpose of this paper is to deal with a text which, at a casual reading, appears to be perhaps the most misogynous passage of all, Eccl 7:25-29. I deal with this text in order to challenge the feminist assertion that the Bible is by nature misogynist and therefore misguided. I will not in this paper address the arguments of conservative feminists. While I have not found many of their arguments persuasive, acknowledge their respect for biblical authority and do not consider their works to constitute a threat to the hermeneutics of biblical Christianity. The case is different, however, with the hermeneutics of radical feminism. The notion that the Bible has absorbed the cultural norms of its world to the degree that Christians of later generations may radically revise its teachings has chaotic consequences for any semblance of biblical authority. Indeed, my real purpose here is not to combat feminism (although I believe it obtains a number of serious problems) but to uphold the Bible's authority.

At this point we must turn to the offending text:

<sup>25</sup>"So I turned in my heart to know and seek and search out wisdom and reckoning, and to understand the evil of folly and the foolish behavior that is madness. <sup>26</sup>And I discover that more bitter than death is the woman who is a trap and whose heart is nets and whose hands are bonds; he who fears God escapes her but the sinner is trapped in her.

<sup>6</sup> E. S. Fiorenza, "Toward a Feminist Biblical Hermeneutics: Biblical Interpretation and Liberative Theology," *A Guide to Contemporary Hermeneutics* (ed. D. McKim; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) 377.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 378.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 379.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 379-80

<sup>10</sup> M. A. Tolbert, "Defining the Problem: The Bible and Feminist Hermeneutics," *Semeia* 28 (1983) 113.

<sup>27</sup>Listen, this is what I have found, says Qoheleth, by adding one thing to the other to discover understanding: <sup>28</sup>What my soul seeks I have not, found. I have found one man among a thousand, but a woman among all these I have not found. <sup>29</sup>But this I have found: God made humanity upright, but they have sought out many schemes.

The source of feminist irritation is not hard to find: Women appear to be described as human traps whose only goal is to ensnare men and make them miserable. More than that, their innate depravity seems worse than that which besets men. At least Qoheleth found one in a thousand men, but not a single woman. The feminist L. Swidler therefore asserts this passage to be "especially vitriolic and bitter."<sup>11</sup> He adds, "This would seem to fulfill the definition of misogynism, of woman-hating. The author then raises misogynism to the level of religious virtue: 'He who is pleasing to God eludes her, but the sinner is her captive' (Eccles 7:26)."<sup>12</sup> In the view of Qoheleth, Swindler asserts, "all women have been reduced to essential evil."<sup>13</sup>

Examination of the Hebrew text in no way lessens the impact of the verses. The dreadful woman of v 26 is said to be **מצודים** ("traps, from **צוד**, "to hunt") and **חרמים**, ("nets," which were used by both hunters and fishermen). Indeed, the woman here is compared unfavorably to the black, insatiable **מות** ("death"). One important consideration does arise from the Hebrew text, however, in v 29. As R. Gordis explains, the verse clearly does not mean that God made men upright but that women have sought out many devices, as if Qoheleth were saying that men are straightforward but women are cunning. Besides the fact that this interpretation contradicts v 28, the word **האדם** in v 29 means "humanity" and not "men."<sup>14</sup>

Scholars have dealt with this text in a variety of ways. W. C. Kaiser prefers to see the woman who is in view here not as a reference to women in general but as the "strange woman" of Proverbs 5-7, the antipathy of the personified Lady Wisdom of Proverbs 9.<sup>15</sup> But it is hard to escape the conclusion that Qoheleth has real women in mind here. H. C. Leupold, more boldly, asserts that the woman described here is a symbol for "heathen philosophy."<sup>16</sup> This interpretation is absolutely out of the question. M. A. Eaton is nearer the truth in

<sup>11</sup> Leonard Swidler, *Biblical Affirmations of Woman* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979) 128. Swindler identifies himself as a feminist on p. 11.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> R. Gordis, *Koheleth, The Man and his World: A Study in Ecclesiastes* (New York: Schocken, 1968) 285.

<sup>15</sup> W. C. Kaiser, Jr., *Ecclesiastes: Total Life* (Chicago: Moody, 1979) 88.

<sup>16</sup> H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1952) 173-75.

his assertion that Qoheleth is talking --about a particular kind of woman,"<sup>17</sup> but this does not solve the problem entirely. Qoheleth after all, seem to indicate that at least a tiny chance exists for finding a good man, but no chance exists for finding a decent woman (v 28). Several commentators have noted that Qoheleth's attitude toward women is considerably better in 9:9,<sup>18</sup> but this too does not entirely solve the problem here. G. A. Barton says that --Qoheleth is inveighing against bad women in the vein of Prov 5:4, 22-23; 7:22-23; 22:14."<sup>19</sup> But in all those texts the evil woman mentioned is an adulteress or prostitute. In Ecclesiastes 7 nothing indicates that adultery or prostitution is in view; indeed, the woman whose heart is a trap to a man can very well be his wife. J. A. Loader simply asserts that Qoheleth is taking up the typical wisdom theme of the dangerous woman.<sup>20</sup>

I should note, however, that none of the commentaries or interpretations I found regarded this passage as evidence of the moral or intellectual superiority of men. Even R. Wardlaw, a conservative Scotch scholar of the early 19th century, in no way uses this text to prove that women are innately more wicked or foolish than men.<sup>21</sup> The importance of this observation is that it throws into doubt the contention of feminists that the reason men have held on to these texts is that they enable them to suppress and feel superior to women. If no such bias is found in traditional Christian hermeneutics, it begs the question of whether a--feminist (or any other) reading" is not ad hoc and innately construed to skew the natural meaning of a text. The question of how this text is to be interpreted, however, remains to be addressed. Several factors emerge as probable control elements. First, one must note that Ecclesiastes often reflects an awareness of and dependence on the early chapters of Genesis. Eaton, building on the work of C. C. Forman and W. Zimmerli, details the evidence behind this assertion.<sup>22</sup> Evidence that Qoheleth builds his reflections on the early chapters of Genesis is conspicuous. Qoheleth's preoccupation with death (e.g., 3:18-22; 9:1-6) reflects more than his

<sup>17</sup> M. A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1983) 116.

<sup>18</sup> E.g., Gordis, *Koheleth*, 282.

<sup>19</sup> G. A. Barton, *The Book of Ecclesiastes* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1912), 147.

<sup>20</sup> J. A. Loader, *Polar Structures in the Book of Qohelet* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1979) 51.

<sup>21</sup> R. Wardlaw, *Exposition of Ecclesiastes* (1868; reprint ed.; Minneapolis: Klock and Klock, 1982) 244.,60.

<sup>22</sup> Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 46.

own gloominess and pessimism; it is derived from Gen 2:17 and the story of the fall in Genesis 3. In addition, Qoheleth is dismayed at how much of life is consumed by vexing labor and hardship (e.g., 2:18-23; 5:15-17). This surely reflects an awareness of the curse on man in Gen 3:17-19. Forman notes that Eccl 1:5-8 calls to mind the descriptions of the seasons in Gen 8:21f.<sup>23</sup> It often alludes to the inaccessibility of knowledge (e.g., 1:15-17; 8:16-17), an idea which builds upon both the forbidden nature of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil and on the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the presence of God. Indeed, the hiddenness of God is a major theme of Ecclesiastes (see 3:11; 8:17-9:1; 11:5). Eccl 3:19-20 all but directly quotes Gen 3:19c in referring to the idea that all are dust and all return to dust (see also Eccl 12:7). Compare also Gen 6:5-6 to Eccl 7:29; 8:11 and 9:3. Even the frequently repeated **הבל** ("vanity") appears to be a play on the name of Adam and Eve's lost son, **הבל** ("Abel").<sup>24</sup> This preoccupation with Genesis emerges in 7:26ff as well.

Another important consideration is that Ecclesiastes is intensely autobiographical and confessional. Throughout the book, Qoheleth repeatedly asserts his advice to be an out-growth of prolonged observing, searching, and investigating (e.g., Eccl 1:13, 16-17; 2:1; 3:16; 4:1; 4:7; 5:18; 6:1; 7:23-25; 8:9; 9:1; 10:5; 10:9-10). He often describes his personal history in great detail (e.g., chap. 2), and is brutally frank in describing his feelings in his observations of life (e.g., 4:2-3).<sup>25</sup>

Finally, we must note that Ecclesiastes was written from a man's perspective in the man's world (as it was in that day) of the courtly circle in which the two most important activities were the pursuit of wisdom and the exercise of political power. The wealth, power, and preoccupation with intellectual exploration evidenced in 1:12-18; 2:1-23; 5:8-17; 8:1-6; 10:1-7; and 12:9-12 all indicate a *Sitz im Leben* which, in the ancient world, would have excluded most (if not all) women. This may seem to prove that indeed the perspective of Ecclesiastes must be patriarchal and misogynist but a close inspection of the text reveals that this is not the case.

<sup>23</sup>C. C. Forman, "Qoheleth's Use of Genesis," *JSS* 5 (1960) 256-57.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, 257-58.

<sup>25</sup>The question of the date and authorship of Ecclesiastes is obviously significant here. I consider the traditional view that Solomon is the author to be considered stronger than has recently been recognized. If the book is Solomonic, his personal history could have bearing on the interpretation of this passage. But to avoid the appearance of having prejudiced the issue and in order to demonstrate that the interpretation here proposed is not dependent on Solomonic authorship, I speak of the author only as Qoheleth and rely only on internal evidence to support the points made concerning the *Sitz im Leben* of this text.

With this background in mind we can proceed to the interpretation of the text itself. In v 25 Qoheleth says that he was involved in a quest to understand the difference between wisdom and folly. This assertion is similar to those noted above and gives the reader no new information except that it reinforces the autobiographical nature of what follows. In v 26 he asserts, "And I discover (אִצְוֵי) that more bitter than death is the woman whose heart is traps. ..." The assertion that what he here describes is a "discovery" again indicates that he is speaking of his own experience and that of the group of men in his circle. He has discovered that either for himself or for his associates (probably both) women have been bitter traps and snares and sources of much grief and sorrow. In short, he has seen that for many men nothing gives them so much trouble and misery as the women with whom they associate. In this context no grounds exist for thinking that the women he has in mind are all prostitutes and adulteresses. The most natural assumption is that the women who have given these men the most trouble are those with whom they most frequently associate—their wives. He adds that he has observed that certain godly men have escaped this misery (but this does not necessarily mean that these men who "feared God" were not married!).

Qoheleth's understanding of this sad situation is determined not only by personal experience, however, but also by his reflection on the Genesis narrative. In the story of the fall the deceived woman gave the fruit to her husband and induced him to fall. Hence some see in Eve a pattern of woman as a trap and a source of deception.<sup>26</sup> With regard to the broken relationship between man and woman, however, the critical point in the Genesis narrative is not Eve's temptation of Adam. Indeed it is hardly correct to say that Eve tempted Adam. Gen 3:6 only says that she gave some of the fruit to her husband and he ate it. Even Adam, in blaming Eve for his fall and excusing himself, does not assert that he was deceived or tempted by her (v 12). Far more important with regard to the questions posed by Eccl 7:26 is the curse on the woman in Gen 3:16b: "Your desire shall be for your husband and he shall rule over you." .

This verse has been greatly misunderstood and abused in traditional theology.<sup>27</sup> First, "desire" here does not mean to desire sexually,

<sup>26</sup>The Targum on 7:29 refers to Eve's "seduction" of Adam. See E. Levine, *The Aramaic Version of Qoheleth* (New York: Sepher-Hermon, 1978) 40.

<sup>27</sup>For a good survey of interpreters' attempts to deal with this verse, see C. Westermann, *Genesis 1:11: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1974) 261-63. See also J. Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1910) 83.

as if the meaning were that woman is man's sexual slave.<sup>28</sup> The word translated "desire" (תְּשׁוּקָה) is used three times in the OT. In Cant 7:11 it does refer to sexual desire, that of a bridegroom for his bride, but there the word is in a context of joy and love, not in a context of sin and judgment.<sup>29</sup> As A. P. Ross has observed, a far more likely parallel to the use of the word in Gen 3:16 is in Gen 4:7, where the word refers to sin's desire to capture Cain. There, sin is pictured as crouching like a hunter prepared to spring upon its prey. The "desire" is a desire to master and consume.<sup>30</sup> Besides the fact that this use of the word is separated from Gen 3:16 by a mere 15 verses, the verbal parallel between the two occurrences is very strong.

3:16b

"To your husband will be your desire, but he will rule you."

וּאֵל אִישׁךָ תְּשׁוּקָתְךָ וְהוּא יִמְשָׁל בְּךָ

4:7b

"To you is its desire, but you must rule it."

וְאֵלֶיךָ תְּשׁוּקָתוֹ וְאַתָּה תִּמְשָׁל בּוֹ

With this unmistakable parallel, it is clear that the desire is not a sexual desire of love or devotion, but is desire to seize and control or consume. Note especially how in Gen 4:7 sin is "crouching at the door"; that is, it does not directly confront and do battle but has assumed a posture that reflects cunning and treachery. In the same way, the woman of Eccl 7:26 is a "net" or a "trap." Similarly, the "ruling" (מִשָּׁל) described in the two Genesis verses is not benevolent leadership but absolute domination without concern for the well-being for the one ruled (Cain is clearly not urged to become a benevolent lord over sin).

Therefore the meaning of the curse is clear. The woman is told that because of sin domestic life would become a center of conflict and struggle. Woman's situation will ever be one of trying to capture, manipulate, and consume her husband. Instead of being at one with him, she shall be at war with him. But it is a war which in the majority of cases she will lose. The curse indicates that she generally will be in a place of forced subordination and servitude. Her life will be made bitter and sorrowful. From human history, moreover, we can see that this curse has been tragically fulfilled. With the exception of a few

<sup>28</sup>Cf. the translation in E. A. Speiser, *Genesis* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 1964) 22: "your urge shall be for your husband."

<sup>29</sup>V. P. Hamilton, "תְּשׁוּקָה," *TWOT* 2.913.

<sup>30</sup>A. P. Ross, "The Daughters of Lot and the Daughter-in-Law of Judah: Hubris or Faith in the Struggle for Women's Rights" (paper delivered at the 1986 annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society) 10, n.2.

matriarchal cultures, woman's lot throughout world history has been one of unmitigated pain and sorrow. In addition to the frequent pregnancy and attendant pain and risk of health and life that has been the lot of most women (3:16a), the domestic and social life of women in most societies has been rigidly controlled and circumscribed. Not only has convention prevented the majority of women in human history from engaging in a full life in and outside the home, but domestic violence, neglect, and cruelty received from her husband and her husband's family have demoralized and made miserable the lives of many a woman in many cultures.

In this regard we must point out that Gen 3:16 is a curse and not a law. While it is correct, I believe, to assert that a man should be the moral leader of his home, this verse does not teach or prescribe a pattern of Christian behavior. Such a pattern is better seen in creation itself, where woman is taken from man and man has a precedence in the family, but a precedence that can be properly maintained only in the context of being under God and united in love with his wife. Paul speaks of the husband as the head; in contrast to recent attempts to deplete this term of all implication of authority, I believe the term must be understood in its Hebraic sense (ראש), a sense that implies leadership. But it is a leadership which is integrally concerned for the welfare of the wife; metaphorically described as the body. As the head must make the needs of its body preeminent, so the husband must make the needs of his wife preeminent (Eph 5:21-33).

But it is utterly false to treat Gen 3:16 as prescriptive law. It is a curse and a prophecy of the effects of sin in the domestic area; it is not a command. A woman who experiences a good pregnancy and relatively easy childbirth is not being disobedient to God's revealed will any more than is a man whose occupation does not take him out into the fields to contend with weeds and brambles-but as a matter of fact the curse of Gen 3:17-19 has been more than fulfilled in history since most men have led lives of bitter toil in the face of a hostile environment. Similarly, Gen 3:16 requires neither husbands to be harsh taskmasters nor wives to be cunning shrews. On the contrary, it condemns both as the outworkings of human sin in the domestic relationship. But the history of our sinful race has yielded and continues to yield countless examples of how sin has perverted the divinely decreed order with the result that women have been snares to their husbands and men have been cruel and oppressive toward their wives. One should no more preach Gen 3:16 as a normative rule for the Christian home than one should preach vv 17-19 as God's ideal for a theology of work.

In this light, Eccl 7:26ff begins to make sense. Qoheleth, working from the theological stance of Gen 3:16, observes and with brutal

honesty describes what he has seen in most domestic relationships. He has discovered that many men have their greatest pain and their most miserable failures in the context of their marriages. To them, their wives are cunning, human traps who leave them nothing but grief and vexation. In his own quest for meaningful relationships he has never found a single woman whom he did not consider to be a lurking shark interested in only her own advantage and gain. As far as that goes, however, he has only found one in a thousand men whom he could consider to be a true friend who spoke with honesty and integrity. Eccl 7:26-28, therefore, from a man's perspective, describes the miseries of the domestic relationship.

It is, however, a picture given strictly from a man's perspective. This does not mean that anything he has said is wrong or incorrect; it only means that the woman's side is not explicitly stated. A woman's version of the text might look like this:

<sup>26</sup>And I find more bitter than death is the man who is an iron fist and whose heart is arrogant and whose feet are steel boots. The woman who fears God will escape him, but the sinner he will crush. <sup>27</sup>Listen, this is what I have found, says Qoheleth, by adding one thing to the other to discover understanding: <sup>28</sup>What my soul seeks I have not found. I have found one woman among a thousand, but a man among all these I have not found.

In transforming the text in this way we see the other side of the domestic life of sinful humanity -woman is oppressed by a cruel and unfeeling husband and life is drudgery and misery. In both cases, it is clear that nothing brings out the sinfulness of humanity more thoroughly than the marriage relationship. Not surprisingly, pastors involved in counseling often find themselves dealing with domestic discord and broken relationships more than with any other area. Men on the job or in the military often cluster to voice their grief over how their wives are making them suffer. Women frequently look for a sympathetic ear, often another wife, to whom they can pour out their sorrow and despair. Qoheleth's assertion that he found one man but not a single woman has been born out in the lives of many men. They never can find a lover or spouse with whom they can be truly at ease and pour out their souls, but if they are fortunate, they can find at least one friend of the same sex with whom they can truly relax and not feel that they are in a struggle. Many women have had the same experience with respect to their inability to find a man they can trust. Although few people attain to joyful marriages, many are at least able to find one true friend in life.

Some may object to describing the passage from the woman's point of view as if that were itself feminist or somehow tampering

with the Bible. This is no attempt to add to the Scriptures, however, and I am not advocating that the woman's perspective be inserted alongside the man's in the Bible. But to look at the text and the phenomena of domestic struggles from the woman's viewpoint is no different from what interpreters and preachers have always done. We do not, after all, assert that it is wrong for a man to covet another man's wife but allow a woman to covet another woman's husband on the grounds that Exod 20:17 only prohibits the former. We do not assert that the woman who goes to a male striptease is not sinning since Jesus only forbade the lust of a man looking on a woman and not that of a woman looking on a man (Matt 5:28). We would not warn boys against seductive girls and prostitutes but think it unnecessary to teach girls to avoid clever and lustful boys on the grounds that Proverbs 5 says nothing in that regard. In the same way it is absolutely essential for the Christian interpreter to show how terribly both men and women suffer in the home as a result of sin.

One may object, of course, that if Qoheleth had intended to describe the misery caused by sinful husbands and not just that caused by sinful wives he would have done so, but such a protest reveals a failure to understand both the historical situation of Qoheleth and the distinction between strict interpretation and proper application of a biblical text. With regard to the historical background of Ecclesiastes, it is critical to read the book with the understanding that it was composed from and for a circle that was almost certainly exclusively male. While it is true that, as J. L. Crenshaw says, "Present knowledge about education in ancient Israel is astonishingly incomplete,"<sup>31</sup> every indication is that the scribes, sages, and royal advisers, the group generally classified as "the wise," was confined only to men and only to a select few men at that. I am inclined to Whybray's solution that, rather than speak of a professional circle of wise men, we should understand that the royal court included a group of advisors,<sup>32</sup> and consider it likely that these individuals were a landed aristocracy that was both active in the giving of political counsel to the king and had a leisure time for the more academic study of wisdom. Ecclesiastes reflects such a *Sitz im Leben*.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, whether the group in question was a circle of professional wise men or the king's aristocratic counselors, no grounds whatsoever exist for assuming women played a significant role. The point, therefore, is that it is utterly unreasonable to expect Qoheleth to address a side of

<sup>31</sup>J. L. Crenshaw, "Education in Ancient Israel, *JBL* 104 (1985) 601.

<sup>32</sup>R. N. Whybray, *The Intellectual Tradition in the Old Testament* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1974), 5-54.

<sup>33</sup>On the subject I have a forthcoming article, "Qoheleth on the Use and Abuse of Political Power," in the *Trinity Journal*.]

an issue that was not directly relevant to his audience. His message to his aristocratic and sagacious circle is that only through the fear of God can one escape a miserable marriage, and for those men a miserable marriage is naturally described from the man's side. To turn the issue around, we should not deal with a battered wife in a crisis center by telling her how some women make their husbands miserable.

Also, as mentioned above, legitimate application can (and must) grow out of the strict interpretation of the text. If the strict interpretation of the text is that sin has made the marriage relationship into a bed of misery for a man but that he can escape the grief caused by an evil wife through the fear of God, surely it is a legitimate application to assert that the same is true from the woman's perspective.

Our interpretation is also very distinct from that of the feminist hermeneutic. Radical feminism asserts that because Qoheleth speaks from a patriarchal and misogynist perspective, all that he says about women being snares and traps is simply wrong and to be rejected. While it is true that he speaks from a man's perspective to a male audience, his words are neither misogynist nor inaccurate. His words are in fact absolutely true. Many men throughout history have suffered terribly and been brought to ruin by the women in their lives. Qoheleth's words, however, are not exhaustively true in that there is another side to the story—the woman's side. Many women throughout history have had lives empty of joy and been brought to emotional (and sometimes physical) death by the men in their lives. To look at the issue from both sides is entirely legitimate in light of the scope of the curse of Gen 3:16. Nevertheless, the feminist hermeneutic which asserts this passage and others like it to be both evidence of woman-hating in the Bible and a patriarchal tool for the oppression of women must be rejected decisively. It is one thing to say that a text reflects the viewpoint of a given group of people; it is another thing entirely to assert that the text shows that group to be perverted by hatred and a desire to dominate.

Qoheleth's recognition of sin as a dominant force in the lives of people is evident in v 29. God made humanity to be upright, good, and glorifying to him, but instead they have turned away from both God and righteousness. He asserts that they have sought out "many schemes" (חשבונות). In the parlance of Christian theology, Qoheleth, reflecting on the story of the fall in Genesis 3, asserts no less than the depravity of humanity. This further indicates that vv 26-28 must be understood in the light of the sinfulness of both men and women.

Happily, however, Qoheleth's assertion about domestic troubles does not end there. He also asserts that the one who fears God

escapes her, the cruel woman, to which we can properly add that the woman who fears God escapes him, the cruel man. As indicated above, this does not mean that the truly pious escape these troubles by avoiding marriage altogether.<sup>34</sup> Here, Eccl 9:9 may legitimately be called upon as an assertion by Qoheleth that marriage can be a good and fulfilling relationship. Those who fear God escape the miseries of a tormented marriage because, with God being sovereign over their home and grace giving deliverance from destructive sin, they are able to achieve a harmonious and joyful relationship of the sort typified in the marriage of Adam and Eve prior to the fall. Sin is not eradicated but those who fear God conquer its effects by his grace. God, in his goodness and grace, gives to those men who fear him a wife who is a true source of help and support and to each woman who fears him a husband who is a true source of love and strength.

Eccl 7:25ff., when understood in the light of Gen 3:16 and the historical context of the wisdom school, addresses directly and powerfully the domestic warfare, misery and violence that is no less prevalent today than it ever has been. Christian ministers must proclaim this passage to their congregations. They must do it both from the woman's and the man's perspective just as they would preach on any text that is masculine in the biblical context but applies equally to both sexes. But the authority of the Bible must be maintained. We must not follow the error of those who cite Gen 3:16 as a proof text for man's freedom to do whatever he wants to his wife. The fall has not elevated man vis-à-vis his wife. On the other hand, we must not allow feminist accusations of misogyny in the Bible to lessen our appreciation for its absolute and universal authority and we must accept its standards whether it is describing the proper relationship between man or woman and God or that between man and woman.

<sup>34</sup> Also, contrary to the Targum on 7:26, Ecclesiastes does not recommend divorce as the proper course of action for "the righteous [man] before God." See Levine, *Aramaic Version of Qoheleth*, 40.

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