

The king of Qoheleth (Part-2)

The king of Qoheleth is king Uzziah (otherwise known as Azariah) and his history is recorded in 1 Kgs.15:1-8 and 2 Chronicles 26.¹ The prophet Isaiah (1:1) was his contemporary as were the northern prophets Amos and Hosea. A great earthquake occurred during Uzziah's reign (Zech.14:5) and Isaiah was commissioned in the year that king Uzziah died (Isa 6:1). Amos commenced his career two years before the earthquake (Amos 1:1).² Josephus has the great earthquake occurring when Uzziah forcefully entered the temple (*Antiq.* 9:225; LCL 6:119)³ and according to Austin (et al) the earthquake occurred in 750 BC ⁴ with Uzziah dying 15 years later (735 BC see Perry). ⁵ Outline of the Life and Times of King Uzziah (2 Chron. 26) is as follows:

- A. Introduction. 26:1-5.
- B. The prosperity of King Uzziah. 26:6-15.
 - 1. Material possessions. 26:6-10.
 - 2. Military preparations. 26:11-15.
- C. The pride of King Uzziah. 26:16-19; cf. Deut. 8:6-18; Prov. 16:18.
- D. The punishment of King Uzziah. 26:20-23.

Profiling Uzziah

From the accounts of his reign we can develop a “psychological profile” of king Uzziah and deduce that he wanted to rival his progenitor Solomon for wisdom and glory, and also wanted to equal David, who

¹ Uzziah is also mentioned in 2 Kgs 15; 30-34, the northern prophet Hosea was also his contemporary (1:1) and he is called Azariah in 2 Kgs 14:21; 15:1-8, 17-27; 1 Chron. 3:12.

² See also Isa.2:10-22 and Amos 9:1 for earthquake language.

³ This information is not supplied in the Biblical account (perhaps Josephus had access to other sources); according to Josephus this occurred on the Day of Atonement.

⁴ Evidence for this earthquake has been uncovered by the archaeologists spade throughout Israel and Jordan. Graphic evidence can be seen at Hazor and Ein Hazeva (Biblical Tamar). The earthquake measured an 8.2 on the Richter scale and the epicentre was located in the Bekaa Valley, in present day Lebanon. Steven A. Austin, Gordon W. Franz, and Eric G. Frost, “Amos’s Earthquake: An Extraordinary Middle East Seismic Event of 750 B.C.” *International Geology Review* 42 (2000) 657-671. Yadin and Finkelstein date the earthquake level at Hazor to 760 BC (plus or minus 25 years) based on stratigraphic analysis of the destruction debris (Y. Yadin, *Hazor, the Rediscovery of a Great Citadel of the Bible* (New York: Random House, 1975). I. Finkelstein, “Hazor and the North in the Iron Age: A Low Chronology Perspective,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 314 (1999) 55-70). Both are cited in Austin et al., “Amos’s Earthquake,” 658. Similarly, Ussishkin dated the “sudden destruction” level at Lachish to approximately 760 BC. (D. Ussishkin, “Lachish” in E. Stern, ed., *The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993) vol. 1, 338-342, cited in Austin et al., “Amos’s Earthquake,” 660). This article employs the date 750BC, however, any suggested dates for the earthquake draw on a combination of historical, biblical and archaeoseismological evidence and therefore precision is difficult and we should probably speak of a *dating range* around the mid 8th century. See, David Danzig, *A Contextual Investigation of Archaeological and Textual Evidence for a Purported mid-8th Century BCE Levantine Earthquake*, 2011 in which he offers a fair minded critique of the methodology of archaeoseismology as related to the book of Amos. Interestingly he lists 40 references or allusions to the earthquake in the book of Amos. Danzig distinguishes theophanic, phenomenological and literal language. The epicentre seems to have been near the temple (the Beth-el sanctuary?), contra Zechariah seems to draw on the effects that it had on Jerusalem during Uzziah’s reign. Danzig finds the biblical evidence strong but the archaeoseismological evidence inconclusive.

⁵ Thiele proposes; Coregent (with Amaziah of Israel): 791 – 768 BC; Sole reign: 767 – 751 BC; Leprous and coregent: 751 – 740 BC. [The above dates are those of Thiele, except the starting date for the Amaziah/Uzziah coregency, which is taken as one year later than that given by Thiele, following Leslie McFall. (Edwin R. Thiele, *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings* (3rd ed.; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan/Kregel, 1983) 217, and Leslie McFall, “A Translation Guide to the Chronological Data in Kings and Chronicles,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 148 (1991), 42)]. However, the Dating schemas of W. F. Albright, E. R. Thiele and R. H. Pfeiffer are not entirely convincing. This article employs the dating schema proposed by Perry, See; A. Perry, “Kings Chronology” an Excel download with notes @ <http://www.christadelphian-ejbi.org/downloads.htm> [cited May 2014] Perry has: Coregent(with Amaziah of Israel):787- 765BC; Sole reign: 764-746; Leprous and coregent 750-735 BC. Perry has overlapping coregencies with Jotham/Ahaz in the period 750-735. Note that Isaiah 6:1 does not say; “*in the first year of king Jotham....*” but in the year king Uzziah died (even though Jotham and Ahaz were coregents whilst Uzziah was alive) – Ahaz is called king when he is the sole ruler– “*...in the year that king Ahaz died*” (Isa.14:28).

acted as a Melchizedek king-priest and sat before the Lord (2 Sam.7:18). However, unlike David, who was *invited* into the divine presence (fully aware of his non-Levite status), Uzziah attempted to force his way and was struck down with leprosy for his hubris. Henceforth Uzziah was quarantined and separated from his subjects and excluded from attending the temple services (2 Chron. 26:21). This would allow Uzziah ample time for reflection and to record his memoirs. Uzziah, the longest reigning king of Judah, reigned for 52 years but for much of the latter part of his reign he was only the titular head of state as his son Jotham (2 Kings 15:5) and subsequently his grandson Ahaz were co-regents. At the commencement of his reign Uzziah feared God (2 Chron. 26:16a); he observed the statues (26:16b); his heart was not lifted up (26:16b); nor did not turn away from the LORD (26:18), thus his days were prolonged (26:21). However, after he conquered Eilat, he expanded his military and cavalry (multiplying horses for his army). This allowed him to control the trade routes⁶ and receive tribute; he multiplied gold and silver to himself. The Prophet Isaiah acknowledged this state of affairs. “Their land (Judah) is also full of silver and gold, and there is no end to their treasures; their land is also full of horses, and there is no end to their chariots” (Isa. 2:7). Compare, “I gathered me also silver and gold...”(Ecc.2:8), but in the end silver was “vanity” (Ecc.5:10).⁷ It is obvious that Uzziah attempted to imitate Solomon particularly with regards to possession of Eilat which was an important sea port adjacent to the place where Solomon launched his fleet⁸ and in his penchant for the multiplication of horses.

Whatever the composition history of Chronicles might be, it seems that the chronicler(s) had access to Isaiah’s records of Uzziah’ reign⁹ and it is relevant to note that whatever linguistic developments lie behind Qoheleth the only places that הִשָּׂבֹן (hiššābôn) occurs is in Chron 26:15 (engines KJV) and Ecc.7:25 (inventions KJV).¹⁰ In Chronicles it stands for a brilliant military invention such as depicted in artwork from Lachish – a defensive structure to protect archers.¹¹ The accomplishments of Qoheleth were all done for his own benefit (I made myself, I acquired, I gathered....) not out of public largess but almost for narcissistic pleasure (I said in my heart 2:1). The list of his accomplishments matches the summary of Uzziah’s reign in 2 Chron 26:

Ecclesiastes 2	2 Chronicles 26
I made me great works	And he made in Jerusalem engines ¹²
I planted me vineyards	husbandmen <i>also</i> , and vine dressers in the mountains, and in Carmel: for he loved husbandry
I made me pools of waterand digged many wells
I had great possessions of great and small cattle above all that were in Jerusalem before me	for he had much cattle, both in the low country, and in the plains
I gathered me also silver and gold, and the peculiar treasure of kings and of the provinces	And the Ammonites gave gifts to Uzziah

⁶ This is probably why Uzziah built “towers in the desert” i.e., along the trade routes in order to extract a toll (2 Chron.26:10).

⁷ Gold was so plentiful during the reign of Solomon that it made silver seem worthless (1 Kgs10:21). Uzziah wanted to achieve the same prosperity as Solomon.

⁸ And King Solomon made a navy of ships in Eziongeber, which is beside Eloth (Eilat), on the shore of the Red sea, in the land of Edom (1 Kgs.9:26). Some 70-80 years after Solomon (and 70-80 years before Uzziah), Jehoshaphat of Judah attempted a similar excursion but his fleet was destroyed (1 Kgs.22:48). Whether or not Uzziah launched a fleet, possession of Eilat alongside Eziongeber would ensure that he had a monopoly on southern ports and important trade routes and taxing these routes would increase his wealth exponentially. Note that Isaiah chapter 2 condemns *the ships of Tarshish* (v.16) and *the proud and lofty* (v.12 i.e., Uzziah) in the context of “earthquake language” – *And they shall go into the holes of the rocks, and into the caves of the earth, for fear of the LORD, and for the glory of his majesty, when he ariseth to shake terribly the earth* (v.19).

⁹ “Now the rest of the acts of Uzziah, first and last, did Isaiah the prophet, the son of Amoz, write” (2 Chron. 26:22).

¹⁰ See, *NIDOTTE*, (ed.Vangemeren,Paternoster,1996), Vol.2, # 3108

¹¹ See Y. Sukenik (*BJPES* 13, 1946/47, 19-24) and Yadin (*The Art of Warfare*, 1963, 325-28). However, Chronicles says that these devices were able “to shoot arrows and great stones withal” which seems to discount defensive devices (2 Chron.26:15).

¹² The “great works” of Ecc 2:4 are the “inventions” of Ecc 7:29 and the “engines” of 2 Chron 26:15.

Qoheleth's love of husbandry extended beyond viticulture to general horticulture; "gardens and orchards" (Ecc 2:5),¹³ his own assessment is - "So I was great, and increased more than all that were before me in Jerusalem: also my wisdom remained with me" (Ecc 2:9). Qoheleth did not want to rival Solomon; he wanted to surpass Solomon's wealth, wisdom and prestige. Similar to Solomon, he installed a "harem" and like David, showed an interest in music (Ecc.2:8 NIB/NIV). He withheld nothing in his attempt to rival his ancestors and he was willing to test every extreme (wisdom and folly) in this pursuit.

Uzziah reigned during a "golden period" as Aramaean dominance came to an end with the resurgence of Assyria under Adad-nirari III. This inaugurated a period of national restoration and prosperity in Israel and Judah that lasted nearly fifty years.¹⁴ As long as Assyria maintained a strong presence in the west, its loyal vassals reaped the benefits of renewed stabilisation. However, Assyria went into decline during the reigns of the three subsequent rulers and once again Aram-Damascus began to reassert its influence. The ascension of Tiglath-pileser to the Assyrian throne and his campaigns of consolidation brought further instability and in the years following 750 BC (about the time of the major earthquake)¹⁵, Israel and Judah were once again caught up in a maelstrom of opposing forces from Assyria, Egypt and Damascus. Israel (Samaria) had to choose which state to align with and a period of instability, intrigue and turmoil ensued with four kings ruling in quick succession (three of the four were assassinated after only brief reigns). However, for a large portion of this period Judah was peaceful and prosperous and functioned as a regional (or at least a local) power. Uzziah organized the army, improved their weaponry, refortified Jerusalem and built war engines. He gained important victories over the Philistines and the Arabs, razed the walls of Gath, Jabneh, and Ashdod, and received tribute from the Ammonites and other foes. Uzziah lived to see the decline of Israel and the title "king over Israel" (Ecc.1:12) may have been due to self-aggrandizement (or, possibly a gloss), however, his deteriorating health ended his hubris and saw his sons become co-regents.

The reign of Jotham was contemporaneous with his father Uzziah as was that of his grandson Ahaz.¹⁶ Jotham became coregent (four years after the major earthquake) in the forty-first year of Uzziah (Perry); power sharing was necessary because Uzziah was too ill to meet with new challenges (the ascension of Jeroboam II). The earthquake language of Amos 9:1 occurred two years before the 750 BC earthquake and is similar to that found at the death of Uzziah (Isa.6:4), which occurred fifteen years later in 735 BC. Similar to Amos, Isaiah also describes the "posts (of the temple) door moving", but unlike Amos, Isaiah places the event at the death of Uzziah. However, the movement of the posts in Isaiah is theophanic (caused by the voice). The time line is; (752): Amos commissioned; (750): Earthquake –Uzziah quarantined for leprosy; (746): Jotham co-regency at death of Jeroboam of Israel; (735): Theophany – death of Uzziah –Isaiah commissioned. This means that the major earthquake occurred in the year that Uzziah *sinned and became leprous* and that Uzziah was quarantined for 15 years. Uzziah lived to see the reigns of Jotham and Ahaz and the birth of Hezekiah.

Ahaz was particularly syncretistic and fawning towards the Assyrians and even installed an Assyrian altar in the temple. Ahaz was an idolator, causing his son to pass through the fire, and sacrificing and burning incense on high places and under green trees (2 Kgs.16: 3, 4).¹⁷ He was unsuccessfully besieged in Jerusalem by the army of Rezin, king of Syria, and Pekah, king of Israel (2 Kgs.16:5; Isa.7: 1). In connection with this crisis, before the invading force arrived, Isaiah was sent to exhort Ahaz to rely upon *Yahweh* and not to appeal for foreign support. Thereupon the prophet uttered the celebrated prophecy relative to the birth of Immanuel (Isa.7: 1-16). Despite the admonition, Ahaz turned to Tiglath-pileser, king of Assyria, and purchased his aid with the treasures of the temple and the palace (2 Kgs.16: 2; Chron.

¹³ The Hebrew for orchard is *pardēs* (LXX *paradeisos*), probably from the Persian *paridaida* (cf. paradise), it describes royal gardens or parks (NIDOTTE, vol., 3#7236). Uzziah "loved husbandry" (Hebrew; *'adamah*) the theology of 2 Chron.26 presents Uzziah as a type of Adam in Paradise who committed an act of hubris. On the use of Persian words in Qoheleth see Part 3 (*The language of Qoheleth*).

¹⁴ The biblical picture accords well with the broader political context in the Assyrian Empire at this time (see J. Bright, A history of Israel (4th ed., Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2000)

¹⁵ Perry's chronology makes 750 BC the thirty-eighth year of Uzziah

¹⁶ Ahaz becomes joint coregent with his father Jotham in Uzziah's forty-fourth year (Perry)

¹⁷ Despite his sin Uzziah is recorded as "*doing that which was right in the eyes of the Lord*" (2 Chron. 26:4), as was his son Jotham (2 Chron. 27:2), but a negative assessment is recorded for his grandson, Ahaz (2 Chron. 28:1).

28). Ahaz travelled to Damascus to pay homage to Tiglath-pileser and while he was there he had a copy made of a heathen altar that he admired, and then subsequently installed in the Temple at Jerusalem. He reigned 16 years and was succeeded by Hezekiah who was probably born in the forty-seventh year of Uzziah's reign.¹⁸ In this case Uzziah lived to see the birth of his great grandson.

“...for what can the man do that cometh after the king?” (2:12)

“...the fool walketh in darkness..” (2:13)

“Yea, I hated all my labour which I had taken under the sun: because I should leave it unto the man that shall be after me. And who knoweth whether he shall be a wise man or a fool? Yet shall he have rule over all my labour wherein I have laboured, and wherein I have laboured under the sun. This is also vanity. Therefore I went about to cause my heart to despair of all the labour which I took under the sun.” (2:18-20)

“And moreover I saw under the sun the place of judgment, that wickedness was there.” (3:16)

“A man to whom God hath given riches, wealth, and honour, so that he wanteth nothing for his soul of all that he desireth, yet God giveth him not power to eat thereof, but a stranger eateth it (tribute to Assyria paid by Ahaz): this is vanity, and it is an evil disease.” (6:2)

Qoheleth does not promote a cynical view; it records the struggle of a troubled mind coming to terms not only with disease, but also with his impotence to prevent his legacy being eroded and ultimately destroyed (It is surely the final irony that he is not even acknowledged as the author of Ecclesiastes). From his position in the Lazar house Uzziah watched with dismay as his grandson Ahaz slowly undermined his labours. Even his great defensive reinforcements and building work would have been damaged by the great earthquake -- it was all meaningless.....his life's work was “vanity”.

Moreover, the “theophanic earthquake” at the death of Uzziah (described in Isa.6:1) acts as a divine obituary, censuring Uzziah for his earlier sin (which caused the major earthquake in 750BC) but it was also a reproach on the “leprous” nation. Uzziah attempted to force his way into the holy place to burn incense but was prevented by the priests, this made him furious and while he was still angry leprosy broke out on his forehead. Uzziah was full of pride, (“his heart was lifted up”: 2 Chron. 26:16) but now Isaiah saw “Yahweh... high and lifted up” (6:1), Isaiah is called a “man of unclean lips” (6:5), language suggestive of leprosy (cf. Lev 13:45) and Isaiah is cleansed with a coal from the altar of incense (v.6) as the temple is filled with smoke (incense); Uzziah attempted to defile the altar of incense. Uzziah typified the state of the diseased nation (similarly a faithful remnant was represented by the suffering servant Hezekiah). The prophet Isaiah declared the whole nation leprous, like its king;

“...the whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint. From the sole of the foot even unto the head there is no soundness in it; but wounds, and bruises, and festering sores...” (Isa.2:7)

Ecclesiastes is not an abstract discourse on wisdom, or an amorphous theological or philosophical tract; rather it is based on concrete reflections drawn from real life experiences. As he sat in the isolation of quarantine, king Uzziah was able to dispassionately review his life in an attempt to draw conclusions on the meaning of life;

“Better is a poor and wise child than an old and foolish king, who will no more be admonished” (Ecc.4: 13)

“Then said I in my heart, as it happeneth to the fool, so it happeneth even to me; and why was I then more wise?” (Ecc.1: 15)

¹⁸ *Ibid*, Perry

The rise and fall of a king

The major theme in Qoheleth, largely unrecognised by scholarship, is the humbling and humiliation of a king – this within the context of covenant breaking and rebellion. It is linked to the adamic sin of hubris and self-divinization. Qoheleth demonstrates knowledge of Persian era writings and the framework of the intertextual connections suggests that the direction of dependency is from Qoheleth to the Persian era. In other words Qoheleth is alluding to Persian era books (and not the other way around). The ramifications that this has for the composition and redaction of Qoheleth will be discussed in the article on *The language of Qoheleth* but for now we simply state that later redaction does not detract from the original sentiments expressed in Uzziah's memoirs. Qoheleth is theological wisdom literature based on real events and the *inspired* author has the literary and theological freedom to interpret and present those memoirs in such a way that they are integrated within the wider canon.

Who *is* as the wise *man*? and who knoweth the **interpretation** of a thing? a man's wisdom maketh **his face to shine**, and the boldness of his face shall be changed. ² I *counsel thee* to keep **the king's commandment**, and *that* in regard of the oath of God. ³ Be not hasty to go out of his sight: stand not in an evil thing; for he doeth whatsoever pleaseth him. ⁴ Where the word of a king *is*, *there is* power: and who may say unto him, **What doest thou?** (Ecc.8:1-4)

We argue that “the king” in the above verses is Yahweh and that the references are all intertextually linked with either the theme of coming into the presence of God, or to the theme of the humbling of human pride. The main links are as follows:

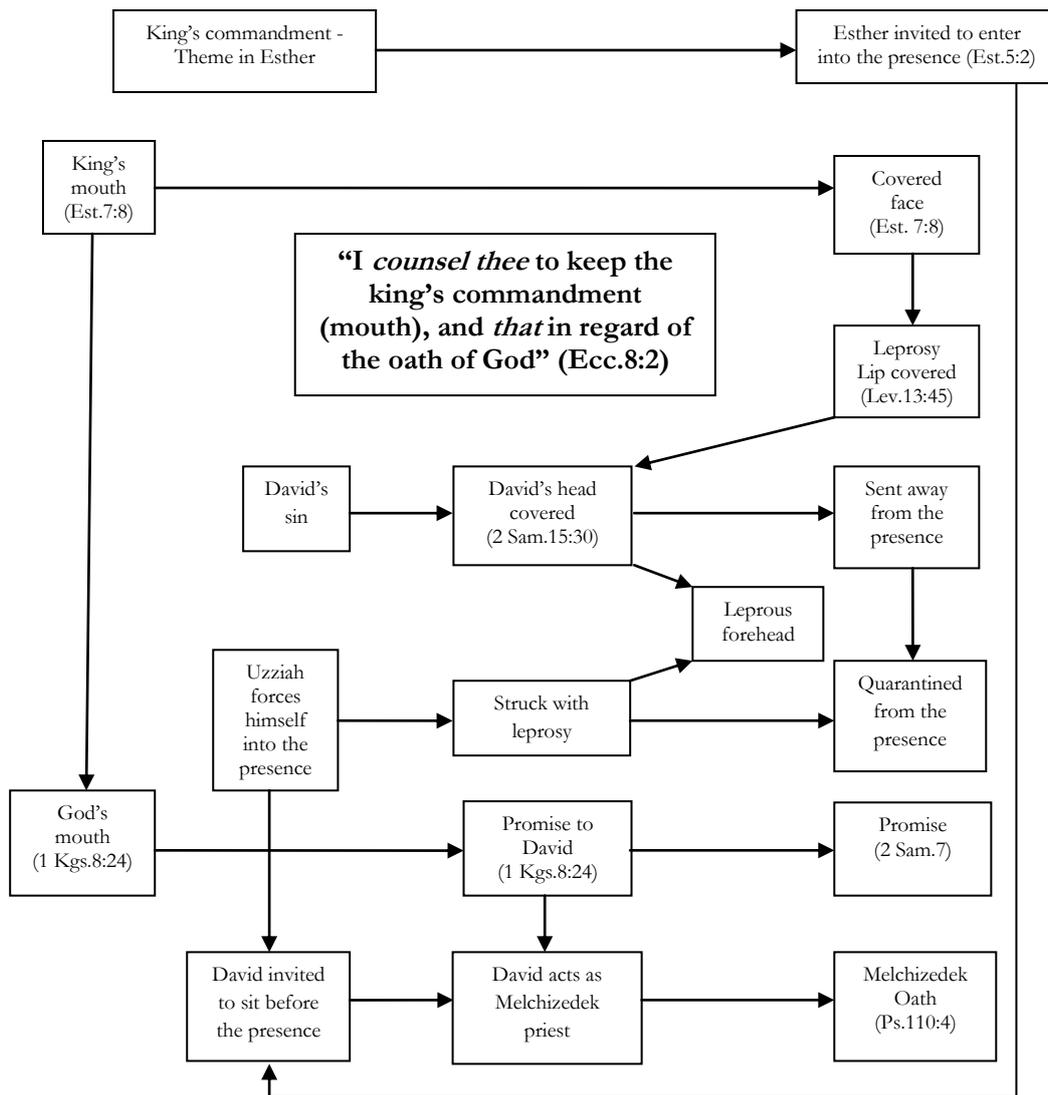
1. Humbling of pride = king Nebuchadnezzar
2. Face to shine = Moses in the divine presence
3. Commandment of the king = Esther enters into the presence of the king

The **wise man** is Daniel who was also the **interpreter** of the dream that preceded the humbling of Nebuchadnezzar's pride (Daniel chapter 4).¹⁹ Upon his recovery Nebuchadnezzar uses the following words in his doxology; “And all the inhabitants of the earth *are* reputed as nothing; and he doeth according to his will in the army of heaven, and *among* the inhabitants of the earth: and none can stay his hand, or say unto him, **What doest thou?**” (Dan.4:35). When Moses had been in the presence of Yahweh, **his face shined** (Ex 34:29-35)²⁰ in contrast Uzziah's face became leprosy. The phrase “commandment of the king” occurs repeatedly in Esther but the English translations often do not differentiate between the various nuances in the original language (speech, word, statute, law, decree, command, order, etc) nevertheless, many of the terms are virtually synonymous. Esther relates how queen Vashti refused the commandment of the king to enter into his presence (Est.1:15), in contrast Esther risked her life by entering into the presence of the king in order to save her people (Est.4:11). In this story the motive is all important – acting out of pride or out of love – all connected with the presence. Ecclesiastes does not employ “command” in Ecc.8:2 - but literally “mouth” פֶּה (*peh*) as in “keeping the kings mouth” (i.e., his word/command) the same expression is encountered in Est.7:8; “As the word went out of the king's mouth (*peh*), **they covered Haman's face**”. It is difficult to make sense of this phrase (covered his face) the LXX has διετράπη τῷ προσώπῳ (he changed countenance) which is probably a paraphrase as the Hebrew is doubtless meant to convey the covering of the upper lip

¹⁹ The noun פֶּשֶׁר common masculine singular occurs only in the grammatical construct, suffix 3rd person masculine singular, in Ecc.8:1 and Dan.4:6. It is the Aramaic word פֶּשְׁרָא (*pesbar*) for interpretation. It occurs extensively in other forms, totalling thirteen times in Dan.2 and eight times in Dan.4. The word for wise in Ecc.8:1 is the Hebrew חָכָם (*chakam*) synonymous with the Aramaic term חַכְכִּימָא (*chakkīym*), which is employed extensively in Dan. 2(9x) and in Dan. 4(4x).

²⁰ The Hebrew in Exodus is קָרַן (*qaran*) in the sense of radiating (i.e., rays), Ecclesiastes uses the Hebrew אֹרֵר (*'omr*) suggesting light or shining, the same word is used in Dan.9:17 in an appeal for God to cause his face to shine on his sanctuary. The leprosy “rose up” זָרַח (*zarach*) in Uzziah's forehead; the same word is used for the rising or shining of the sun (cf.Ecc.1:5). Moses' face reflected divine glory that of Uzziah human sinfulness.

proscribed for the leprous (Lev.13:45).²¹ The word mouth (*peh*) is also used by Solomon at the inauguration of the temple; Who hast kept with thy servant David my father that thou promisedst him: thou spakest also **with thy mouth** (*peh*), and hast fulfilled *it* with thine hand, as *it is* this day (1 Kgs.8:24). The promise that Solomon refers to is a reference to 2 Sam.7 regarding the Davidic dynasty on the occasion when David entered the divine presence. Psalm 110:4 describes the vision that David saw; “The LORD **hath sworn**, and will not repent, Thou *art* a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek”. The swearing refers to an oath used for affirming a priest (Heb.7:20). Therefore, Ecclesiastes 8:2 has a multivalent matrix of thematic and intertextual connections:



²¹ The Hebrew for covering in Lev.13:45 is עָטָה (*atal*) in Est.7:8 the word חָפָה (*chaphah*) is used, but the same word is applied in 2 Sam. 15:30, when David fled Jerusalem weeping “and had his head covered (*chaphah*)”. David’s condition is depicted as leprosy (the sin disease) and he is sent away from the sanctuary (cf. Ps.51:11; “Cast me not away from thy presence”).

The advice of Ecc.8:3; “Be not hasty to go out of his sight: stand not in an evil thing; for he doeth whatsoever pleaseth him” (KJV) should rather read (as in the NRS) as; “Do not be **terrified**;²² go from his presence, do not delay when the matter is unpleasant, for he does whatever he pleases”. This is a better fit for Uzziah’s situation – he is so paralysed with fear that he cannot even move to leave the presence of the king!

The epilogue is often thought to be by a different hand – a “corrective” on Qoheleth’s philosophy, however, careful examination demonstrates that it is a continuation of the theme of the “king’s commandment” of Ecc.8:1-4;

⁹ “And moreover, because the preacher was wise, he still **taught the people** knowledge; yea, he gave good heed, and sought out, *and* set in order many proverbs. ¹⁰ The preacher sought to find out acceptable words: and *that which* was written *was* upright, *even* **words of truth**. ¹¹ The words of the wise *are* as goads, and as nails fastened *by* the masters of assemblies, *which* are given from one shepherd. ¹² And further, by these, my son, be admonished: of making many books *there is* no end; and much study *is* a weariness of the flesh. ¹³ Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: **fear God**, and **keep his commandments**: for this *is* the whole *duty* of man. ¹⁴ For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether *it be* good, or whether *it be* evil (Ecc.12:9-14)”

The duty of man is to “keep his commandments” and to “fear God” these are the very matters that Uzziah neglected. Qoheleth will “teach” the people “truth”. Intertextual links direct us to the speech given by Samuel *when the first king was anointed*:

“¹⁴ If ye will **fear the LORD**, and serve him, and obey his voice, and not rebel against **the commandment of the LORD**, then shall both ye and also the king that reigneth over you continue following the LORD your God.....but **I will teach you the good and the right way**: ²⁴ Only **fear the Lord**, and serve **him in truth** with all your heart: for consider how great *things* he hath done for you. ²⁵ But if ye shall still do wickedly, ye shall be consumed, both ye and your king” (1 Sam.12:14; 23b-25).

In the days of Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah (Micah 1:1) “truth” became a technical term for the *covenant promises* (cf. Micah 7:20). The “truth” delivered to Abraham concerned a particular “seed” and the hope for that seed was further concentrated in the Davidic line. Qoheleth would teach words of truth – the truth that he had learned concerning the covenant was that man cannot grasp at divinity as if by right – even a Davidic king could not presume to crown himself a Melchizedek priest – a messianic role **sworn by a divine oath** and promised to a “son of David”. His pride and sense of entitlement had led him to disrespect God and love self more than God (*The commandment...Love the Lord thy God*). Uzziah’s service was driven by self-interest (I built...I made etc) unlike the “suffering servant” of Isaiah 53 (despised and rejected of men)²³ who acted as a type of the true messianic priest; “For thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name *is* Holy; I dwell in the high and holy *place*, with him also *that is* of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones”(Isa.57:6). After his humiliation Uzziah used his fall from grace to teach the people knowledge and show them *truth*, as instructed by Samuel.

²² The Hebrew בָּהֵל (*bahal*) carries the idea of “terror”. First used in Gen.45:3; “And Joseph said unto his brethren, I *am* Joseph; doth my father yet live? And his brethren could not answer him; for they were **troubled** (*bahal*) **at his presence**”. It carries the idea of being awe-struck or paralysed by fear – they couldn’t even speak!

²³ The “suffering servant” was king Hezekiah; he represented the faithful remnant and typified the Messiah

Priestly Sin

The priests were guardians of God's holiness. There are two incidents that reflected badly on the priesthood and they are alluded to in Ecclesiastes. One might inquire why this subject was of interest to Qoheleth. In the case of Uzziah the priests acted entirely correctly and manhandled the king in order to prevent his folly. However, in the past the priests themselves had to be taught lessons concerning the holiness of God and the sanctity of his covenants.

“Dead flies cause the ointment²⁴ of the apothecary to send forth a **stinking** savour: *so doth* a little folly him that is in reputation for wisdom *and* **honour**” (Ecc.10:1).

“A **good name** *is* better than **precious ointment**; and the day of death than the day of one's birth” (Ecc.7:1).

The “ointment of the apothecary” was the perfumed *holy anointing oil* used to consecrate priests and the *perfumed incense* was burned every morning; the manufacture of the anointing oil was closely guarded, it was strictly kept for holy purposes and not for personal use. Also, the priests were forbidden to burn any perfumed incense (strange incense) other than the proscribed recipe (Ex.30:25-35; 37:29). When the priests Nadab and Abihu burnt “strange incense” they were consumed and the people were instructed to mourn their deaths – it is this very incident that necessitated the introduction of the Day of Atonement – the sanctuary had been defiled by the actions of the priests and made unclean by their dead bodies. From henceforth the Jews would commemorate a Day of Atonement for national transgression because the priests (the representatives of the people) did not fear God. The high priest would enter the inner sanctum once a year surrounded by incense clouds to make atonement for the nation. There is a matrix of intertextual connections between Ecc.10:1 and Ecc.7:1 and *bad priestly behaviour*. The progenitor of the priestly tribe, Levi, was reprimanded by his father Jacob for abusing the covenant (of circumcision) in order to murder a young prince;

“Let not my soul enter their council; Let not my **honour** be united to their **assembly**; For in their anger they slew a man, And in their self-will they hamstrung an ox” (Gen.49:6 NKJ).

The latter part of the verse is dynamically rendered by the YLT; “Into their secret, come not, O my soul! Unto their assembly be not united, O mine honour; for in their anger they slew a man, and in their self-will eradicated a prince” (i.e., circumcising the prince so as to make him immobile, he was like a hamstrung ox; cutting the beasts tendons to immobilize it). This incident had caused Jacob's name “to **stink** among the inhabitants of the land” (Gen.34:30). Jacob did not want his honour (glory) associated with **their assembly** (49:6). The same Hebrew words are employed in Ecc.10:1 (stink/honour). Moreover, the Hebrew word for **assembly** קהל (qhālām) is a form of our word for Preacher (קהלת) or “assembler”²⁵ (qōhélet) in Eccl. 1:1f, 12; 7:27; 12:8ff. Similarly, in Ecc.7:1 a “good name” (contrast a stinking name) is worth more than pleasantly perfumed priestly anointing oil.

Qoheleth is interested in the covenant-breaking of the priestly tribe of Levi because Qoheleth himself had attempted to usurp the priestly function. He had made his good name to stink (literally with leprosy) by “anointing himself with the precious priestly oil” (making himself a priest) – he had joined his “honour” and good reputation to the assembly of the covenant-breakers.....Levi! The priests warned Uzziah not to proceed with the following words:

“Neither shall it be to **thine honour**” (2 Chron.26: 18)

“Unto their **assembly** mine **honour** be thou not united” (Gen.49: 6)

²⁴ שֶׁמֶן (*shemen*): Hebrew for oil; olive oil ; perfumed and used as anointing oil same word used in Ecc.7:1

²⁵ Assembler of wisdom?; Caller of assemblies?; Hence, *Ekklesia*/Ecclesiastes –dynamically-Preacher/teacher

The Genesis reprimand was delivered to Levi and Simeon, the patriarchs of the priestly and scribal tribes, for violating the covenant – it is fitting then that it is referred to by the descendants of Levi as a reminder to Uzziah not to unite his honour with the **assembly** of the wicked (like the Korathites did in Num.16). Uzziah was engaged in an act of rebellion, possibly self-divinisation, but instead of acquiring the priestly crown (worn on the forehead Ex.28: 38) he was struck with a leprous forehead. Qoheleth declares that the “day of death is better than the day of one’s birth” (7:1) and his obsession with death (3:2; 7:1, 26; 8:8; 9:5) is easily explained by leprosy, which was a living death. When Miriam was struck with leprosy as punishment for her rebellion against God (i.e., against the authority of Moses as God’s representative) Aaron pleaded; “Let her not be **as one dead**, of whom the flesh is half consumed when he cometh out of his mother’s womb” (Num.12:12). Qoheleth’s rebellious challenge to divine authority was similar to that of Korah, Dathan and Abiram in Numbers 16. These Levites also challenged Moses’ and Aaron’s authority and declared that they were also holy (and therefore should be accorded the same rights of access); they were instructed to fill their censers and assemble at the tabernacle. God consumed them and swallowed them up **with an earthquake**. Their censers were beaten flat and used as a covering for the altar (of incense); “*To be* a memorial unto the children of Israel, that no stranger, which *is* not of the seed of Aaron, come near to offer incense before the LORD; that he be not as Korah, and as his company” (Num.16:30). Surely, Uzziah would have seen this covering? One suspects that his censer (2 Chron.26:19) was also beaten flat and added to the memorial covering.

Uzziah’s sin also has intertextual links with the sin of Cain, who like Uzziah is described as a “tiller of the ground” (Gen.4:2 cf. Uzziah loved husbandry) and who was “very wroth” (Gen.4:5 cf. 2 Chron.26:19) when his sacrifice was rejected, like Cain he received a “mark” (cf. leprosy) and was sent away from the sanctuary (Gen.4:15-16). The story of Cain and Abel (cf. Hebel; “vanity) is a metaphor for the two atonement goats – one slaughtered and the other sent away as the scapegoat (bearing sin). It is highly probable that Uzziah attempted his foray into the inner sanctum on the Day of Atonement.

Under the Sun

One of the favourite catch phrases of Qoheleth is “under the sun” employed some twenty seven times in Ecclesiastes. It is only encountered in relation to David’s sin with Bathsheba. David sin was hidden from public sight but his punishment would be publicly exposed and traumatic – literally, “*in sight of this sun*” and “*before this sun*” (2 Samuel 12:11-15). This is the only occasion that a similar phrase is employed; in the case of hidden sin and public humiliation. In contrast, Uzziah sin was public (under the sun) but his punishment was hidden. He had conducted all his experiments “under the sun” and explored all that wisdom and folly had to offer “under the sun” his rebellion had occurred “under the sun” but the remainder of his life was spent in darkness- not allowing the light of the sun to touch his ravaged skin. Henceforth he would be in the “house of mourning”;

“*It is better to go to the **house of mourning**, than to go to the house of feasting: for that is the end of all men; and the living will lay it to his heart*”
(Ecc.7:2, 4)

He spent the last fifteen years of his life **in quarantine** (in the “lazar” house) contemplating his misspent youth; “Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them”(Ecc.12:1).

Difficult texts

Some texts are difficult to understand but once they are placed in the context of Uzziah and given wider intertextual treatment suggestions can be made as to how they should be interpreted. It is sometimes stated that Qoheleth was a misogynist as he supposedly had a low opinion of women. For example (Ecc.7:25-28);

“²⁵ I applied mine heart to know, and to search, and to seek out wisdom, and the reason of things, and to know the wickedness of folly, even of foolishness and madness: ²⁶ And I find more bitter than death the woman, whose heart is snares and nets, and her hands as bands: whoso pleaseth God shall escape from her; but the sinner shall be taken by her. ²⁷ Behold, this have I found,

saith the preacher, counting one by one, to find out the account: ²⁸ Which yet my soul seeketh, but I find not: one man among a thousand have I found; but a woman among all those have I not found”.

Firstly, in wisdom literature the “woman” is employed as a metaphoric personification for either wisdom or folly, particular in Proverbs. In Proverbs 5:1-23 the “strange woman” is a personification of the seduction of folly; “Lest thou give **thine honour** unto others, and **thy years unto the cruel**²⁶ - “Lest strangers be filled with thy wealth; and thy labours be in the house of a stranger; And thou **mourn at the last**, when **thy flesh and thy body are consumed**” (vv.10-11). This could stand as a summary of Uzziah’s life and was probably composed by Hezekiah’s scribes (Prov.25:1). Note, Prov.5:14, another allusion to Qoheleth; “I was almost in all evil in the **midst of the congregation and assembly**”. Furthermore, the idea of “counting” and finding “one righteous man” in a thousand, and not one woman, is an allusion to the Sodom incident in Genesis 18-19, where after “counting” (and bargaining) only Lot was found righteous, but both his wife and two daughters proved to be lacking. Why did Uzziah refer to this incident? Probably because he had conquered the Ammonites (2 Chron.26:18; Gen.19:38), who were the product of an incestuous union between Lot and one of his daughters; the “strange woman” (folly) is then represented by the folly of Lot’s daughter, moreover, the incident at Sodom represented a boundary which should not be crossed – a boundary between the holy (the angels) and the profane (the men of Sodom), who wanted to forcefully establish their dominance by abusing divinity and this act of presumption would have spoken powerfully to Uzziah. Moreover, towards the end of Uzziah’s reign, when Ahaz was co-regent, the temple service deteriorated into an erotic beauty pageant (Isaiah 3). The “daughters of Zion” are compared with the leprous condition of Uzziah (The Lord will strike with a scab the crown of the head....Instead of a sweet smell there will be a stench) and of the nation it is said that “they declare their sin as Sodom” (Isa.3:9) - - their pride and hubris. Isaiah says; “they which **lead**²⁷ thee cause *thee* to err” (Isa.3:12) which may be a reference to the *asherah* cult of temple prostitution. Another difficult text is Ecc.10:9;

“Whoso removeth stones shall be hurt therewith; *and* he that cleaveth wood shall be endangered thereby”.

The suggestion is that Uzziah is referring to the stones of the pagan Assyrian altar that Ahaz had his priests copy from an example in Damascus. He rearranged the temple layout in order to install it in the temple court. The wood is a reference to the fuel needed for the sacrifices (2 Kings 16; 2 Chron.28). Although Uzziah sinned when he acted presumptuously, he was a faithful king; Ahaz, on the other hand, chose a path of defiance and unfaithfulness – he purged his court by promoting undesirable cronies: “Folly is set in great dignity, and the rich sit in low place” (Ecc.10: 6).

Ahaz eventually abandoned the temple to neglect; “By much slothfulness the building (i.e., the temple) decayeth; and through idleness of the hands the house droppeth through” (Ecc.10:18) and it required the reformation of Hezekiah to repair the damage. Instead of relying on God he strengthened the defences of Jerusalem and appealed to Assyria for deliverance. It was during such an inspection tour of the backbreaking labour needed to protect the city that he encountered the prophet Isaiah: “And he said, Hear ye now, O house of David; Is it a small thing for you to **weary men**, but **will ye weary** my God also?” (Isa.7: 16). This agrees with the sentiments of the Preacher: “The labour of the foolish **wearieth** every one of them, because he knoweth not how to lead the city” (Ecc.10:15).²⁸ The syncretism of Ahaz was foolish; chopping wood for an Assyrian altar was dangerous as the “axe” of Assyria (cf. Isa.10:15) could easily rebound to their injury.

²⁶ Of Levi and Simeon it is said; “**instruments of cruelty** *are in* their habitations” (Gen.49:5); another connection with the theme of the “bad priest”. Taken together with the key word “honour” (from Gen.49:6), mourning (Ecc.7:2), consumption of the flesh (leprosy) and “assembly” this can be none other than Uzziah.

²⁷The Hebrew is אַשְׁרָה (*asherah*) the son of Hezekiah (Manasseh) placed an אַשְׁרָה (*asherah*) in the temple. She was a Canaanite goddess (of fortune and happiness), the supposed consort of Baal. The LXX has here; “that pronounce you blesses” (makes happy). It seems that temple prostitution was rife in the time of Ahaz.

²⁸ Nearly all translations have “go to the city” but surely the Hiphil (cause to go i.e., to lead) is more appropriate?

Isaiah and Qoheleth

The prophet Isaiah, who recorded Uzziah's reign (2 Chron.26:22), seems to continue a dialogue with Qoheleth. We can hypothesise that a first draft of Qoheleth's memoirs would have existed then and that aspects of the "preachers" life would have been employed to illustrate the "health" of the nation;

Qoheleth: "What profit has the worker from that in which he labors? I have seen the God-given task with which the sons of men are to be occupied" (Ecc.3: 9-10).

Isaiah: "Then I said, 'I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and in vain; Yet surely my just reward *is* with the LORD, And my work with my God" (Isa. 49:4).

Qoheleth: "He has made everything beautiful in its time..." (Ecc. 3:11).

Isaiah: "...*There is* no beauty that we should desire Him (Hezekiah)" (Isa.53: 2).²⁹

Qoheleth: ".....every man should eat and drink and enjoy the good of all his labor -- it *is* the gift of God"³⁰ (Ecc. 3:12-13).

Isaiah: "He (Hezekiah) shall see the labor of His soul, *and* be satisfied." (Isa 53:11).

The conclusion of the whole matter

Three phrases reoccur in Qoheleth: "vanity of vanities! All is vanity", "...under the sun" "...striving after wind". These phrases emphasize the meaningless and emptiness of life in the temporal realm (under the sun). This prompts the introduction to The Anchor edition of the book to comment: "Ecclesiastes is the strangest book in the Bible . . . in place of religion of faith and hope and obedience, this writer expresses a mood of disillusionment and proffers a philosophy of resignation. His ethic has no relationship to divine commandments, for there are none. . . .The author is a rationalist, an agnostic, a skeptic, a pessimist, and a fatalist."³¹ However, this article does not share that view, for Ecclesiastes is a penetratingly honest account of a troubled mind coming to terms with the meaning of life. The Preacher does not, for example, reject wisdom –he merely recognises the limitations of human wisdom. The Preacher does not advocate a hedonistic lifestyle, but rather a life of moderation – in which one enjoys the fruits of labours.

Although he has not identified Qoheleth, John H. Choi has correctly understood the theology of Qoheleth. Choi believes that Ecc.7: 15-18 (in which a course of moderation is prescribed as the ideal) is the key to the Preachers theology; "A pursuit of hyper-righteousness, then, is the ultimate act of "presumption", and "hubris", because it is more than an effort to please the divine. It is an endeavour to span the great divide between humanity and divinity. The warning is a reminder that one must live life happy in the lot that God has given, and not strive for what lies beyond the mortal's grasp."³²

King Uzziah, in his leprous state, was not even accorded a royal burial: "If a man beget an hundred children, and live many years, so that the days of his years be many, and his soul be not filled with good, and also that he have no burial; I say, that an untimely birth is better than he" (Ecc.6:3). He was buried in a separate grave "in the field of the burial which belonged to the kings" (2 Kings 15:7; 2 Chron 26:23). "That lonely grave in the royal necropolis would eloquently testify to coming generations that all earthly monarchy must bow before the inviolable order of the divine will, and that no interference could be tolerated with that unfolding of the purposes of God, which, in the fullness of time, would reveal the Christ, the true High Priest and King for evermore"³³

²⁹ On his death bed Hezekiah resembled Uzziah and was despised...yet his faith saved the nation.

³⁰ The only way to profit from personal "works" is through the messiah (**the gift of God** cf. John 4:10). Hezekiah typified the messiah. Uzziah typifies fallen human nature.

³¹ Ecclesiastes (The Anchor Yale Bible Commentaries), Yale University Press (1997):191-2

³² John H. Choi, "The Doctrine of the Golden Mean in Qoh. 7, 15-18: A Universal Human Pursuit", *Biblica* 83, (2002): 358-374

³³ Samuel G. Green, *The Kingdom of Israel and Judah After the Disruption*, vol. 2, (Publisher: Sunday School Union,1876)