The Hebnelness of African Power: Hope or Despair: A Political Reading of Reading Qoh 3:16-17; 4:1-3.13-16

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Abstract: The mother continent Africa is known for its various, multiple, and repeated instabilities; the rationale being the great hope and desire for the permanence, fixity, stability, lasting or enduring things that characterize human beings. Irrespective of how great and noble this hope and desire might be, one should admit that permanence or stability in life under the sun is against human nature, which for Qoheleth is הֶבֶל, that is, fleeting, transitory, brief, “not stable”. The use of הֶבֶל applied to different areas of life draws attention to the fleetingness of human experience in the world compared to God’s eternity. In Qoheleth’s view, there is nothing eternal on Earth: everything is fleeting (הֶבֶל). So is political power, which for Qoheleth is short-lived and unstable, whether oppressive or not. It is, therefore, the aim of this paper to explore the hermeneutical possibility of Qoheleth’s use of הֶבֶל, which could be used to understand the political instability in African leadership. As such, this study calls attention to Qoheleth’s use of הֶבֶל with a political focus. It reads the text against the context of the oppressive manipulative political control of the powerless, voiceless, and the downtrodden by the powerful in Qoheleth’s society, which is no less in today’s African society. Consequently, it proposes that a political reading of Qoheleth adds to its hermeneutical understanding, which then can become more meaningful to Africans in an oppressive and depriving social and political environment.

Keywords: power; political; hebnelness; fleeting; Qoheleth; coup d’état; oppression

1. Introduction

In his article, “Twentieth- and Twenty-first-century Readings of Hebel (יהֶבֶל) in Ecclesiastes,” Russel Meek posits that “the meaning of יהֶבֶל is a crux interpretum for the book.” (Meek 2016). Antoon Schoors boldly affirms that יהֶבֶל “is even the key word par excellence, more than any of the more frequently occurring words, because it is found at strategic points of the exposition and embodies the thinking and the mood that pervade this sapiential book.” (Schoors 2013, p. 40). So far as the prominent role and meaning of יהֶבֶל are concerned in the understanding of the book, there is, however, no consensus concerning the meaning of יהֶבֶל in Qoheleth.

The Hebrew word יהֶבֶל indeed presents a difficult interpretive problem. Most studies have attempted to understand the term etymologically, functionally, metaphorically, and even contextually. When reading Qoheleth and its hevel judgments, one should seriously take into consideration James Barr’s reminder that words have meaning in specific contexts and in relation to the intention of those who use them (Barr 1961, p. 171). This idea of “meaning in context” is reiterated and highlighted by Frege and Wittgenstein (Wittgenstein 1993, p. 45).

As a matter of fact, Frege in Die Grundlagen der Arithmetik, argues that the meaning of a word should not be defined in isolation but in the context of a proposition (Satzzusammenhang), that is to say, one should, according to Jocelyn Benoist, “dig into the context” to complete and fix the meaning of the word.

In the footsteps of Barr, Frege, Wittgenstein, and Jocelyn, Bartholomew takes יהֶבֶל as a live metaphor whose meaning is controlled by its immediate context (Bartholomew 2009, p. 106) of redaction and reception. Without reducing יהֶבֶל to a single meaning, or to the
negative view assigned to it, I posit that הֶבֶל has a positive value, as it expresses not the absurdity or the meaningless of life, but its fleetingness/transitoriness/brevity. It also calls attention to the fleetingness of human experience in the world. The shortness of life and the limited duration of human achievements do not empty human life of its true meaning and value. Rather, they tell of the very nature of humans and their actions. The hebelness is from God who made things as fleeting, temporary, transient compared to his own eternity. By using the term הֶבֶל, Qoheleth reminds the readers of their transience in this world with its pressing and tragic problems, as well as comforting them with the fact that evil, and abusive and oppressive political power, are temporary in their impacts on life. They will pass away (Some 2021, p. iii).

Here lies my contention on the hebelness of political power. It is, therefore, the aim of this paper to explore the hermeneutical possibility of Qoheleth’s use of הֶבֶל to understand the political instability in African leadership. As such, this study calls attention to Qoheleth’s use of הֶבֶל with a political focus. I read the text against the context of the oppressive and manipulative political control by the powerless, voiceless, and the down-trodden in Qoheleth’s society, and no less in today’s African society.

Consequently, I propose a political reading of Qoheleth, mainly 3:16-17, 4:1-3 and 4:13-16, through the lens of the African political context. How should an African reader appropriate Qoheleth’s teaching or counsel on politics? What would Qoheleth recommend to the oppressed, the poor, and the victims of the African political system? What may they hope for?

In two main sections, I will address these issues. In the first section, which is an exploration of the language of politics or power in Qoheleth, using Qoh 3:16-17, I will mainly discuss the nature, function, and the exercise of power along with the attitude one should have when faced with an oppressive and abusive power. In the second, I will discuss, based on Qoh 4:13-16, the hebelness of political power, with a focus on some African countries.

I The language of politics or power in Qoheleth

2. Nature and Function of Power

The biblical and the ancient near eastern wisdom texts highlight the connection between power, politics, and wisdom. The wise were often court officials or political consultants. Egyptian wisdom texts and proverbs consist mainly of advice. Some of these texts were explicitly about governance. Politics or political powers, as related to activities that involve the administration of public affairs in a country, are to be taken and understood as the art of governing a constitutional entity. This requires from the leader or those in power, a “political wisdom” for the better management of their political activities.

For Elaine Wei-Fun Goh, political wisdom “refers to prudent pointers toward effec-tual administration, crisis prevention, people management, and competent governance … aiming to maintain order and general well-being in a political organization” (Wei-Fun Goh 2019, p. 6). Whether prescriptive or descriptive, this political wisdom is discernible in Qoheleth’s view and understanding of power. In the book of Qoheleth, in fact, the language of politics, kingship, or power appears in various ways (Garrett 1987). First and foremost is the presence of the Hebrew lexemes that connote power and authority: דֹּאִים (4:13.14; 5:8; 8:2.4; 9:14; 10:20), שָׁלְטָן (7:19; 8:8; 10:5), מְלָשָׁן (9:17; 10:4). Also, associated with political power or governance are the following words: כֹּחַ (4:1), מְדִינָה, גָּבֹהּ (5:7), מִשָׁפָּט, צֶדֶק, רֶשׁ (3:16-17),ﬠָשִּׁיק (4:1-3; 5:7; 7:7). Based on the lexemes, it appears that Qoheleth’s discussion of power issues describes the polarity of those in power and those without such power (3:16; 4:1-3; 5:8; 10:16-17). He accordingly points out on the one hand the oppressive, abusive use of power, and on the other hand, the ideal kingship, that is how power should be exercised.

The very nature and function of power and kingship is neither oppressive nor abusive but rather to promote and establish justice and righteousness in the country. Ancient near eastern wisdom texts advise rulers on the proper use of their position. The Babylonian literary composition Advice to a Prince, known from the libraries of the Assyrian king Ashur-
banipal, cautions a king against the divine retribution, which will overtake him, should he oppress his subjects:

1. If a king does not heed justice, his people will be thrown into chaos and his land will be devastated. 2. If he does not heed the justice of his land, Ea, king of destinies, will alter his destiny and he will not cease from hostilely pursuing him. 4. If he does not heed his nobles, his life will be cut short. 5. If he does not heed his adviser, his land will rebel against him. 6. If he heeds a rogue, the status quo in his land will change. 7. If he heeds a trick of Ea, the great gods ...

9. If he improperly convicts a citizen of Sippar, but acquits a foreigner, Shamash, judge of heaven and earth, will set up a foreign justice in his land, where the princes and judges will not heed justice … 55. If either a shepherd or a temple overseer, or a chief officer of the king, who serves as a temple overseer of Sippar, Nippur or Babylon 57. Imposes forced labour on them (i.e., the citizens of Sippar, Nippur and Babylon) in connection with the temples of the great gods, 58. The great gods will quit their dwelling in their fury and 59. Will not enter their shrines”. (Lambert 1960, pp. 110–15)

Similarly, the Egyptian instruction addressed to King Merikare, dated to the late third millennium is spoken by an old king to his son and successor advising him on how to be a good king, and how to avoid evil. The son is instructed on how to deal with rebellion and how to overcome it. The father also gives his son advice on dealing wisely and justly with nobles and commoners, on raising troops and on performing the religious duties (Lichtheim 1973, pp. 97–107).

In these literatures, rulers are taught to seek political stability and order (Perdue 1997, p. 89); they are responsible for the welfare of the people: “People without a king are (like) sheep without a shepherd” (Lambert 1960, pp. 229, 232, lines 14–15). This idea of the king as shepherd is not, therefore, unique, or specific to the Hebrew Bible. Ancient near eastern texts like Sennacherib’s Hexagonal Prism, the Gilgamesh Epic, and the Code of Hammurabi, all characterize the king as a shepherd.

In Qoh 5:8-9, Qoheleth targets the pinnacle of the government structure in his time, marked by oppression, distortions, corruption of justice, and the exploitation of the poor (Wei-Fun Goh 2019, pp. 54–56). In Qoheleth’s view, a king, the one in power, should exercise proper governance by subjugating lower-level corruptions (Wei-Fun Goh 2019, p. 61), making sure, on the one hand, that people are well fed from the produce of his well-tilled field (5:9), and, on the other hand, that they benefit from the political system and leadership and oppression is reduced. If the political powers are unable to establish justice for the well-being of the population, then, observes Qoheleth, this is a failure on their part, because of the pervasiveness of social injustice and the abuse of political power in the country.

3. The Power of the Powerful

(a) The corruption of the meqom hamishpat: Qoh 3:16-17.

Qoheleth 3:16-17 presents Qoheleth’s observation and reflection on the corruption of the judicial court and the oppression of the weak and the poor by the powerful or the wealthy:

“And moreover, I saw under the sun, in the place of judgment, wickedness was there; and in the place of righteousness, wickedness was there.”

In this verse, Qoheleth explicitly complains about the injustice in the place of judgement (עֲמַרְמַר וָכַּחַנה) and righteousness (יָכְוָסַת). As Yat-Shing Edwin Mung points out, Qoheleth “employs not only the vocabulary of justice (כָּרָשָׁע and שׁמֶךָ֣שֶׁם) but also that of injustice (כָּרָשָׁע) … to emphasize the seriousness of this lack. Social justice clearly should be maintained in the places of justice and righteousness.” (Mung 2015, ProQuest 10169968). This expected role and function of the ideal שִׁמְךָ֣שֶׁם is far from the reality. By the same
token, Qoheleth sees wickedness not as a simple violation of justice, but as a strong and evident contrast between the ideal, the expected, and the reality; that is, what should have happened and what did really happen.

In the realm of human existence, Qoheleth has seen wickedness where he expects to find justice and righteousness. Wherever one would expect to find justice, one surprisingly also discovers wickedness (רֶשׁ). The administration of justice is infected by wickedness (רֶשׁ); wickedness has penetrated the place of justice and righteousness. As Richard Belcher observes, “the very places where the innocent should be cleared of wrongdoing and the wicked should be declared guilty with the appropriate punishment, have become places of wickedness because justice is not carried.” (Belcher 2014, p. 129). One might contend that the prevalence of wickedness in the administration of government, and particularly in the judicial sphere, is not new to Qoheleth. It has always been and still is in our current world. The corruption of power is real and common. The hierarchical structure described in 5:7 reflects not only the levels of government bureaucracy but also the layers of corruption and malpractice, for a higher official watches over a high official, and even higher officials are above them, the poor being the victim.

On corruption in the place of justice or in the court system, Qoheleth would have words, the very same words, for our current world and countries. People are accused, judged, and condemned innocently, based on their social status or political affiliation. This is corroborated by the popular awareness of a two-tiered justice system or a two-speed justice system. To put it another way, there are different justices: the victors’ justice versus the justice of the vanquished, or the justice for the rich versus the justice of the poor, or the justice for the white versus the justice for the black. It goes without saying that justice is always on the side of the victors, the rich, since they can hire better attorneys, and even bribe the judges. The worst thing is that nothing can be done against this practice, since those responsible for such injustices have the power in their hands, as Qoheleth says: מָיהְּנוֹכְּחַ (Qoh 4:1). Qoheleth’s problem and frustration is not, therefore, that injustice is done, but that it goes unpunished and wickedness in the place of justice cannot be corrected. When the halls of justice become corridors of corruption, where can righteousness be found?

In response to the situation of injustice, Qoheleth offers, in 3:17, a theological statement on divine justice, which is not limited to the fool but also includes the wise at the appointed time (ﬠ). In so doing, God will reestablish the deed-consequences nexus; “the innocent and the guilty would get what they actually deserve from the hand of God.” (Longman 1998, p. 127). In the meantime, people continue to perpetuate injustice. The delay of divine justice is even described by Qoheleth as a source of oppression and injustice (8:11). In the realm of politics, the corruption or distortion of justice appears to be one of the causes of the political instabilities in many countries, mainly in Africa.

(b) Political oppression, a cause of injustice: Qoh 4:1-3

Following his outcry on corruption in the law court in 3:16, Qoheleth now observes in 4:1-3 the distress of its victims, thus moving from “a wide-spectrum view of injustices (3:16) to a tighter, more vividly imagined lens the actual suffering of individuals who are the victims of such inversions of justice (4:1).” (Duncan 2017, p. 57). Like in 3:16, Qoheleth speaks of the oppression of the poor in the province, that is, in the state. In 5:7 it is relatively easy to understand what the oppression is and to whom it is happening. If the poor are the lowest in the society, the oppression is the theft of justice within the judicial and political system, which Ibn Ezra characterizes as an “open and brazen oppression, rather than stealthy and clandestine.” (Zlotowitz 1979, p. 112).

That Qoheleth links injustice and oppression is praiseworthy, although oppression is a theme found throughout the Hebrew Bible. For, the perversion of justice leads undoubtedly to oppression, and oppression is fundamentally a form of injustice. According to the TWOT, the verbal root כָּעַב, is concerned with acts of abuse of power or authority, the burdening, trampling, and crushing of those lower in class (Harris et al. 1980, 1713a, p. 705). Richard Belcher is then right when he asserts, “oppression can include injustice in the law.
courts, but it also includes any misuse of power by those who have the authority to exercise it.” (Belcher 2014, p. 142). Oppression, then, is the loss of justice because the officials are too preoccupied with these other things when they are supposed to be watching out for justice. In this vein, Delitzsch argues, “the oppression consists of the judge withholding legal aid to those who need it” (Delitzsch and Keil 1993, p. 317). It is the temptation to abuse the power one has by oppressing or extorting others. This is what brings about madness.

The world of observation, oppression, and the acts of wickedness that interests Qoheleth is not an invisible world nor is it inaccessible, but the habitat of the human race, “the realm of living” (Seow 1997, pp. 104–5; Wei-Fun Goh 2019, p. 77), here designated by the expression שֶׁתָּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ (taḥat haššāmeš). In this realm of living, Qoheleth saw three things: “all the oppressions,” the tears of the oppressed, and finally, the וּמִיּוֹשֵׁכִים (miyōshēḵîm), and draws a conclusion.

Both the oppressors and the oppressed are longing for comforters (מְנַחֵם). Unfortunately, there is no one to comfort them (אֵין לָהֶם מְנַחֵם). What kind of comforter might Qoheleth expect for the victims of injustice, of the abuse of political power? Far from being simply a gentle word in the face of oppression, the comforter, rather, refers to active help and assistance to deal with oppression (Zuck 2003, p. 272). That there is no one to comfort the oppressed, the victims of injustice, is an expression of a society in crisis, where all the moral, religious, and human values are completely lost, and where injustice and oppression appear normal and are widespread.

Once again, Qoheleth’s concern is to draw people’s attention and awareness to what is done under the sun, however obvious it might be. To see or to know that oppression exists is one thing. To bring it out or to speak out against it, as Qoheleth does, is another thing. This indeed is characteristic of someone who has a great concern for justice and well-being in society. He is so concerned that he is emotionally affected because of the lack of comforters and the presence of the oppressors.

(c) Rights or duties of the powerless and the oppressed

In the previous analysis, Qoheleth mentions the absolute power of those in power, as he acknowledges the human contribution to injustice, oppression, and abuses (cf. Job 24; Prov 13:23; 14:31; 18:23; 28:15); in this second part, Qoheleth addresses those at the bottom of the traditional power ladder, counselling prudence when dealing with royalty. In Qoh 8:2–5a, the king’s command is associated with the king’s wrath, which parallels the Proverbs of Ahiqar. Both texts discuss obedience to the king. They elaborate on kingly obedience in order to do no harm.

Ahiqar’s cautionary advice to his disciple is essentially intended to show the seriousness to be attached to any order of the king, whose wrath is extremely dangerous and whose authority cannot be questioned. The importance of this Aramaic parallel lies not only in the similarity of its subject, namely, the conduct to adopt in the face of the king’s anger (Prov 16:14; 19:12; 20:2; Qoh 10:4), but also in the fact that it compares the king’s supremacy to the supremacy of the gods. The idea of kingship in the ancient near eastern world relates closely with religion.

Echoing descriptions of the power of the divine warrior in Canaanite mythology, the Aramaic text speaks of the king’s tongue breaking a dragon’s ribs like death. Moreover, the king is compared to the great god El, known by one of his best-known epithets, אֵל רַחוּם, “merciful God” (Exod 34:6; Deut 4:31, Jon 4:2). Before him, no one can stand.

As he uses familiar wisdom ideas common among people of that time, Qoheleth accentuates the authority of the king and the powerlessness of his subjects (Loader 1979, p. 70) by comparing the supremacy of the king to the supremacy of divinity. Such comparison is not outdated in our times, where political leaders often behave or command like deities, convincing themselves of having eternity and power in their hands. In so doing, Qoheleth advises the reader to adopt an appropriate attitude in the royal court, that is, before the one who holds absolute power (8:3; 10:4–7). One must not show animosity, but rather must act with prudence and wisdom, respecting the king’s orders and maintaining self-control (10:4–7). It is, in fact, risky to act tactlessly in the king’s presence, mainly when the power-
ful one can do whatever he pleases (אֲשֶׁרֶה יַחֲפֹץ יָכֹל) and no one will be able to question him about what he does (לֹא יַחֲפֹץ וּלְמָהוּ אָמַר). Such advice aligns with that of the Instructions of Ankhsheshonq (Lichtheim 1980, pp. 159–80). The wise person uses tools such as calmness in the face of anger (10:4) and speech that is prudent and ambiguous (10:16–20). Said otherwise, Qoheleth counsels wise subordination and diplomacy toward a ruler. Qoheleth does not advocate slyness. Rather, he cautions against an immediate clash, which is inappropriate. When the political reality is very challenging, a wise person knows to act with diplomacy by concealing negative sentiments. Thus, Qoheleth warns against direct confrontation; he encourages, instead, the wise handling of courtly matters. One should know how to coexist with the political reality because the trouble of humankind is heavy upon them (Wei-Fun Goh 2019, p. 65; Garrett 1987, p. 170). If tyranny is a serious political evil, the crux of the matter, as Qoheleth highlights, is that “no one knows what is going to happen” (כִּי־אֵין יד זֶה הוּא אָדָם יַגִּיד לְדַעְתָּם.). This rhetorical question, as Fun Goh observes, “is an oratory against the idea of absolute power. No one knows what is going to happen, not even the one who has supreme authority that threatens everyone” (Wei-Fun Goh 2019, p. 65). Hence, our next section will focus on the hevelness of political power.

II The hevelness of African power (4:13-16)

4. A Disordered Political Continent

In the most recent decade, Africa has experienced a significant growth in political instability, through military coups d’etat, or mass revolution. In fact, if in the early years of their independence, African countries were viewed with optimism and discounted for the possibility of military intervention in politics, it seems to be a “monnaie courante” for our generation. This positive view quickly changed to the opposite in the 1960s because of widespread violence, including continuous unrest. Thus, in his 1968 paper, Bell claims, “all of black-ruled sub-Saharan Africa is prone to military coups” (Bell 1968, p. 272). Andreski is more radical, even pessimistic. For him, the military coups d’etat are natural and endemic to the continent (Andreski 1968, pp. 208–9). They are likely to occur anywhere in the region because of the fundamental and lasting characteristics of political life (Zolberg 1968, p. 72). Though it is not peculiar to Africa (be it mentioned, the political crises in Ukraine, Russia, Israel, Palestine, Syria, Afghanistan …), the political instability, the hevelness of power, which characterizes many African countries, gives credit to the above-mentioned scholars’ viewpoint and argument. Across the continent, one can see, not only the tears of the oppressed, the corruption of justice, the exploitation of the poor and bloodshed, but also political leaders, mainly military powers, replacing another leader or the entire governmental system through political or military insurrection. They are in search of political stability and good leadership. However noble this goal might be, the problem that leads to political crisis and instability is the pursuit of power as an end in itself, which for Qoheleth is harmful and fleeting.

5. The Hevelness of Power

In Qoh 4:13-16, 9:13-16, 10:16-17, Qoheleth is reacting to the political situation of his time. Inspired by the fast succession of kings in Alexandria, Qoheleth exposes the hazards of power, which he connects with the transience (הֶבֶל) theme since, according to his experience, popularity, political success, and power are an unreliable, though much desired, value in society (4:13-16). Ben Sira referred to the same unreliability of political power in 11:5 πολλοὶ τυράννου ἐκαθότην ἐπὶ ἐκάθρος ὁ δὲ ἀνυπόστος ἑφόρεσεν διάμνιχ ("many kings have had to sit on the ground, but one who was never thought of has worn a crown"). Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, one finds stories of kings who thought their position secure and inviolable, being defeated or overturned by other kings. An example of this is Sennacherib’s campaign against Judah, as narrated in Isaiah, Kings, and Chronicles. Sennacherib, the king of Assyria, who sent his army to defeat King Hezekiah of Judah and
capture Jerusalem and boasted of his position and his might over the God of Israel, was defeated and finally killed by his sons when he thought himself to be worshipping in the security of his pagan temple.

Those with political power in Africa, in their pretention to have absolute power or to be the divine saviour of their population, are also marked by that very same heb{ê}lness. In the African political arena, stability is not a fact, but a dream, a challenge. The mother continent, Africa, is, in fact, known for its various, multiple, and repeated instabilities. In the last eighteen months, we have been seeing a significant increase in coups d’état, with the military seizing power in Burkina Faso, Sudan, Guinea, Tchad, Mali, and Gabon.

Referring to the coup in Sudan in 2021, Antonio Guterres spoke of an “epidemic of coups d’état” (Guterres 2021) in Africa. Guterres’ explanation for this multiplication of coups d’état is the total impunity and the absolute power of certain military leaders who “can do whatever they want because nothing will happen to them” (Guterres 2021). The motive of these different coups is more than what Guterres claims them to be. The determinants of coups d’état in Africa are social oppression and injustice and governance deficiencies, but also “greed, selfishness, mismanagement of diversity and opportunity, marginalisation, human rights abuses, refusal to accept electoral defeat, manipulation of constitutions, as well as unconstitutional revision of constitutions in favour of narrow interests and corruption”. 8

According to studies carried out by an American researcher, Jonathan Powell, “a recent coup d’état can signal a break in political continuity, a change in power dynamics that may prompt future counter-coups” (Powell and Thyne 2011, p. 252), with the risk of falling into a “spiral of coups d’état” in rapid succession. One of the most prominent characteristics of the recent coups d’état in African countries, and which is to be taken as a sign of hope, is the youngness of their perpetrators, whose age range is between 34 and 41. Qoheleth had already observed it in his time.

In 4:13-16, Qoheleth presents an anecdote that recounts an event of a curious political nature. It contains a satirical spike in which two contrasting characters are depicted: a poor youth (יֶלֶ debounceַב) but wise (וְחָכָםּ) is set in contrast to and in favour of an old but foolish king (מִימוּניָלוּכְסִיל). Whether the poor boy comes from the “house of binding” (מִבָּיתהָסוּרִים) or “was born poor” (שִּנְוָלָדרָ), he is, because of his wisdom, better qualified than the old king for royal rule (Krüger 2004, p. 113) in due time. As Crenshaw points out, “the הָסוּרִים did not prevent the youth from putting his knowledge to effective use. In due time his experience was recognized, and he rose to rule over a kingdom in which he had been born poor” (Crenshaw 1987, p. 113) in favour of the king, whose lack of wisdom can no longer be admonished or take counsel (אֲשֶׁרלֹא־יָדַעלְהִזָּהֵרעוֹ). In other words, the old king can no longer take care of himself, and, thus, of his kingdom. Crenshaw accordingly contends that the phrase points to the unconscious aspect of the king’s behaviour. Refusing to take advice has become second nature to him” (Crenshaw 1987, p. 113).

Africa does not lack foolish leaders, that is, political leaders, mainly presidents, with the unconsciousness disease. Despite their mental or physical disability, some refuse to resign from power. This addiction to power and wealth often leads to political revolution or coups d’état. A political leader who is no longer open to advice could be catastrophic for his people. The most recent case in this respect occurred in the Republic of Gabon. God forbids! Other countries, such as Cameroon and Congo Brazzaville, whose leaders are suffering from old age diseases, might go through such experiences if things remain as they are. The comparisons between the young and the old, the wise and the foolish, a commoner and a king, although typical of the wisdom literature, question the traditional and social belief that wisdom is related to old age or grey hair. Qoheleth reverses the traditional value by exalting youth and decrying old age.

It is in that lens that one should read or understand “l’éveil des consciences” we are now having in some African countries with the youth decrying old and pro-colonizer leaders by overturning them. The young political leaders are challenged to make and offer something different to the people, having their strength and leadership rooted in wisdom.
For Qoheleth, wisdom is better than weapons of war (אֵין קֵץ, 9:18) and might forbid! Other countries, such as Cameroon and Congo Brazzavi forbid! Other countries, such as Cameroon and Congo Brazzavi.

As shown earlier in the introduction, the word תַּחְתָיו is used here as an expression of the fleetingness that characterizes political power. As Fun Goh points out, “the popularity associated with political leadership is unpredictable and ununiformed” (Wei-Fun Goh 2019, p. 81). In other words, political power is unstable and short-lived. It is transient (כָּל) and does not bring any lasting impact. Even if the entrance of a political power or ruler is marked with hope, in time, there is little to choose between different kings and reigns. Qoheleth does not hope that political power will bring about change, for it too will be forgotten. If there is hope, it is in the hebelness of political power. There is no lasting power under the sun. The ‘olam is for God not for humans and their achievements. One may attain great power in this life, but this power does not go with those who hold it when they die. It is passed on to someone else and the memory of the earlier ruler fades. It is of no lasting value, at least for the one who holds it, for every leader surrenders his authority at his death.

6. Conclusions

In a world governed by the injustice of the wealthy and powerful classes, the abuse of the rights of powerless, the inequitable distribution of resources, in a broken Africa, threatened by political instabilities and the subsequent high cost of living, corruption, oppression, and futility experienced on a daily basis, there is reason to be sceptical, fatalistic, and to despair. Even if the entrance of a political power or ruler is marked with hope, in time, there is little to believe that political power will bring about real change in people’s lives. Yet, for Qoheleth, there is hope in a broken and wounded continent like Africa. For Qoheleth, indeed, there is time for everything (כָּל תַּחְתָיו; 3:1-10), and, therefore, a time to oppress, and a time to end oppression, a time for injustice, and a time for judgment and justice. In 8:6, Qoheleth advances an idea of hope — there will be a time and judgment whatever the present reality is. In other words, in response to the situation of injustice, corruption, and oppression, Qoheleth offers, in 3:17; 11:9, and 12:13-14, a theological statement on divine
justice, which is not limited to the fool but also includes the wise at the appointed time (ﬠ͏ֵת). In so doing, God will reestablish the deed-consequences nexus; “the innocent and the guilty would get what they actually deserve from the hand of God”. According to Peterson, the God of Qoheleth is the answer to all the chaos of a broken world (Lavoie 2020, p. 490). Thus, Qoheleth does not exclude faith in judgment beyond the grave nor in the resurrection (12:14). Furthermore, in asserting the advantage of justice, as well as the fleetingness of unjust, abusive, and oppressive governments, Qoheleth wants to bring to his audience a glimmer of hope rather than a fatalistic feeling. This is a strong call for Africans to abandon the ideology of the so called afropessimism and to create a more optimistic social, political, and economic environment, the key for any development and political stability. Given that the unjust governments will likely pass away, there is, thus, the possibility of more just and, hence, more stable governments to arise, even though they too will ultimately pass away. Qoheleth’s immediate concern on this matter is to minimize risk at the moment. Hence, his political wisdom, which one should have in mind and follow. First, one is to keep the command of the king (8:2). Second, one does not leave one’s position hastily due to an incident (8:3). Third, one should not plan harmful actions to avoid further hurt (8:3). It is wise to acknowledge that any occurrence of tyranny will expect judgment (8:6), whether from humans or God. In fact, time, and God’s judgment, are the sustaining factors that offer hope.

It remains, however, that the prominent reason for hope is the hevelness of human beings and their achievements, which are like passing “breath” (הבל).

The use of הֶבֶל applied to different areas of life calls attention to the fleetingness of human experience in the world compared to God’s eternity. In Qoheleth’s view, there is nothing eternal on Earth—everything is fleeting (הבל הֶבֶל). Qoheleth believes that as long as there is a power structure, there is potential for injustice, oppression, and misguided motives in political leadership. Nevertheless, it is vital for a person to embrace certain attitudes in order to cope with it meaningfully. Due to the fleeting nature of life, Qoheleth offers hope to his readers and urges them to put God first and enjoy God’s good gifts, not as a destination in life, but rather as part of one’s Earthly journey.

By using the term הֶבֶל, Qoheleth reminds the readers of their transience in this world, with its pressing and tragic problems, as well as comforting them with the fact that evil itself is temporary in its impacts on life. They will pass away. Understanding the fleeting nature of political power through Qoheleth’s use of הֶבֶל helps one to stand firm in the midst of oppression, and to try to find and to give meaning to life. It also gives the hope that challenges can be tough; however, they are not permanent. One should, therefore, leave room for other opportunities or possibilities. For an African reader, life is not black versus white, there are many other colours that enrich the tapestry of life. A reading of Qoheleth gives the sense that human beings need to benefit from the diversity of life’s experience. It was, therefore, the aim of this paper to explore the hermeneutical possibility of Qoheleth’s use of הֶבֶל to understand the political instability in African leadership.

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Notes

1 A comprehensive survey on the history of the interpretation and meaning of הֶבֶל in the Hebrew Bible and mainly in Qoheleth is prominently found in the studies of Sneed (2017); Meek (2016); Fuhr (2013, pp. 29–63); Sneed (2012, pp. 155–74); Ingram (2006, pp. 91–129); Miller (2002); Anderson (1997); Fox (1986).
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