

Parshanut on Qohelet 8: 1— Advice on how to get along in the shadow of the king’s arbitrary authority leads to reflections about *shilton*, which can be rendered “rule,” “authority,” or “control.” Earlier wisdom too is aware of the dangers of power. The Book of Proverbs warns about the king’s wrath (e.g. “The terror of a king is like the roar of a lion; he who provokes his anger risks his life; 20: 2), but on the whole it is less chary than Qoheleth of the king’s temper and more confident of his justice. Later, living under the Romans, R. Shemaiah shares Qohelet’s suspicions: **“Do not become intimate with authorities”** (mAvot 1: 10). And R. Gamliel III warns, **“Be wary of authorities, for they bring a man near them only for their own ends. They appear to be friends when it is useful to them, but they do not stand by a man in trouble.”** (mAvot 2: 3).

It is virtually impossible that the author or the readers of Ecclesiastes would have access to an actual king. “King” may stand for all the authorities within the imperial hierarchy (mentioned in 5: 7), whose power was an extension of the king’s.

Qoheleth Rabbah, Rashi, Rashbam and other traditional commentators identify the “king” as God, whose command, the Torah, is supreme and must be obeyed. The “oath” (v.2) is then Israel’s pledge of obedience at Mount Horeb. By this reading the passage is a fervent affirmation of obedience—to God. The exegesis identifies “wise one” variously as God, Adam, Israel, the Torah scholar, and Moses (*Qoheleth Rabbah* 8: 1).

None compares to the wise; after all who can take issue with the interpretive competence of Joseph (Genesis 40-41) and Daniel (Daniel 2, 4, 5, 7)? Their competence as being the ones who can interpret dreams (*peshet davat*) is important for knowing the Way. These dream interpretations conveyed to their interpreters go back to God (Genesis 41: 38-39, Daniel 2: 46). Wisdom bestows itself upon a person a self-conscious and relaxed appearance refers here to the heart. The heart of a person changes their face, both for the aught and for naught. The sign of a good heart is a radiant face, but brooding sorrows evoke arduous thoughts. Wisdom is what makes a person’s face shine, and through power it is distorted. Both Joseph and Daniel were wise but also could have been distorted by the power they realized. There are limits even to wisdom: firstly, this raises the question of how human wisdom is related to divine wisdom; secondly, this problematizes the connection between wisdom and power. (Kruger, 151-152).