

Ecclesiastes 2:12

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And I turned myself to behold wisdom, and madness, and folly: for what can the man do that cometh after the king? even that which hath been already done.

Analysis

And I turned myself to behold wisdom, and madness, and folly—after exhausting pleasure's possibilities, Solomon investigates wisdom itself. The Hebrew 'panah' (פָּנָה, turned) suggests deliberate reorientation of focus. He examines wisdom comparatively, studying it alongside its opposites: 'madness' (holelot, חֹלָלָת) and 'folly' (sikhlu, סִכְלָת). True understanding requires knowing not only truth but also error, not only wisdom but also its absence.

The second clause proves enigmatic: **for what can the man do that cometh after the king? even that which hath been already done.** Most likely this means: what can any successor accomplish that Solomon hasn't already attempted? Having exhausted all experimental possibilities with unmatched resources and wisdom, Solomon's conclusions carry unique authority. Future generations cannot improve on his comprehensive investigation—they can only repeat what 'hath been already done.' Alternatively, it may mean: what can those who come after learn that Solomon hasn't already discovered? Either way, the verse establishes Solomon's experiment as definitive—no one has better positioned to answer life's meaning questions.

Historical Context

Solomon's comprehensive investigation of wisdom, madness, and folly reflects ancient Near Eastern wisdom tradition's methods. Egyptian wisdom literature

(Instructions of Amenemope, Ptahhotep) and Mesopotamian texts explored life's meaning through observation and reflection. However, Ecclesiastes uniquely grounds its investigation in covenant theology rather than generic moralism. The phrase 'that cometh after the king' may reflect royal succession anxieties. First Kings 11:26-40 describes Jeroboam's rebellion, and 1 Kings 12 records Rehoboam's foolish policies that split the kingdom. Solomon's successors could not match his wisdom or resources, validating his claim that they could only repeat 'that which hath been already done.' The New Testament identifies Christ as the greater Solomon (Matthew 12:42) whose wisdom definitively reveals life's meaning.

Related Passages

John 3:16 — God's love and salvation

Ephesians 2:8 — Salvation by grace through faith

Study Questions

1. How does studying foolishness and madness alongside wisdom deepen your understanding of what true wisdom is?
2. What does Solomon's unique position—unmatched wisdom and resources—teach about the authority of his conclusions concerning life's meaning?

Interlinear Text

וַיַּפְנֵן יְהִי	וְיָסַךְ וְיָהֹלֵל וְיָהֹלֵל וְיָתֵן יְתֵן	וְיָתֵן יְתֵן וְיָהֹלֵל וְיָהֹלֵל וְיָסַךְ
And I turned	myself to behold	wisdom and madness and folly
H6437	H7200	H2451 H1947 H5531
מִן הַמְּדֹבָר	שִׁיבְרוֹא	לְאַמְּרָה אַמְּרָה
for what can the man	do that cometh	the king
H4100	H120	H935 H310 H4428
כִּי רְשָׁוֹהָן	עֲשָׂוָה	לְרָא וְתָרָא
even that which hath been already	done	וְתָרָא וְתָרָא וְתָרָא
H3528	H6213	H589 H7200 H2451

Additional Cross-References

Ecclesiastes 1:17 (Parallel theme): And I gave my heart to know wisdom, and to know madness and folly: I perceived that this also is vexation of spirit.

Ecclesiastes 7:25 (Parallel theme): 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:

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