

Ecclesiastes 8:9-10

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/eccl/eccl-8/ecclesiastes-89-10/>

The abuse of authority leads men astray. The destiny of wicked rulers is futility.

When Solomon says *applied my mind*, the word for *applied* literally means “given over.” He has given himself fully to this quest and has carefully *seen all this, every deed that has been done under the sun*. He has considered these matters exhaustively.

Elsewhere in Ecclesiastes, Solomon speaks positively of the *authority* God has given humans to steward their choices and the resources of this world. He uses the same word here, “shalat,” which means “rule” or “dominion.” What makes it a negative here is that a *man exercises authority over another man to his hurt*. The power could be used for good, but when it is aimed improperly, it creates *hurt*. In a world where power often flows to those who seek it, this sort of tyranny is a common occurrence.

Humans *hurt* one another when *authority* is *exercised* improperly. The word for hurt here is “ra,” which means evil. Both the man being hurt and the one hurting him are plagued by this manifestation of evil in God’s world.

Next, an observation is made about *wicked* people. It seems reasonable the *wicked* people in mind might include those who improperly *exercised authority* over others to their *hurt*. However, the next sentence begins with “therefore”—translated here *so then*. Solomon proclaims, *So then, I have seen the wicked buried, those who used to go in and out from the holy place, and they are soon forgotten in the city where they did thus*.

It appears Solomon is recounting observations of rulers of other realms. Solomon testifies that *I have seen*, so this is drawn from his personal experience. Solomon’s firsthand experience with rulers of Israel was observing his father King David, who made mistakes but was a man after God’s own heart (1 Sam 13:4) and was not an abusive ruler. The exception might have been the short period where his brother Absalom deposed their father. But that short stint would not have allowed this observation.

Therefore, it seems likely Solomon would have in mind observations of rulers from other realms. Solomon had relationships with many kingdoms ([1 Kings 9-11](#)). He notes that these *wicked people used to go in and out from the holy place*. Authoritarian rulers always cloak themselves in some sort of moral authority. In the Middle Ages, rulers of the “Holy Roman Empire” claimed their right to rule was a “divine right” from God. But pagan rulers typically began with a claim of being appointed by their gods, then eventually claimed to be gods. This was true of the rulers of Egypt and Rome, as examples.

In Solomon’s era, surrounding rulers worshipped their gods and claimed the favor of their gods to provide strength and blessing. In fact, wives that Solomon took from surrounding nations turned his heart from the Lord due to their worship of other gods ([1 Kings 11](#)).

Another example of the piety of rulers before their gods of stone can be seen in the story of the ark of God being captured during the era of Samuel the prophet ([1 Samuel 5](#)). When Israel took the ark into battle, the Philistines were dismayed ([1 Samuel 4:5-8](#)). They recognized God had delivered Israel through the Red Sea and defeated the Egyptians. However, they considered the ark to be a god like theirs, something that could be carried and manipulated. When they captured the ark, they demonstrated piety to their system of belief and placed the captured ark before a statue of their god Dagon ([1 Samuel 5](#)). The statue kept falling down and losing body parts, while the Philistine cities experienced plagues. The lords of the Philistines decided to send the ark back to Israel.

Another example of pagan piety from an earlier era comes from the story of Naaman the Syrian general, who was healed by God through the ministry of the prophet Elisha. After Naaman was healed of leprosy, he committed to worship the true God, but asked permission to bow his head to the Syrian god Rimmon when his king asked him to come and worship. The passage where Naaman requests permission from God’s prophet Elisha follows:

“In this matter may the LORD pardon your servant: when my master goes into the house of Rimmon to worship there, and he leans on my hand and I bow myself in the house of Rimmon, when I bow myself in the house of Rimmon, the LORD pardon your servant in this matter.’ He said to him, ‘Go in peace’” ([2 Kings 5:18-19](#)).

This is another example of a pagan ruler petitioning favor from a god. Solomon could be musing over the irony of a ruler petitioning a god’s favor for himself while being abusive to those over whom he rules. “I want favor and

blessing from my authority, but I will not give it to others over whom I rule.” Solomon appropriately calls this *wicked*.

In any event, that *wicked* ruler who abused his authority will meet the same end as all men—be *buried*, then *soon forgotten in the city where they did thus*. The ruler who wrapped himself in moral authority, who pursued his own glory at the expense of others, will have no glory. He will *soon be forgotten in the city* where he ruled. Solomon observes *this too is vanity*. Men sow hypocrisy and reap futility; it is like trying to grab vapor—vanity (“hebel,” see notes on 1:2).

[Exodus 29:31](#) uses the term *holy place* to refer to the place where sacrifices are offered in Israel. Solomon likely has in mind a pagan *holy place*, like pagan temples referred to above. However, there were occasions from Israel’s history where the priests of Israel misled the people, and abused their authority. An example might be Korah the priest’s rebellion against Moses ([Numbers 16](#)). It is possible Solomon has this in mind as well.

Biblical Text:

⁹ **All this I have seen and applied my mind to every deed that has been done under the sun wherein a man has exercised authority over another man to his hurt.¹⁰ So then, I have seen the wicked buried, those who used to go in and out from the holy place, and they are soon forgotten in the city where they did thus. This too is futility.**