
Qoheleth

A Commentary

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Qoheleth
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Translation

1 The words of Qoheleth, the son of David,
the king in Jerusalem.^a

1a 𐤀 𐤍 𐤏 Syh 𐤏 read: "the king of Israel in Jerusalem."

The title of the book of Qoheleth offers in concise form the information that was essential (in the contemporary understanding) about its author (name, lineage, office, and sphere of operation).¹ This information is not to be understood in the sense of the modern concept of author. It does not assert the authenticity of the "words of Qoheleth" but claims the authority of "Qoheleth" for the present book.² In this sense, in Prov 1:1 the book of Proverbs is placed under the authority of King Solomon, although it also contains the words of other wise men, who are named (30:1: Agur; 31:1: Lemuel) or anonymous (22:17 [see *BHS*]; 24:23), and points expressly to the process of its redaction (25:1). Kings or high offi-

cial also figure in Egyptian wisdom writings as the author or recipient of wisdom teachings.³ In such authorizations, knowledge and power are closely linked.

The book of Qoheleth takes up the convention of the authorization of wisdom teachings but uses it in a way that thwarts and, as it were, "deconstructs" its intentions: Qoheleth is not an Israelite king who is known from OT traditions.⁴ The designation "descendant" or "son of David" suggests his identification with Solomon, without expressly making that identification.⁵ The first-person report of "King Qoheleth" in 1:12–2:26 is reminiscent of the biblical image of Solomon, which, however, often seems to be treated ironically. After chapter 2

- 1 In the OT cf. esp. Jer 1:1; Prov 1:1, also Amos 1:1; Neh 1:1; Prov 10:1; 30:1; 31:1, as well as the titles of Egyptian wisdom teachings; see Brunner, *Altägyptische Weisheit*, 75; cf. K. F. D. Römheld, *Die Weisheitslehre im Alten Orient: Elemente einer Formgeschichte* (BN Beihefte 4; Munich: Manfred Görg, 1989) 17ff.
- 2 Cf. D. G. Meade, *Pseudonymity and Canon: An Investigation into the Relationship of Authorship and Authority in Jewish and Earliest Christian Tradition* (WUNT 39; Tübingen: Mohr, 1986). The same is true of the OT prophetic writings, whose "naming is not to be understood in the modern, post-Greek sense as information on authors but on authority. . . . They were probably also understood thus by contemporaries, of whom at least a minority familiar with the traditional texts could identify the new editions as such" (Otto Kaiser, *Der Gott des Alten Testaments: Theologie des AT*, part 1: *Grundlegung* [UTB 1747; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993] 243). The Babylonian Talmud (*B. Batra* 14b-15a) then distinguishes between "authorities" and "authors" of the biblical books: thus, for example, Hezekiah and his collegium (cf. Prov 25:1) "wrote" the books of Isaiah, Proverbs, Canticles, and Qoheleth; the "men of the great synagogue" "wrote" Ezekiel, the *Testaments of the Twelve Prophets*, Daniel, and Esther.
- 3 Cf., e.g., the teachings of King Amenemhet I (Brunner, *Altägyptische Weisheit*, no. 6), of Prince Djedefhor (ibid., no. 1), and for King Merikare (ibid., no. 4; in l. 256 they quote an otherwise unknown "Teaching of King Khety"). The "writers or authors" named in Egyptian wisdom teachings can, "apart from a very few exceptions, be relegated

- to literary fiction" (Heike Sternberg-el Hotabi, *TUAT* 3:191). P. Seibert (*Die Charakteristik: Untersuchungen zu einer altägyptischen Sprechsitte und zu ihren Ausprägungen in Folklore und Literatur*, part 1: *Philologische Bearbeitung der Bezeugungen* [AA 17; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1967] 69–70) has recommended that one distinguish between "teaching authority" and "teaching recorder" (cf. Römheld, *Weisheitslehre*, 18 n. 3).
- 4 Contra Lohfink: "the name Qoheleth may possibly evoke in the minds of readers of the Hebrew Bible that, according to 1 Kgs 8:1, Solomon assembled (*yahēl*) in Jerusalem all the ancients of Israel, and all the heads of the tribes"; similarly, Crenshaw, for example, and A. S. Kamenetzky ("Der Rätselname Kohelet," *ZAW* 34 [1914] 226), who in view of the occurrence of the root *qhl* in 1 Chr 28:1, 8; 29:1; 2 Chr 1:3, 5; 5:2, 3; 6:3, 12; 7:8 holds that the name *qōhelet* characterizes Solomon "as the one in whose biography the stem *qhl* often appears." Yet that appears almost as erroneous as F. Zimmermann's ("The Aramaic Provenance of Qohelet," *JQR* 36 [1945/46] 43–44) interpretation of *qōhelet* as a cryptogram for Solomon, since the number value of the Aramaic equivalent(!) *knšh* corresponds to that of *šlmh* (Solomon) (see Whitley, *Koheleth*, 5).
- 5 In addition to Solomon, any other, later member of the Davidic dynasty can be designated *ben-dāwid*, "descendant of David." And *melek bīrūšālam*, "(a) king in Jerusalem," can refer back to both "Qoheleth" and "David." Contrary to Delitzsch, but with Ellermeier (*Qohelet*, I/1, 165),

“Qoheleth” no longer speaks as “king.” The epilogue in 12:9-14 designates him as a “wise man” (12:9) and places his book on the level of the “sayings of wise men” (12:11). Moreover, in the continued reading of the book of Qoheleth, the identification of “Qoheleth” as “king (Solomon)” reveals itself more and more clearly as a fictive travesty. Moreover, what “Qoheleth” says as a “wise” man in chapters 3–12 contradicts in part his statements as “king” in 1:12–2:26. The “subtle playing with the identity” of the teaching authority thwarts the function of authorization and legitimization, and it leaves the reader free to compare his/her own life with its experiences, and to accept its logic only after critical examination.⁶ Wisdom and power are not necessarily connected with each other (cf. 4:13).

In the book of Qoheleth the critique of the legitimization of wisdom teachings through a royal teaching authority is not absolutely against the “Solomonic” wisdom of the book of Proverbs as such. It makes clear, however, that in any case “Solomon” became an authority on wise thinking and living not as a king but as a wise man (cf. Wisdom 6–9)—and that his authority must prove itself ever anew with the readers of his teachings. Moreover, it throws a critical light on the claims of knowledge and education of contemporary Hellenistic rulers, as well as those of representatives of the “upper class” who live “like a king” (cf. Job 29:25).⁷

If one sees in the authorization of the book of Qoheleth through the title in 1:1 (and the epilogue in 12:9-14) a deliberate playing with literary conventions,⁸ the “editorial framework” of the book as such still does not allow the conclusion that the “words of Qoheleth” were revised redactionally. More obvious at first is the assumption that the author of the book of Qoheleth put his reflections of fictive teaching authority into “Qoheleth’s” mouth. In this way he reserved for himself the possibility of also distancing himself again from “Qoheleth” (cf. below on 12:9-14).

Morphologically, in קהלה *qôhelet* we have a feminine singular participle (qal) of the root קהל *qhl*, which in the reflexive stem (niph'al) means “gather together,” in the causative stem (hiphil), “gather (someone);” “a singular participle of the basic stem also occurs occasionally with other verbs (e.g., דובר *dôber*) and thus presents no difficulties linguistically.”⁹ The interchanging of indetermination (קהלה *qôhelet*: 1:1, 2, 12; 12:9) and determination (הקהלה *haqqôhelet*: 7:27 [corr.]; 12:8) indicates that in “Qoheleth” a designation of function became the name of its (according to 1:1-2; 12:8-9, male) bearer.¹⁰ It could be a matter of a kind of nickname that by its particular nature characterizes its bearer.¹¹

מֶלֶךְ *melek* is not determined by the following בִּירוּשָׁלַיִם *bîrûšālāim*. Even if one understands מֶלֶךְ בִּירוּשָׁלַיִם *melek bîrûšālāim* with Ellermeier (ibid., 166) as an “asyndetic attributive clause” (“who was [a] king in Jerusalem”), the reference back to both Qoheleth and David remains possible. And the conventions for book titles lead one to expect here an indication of the “author’s” office.

6 Lohfink, 44.

7 In New Aramaic every village chief is designated מֶלֶךְ *mlk*. On this basis it is occasionally recommended that one understand מֶלֶךְ *melek* in Qoh 1:1, 12 not in the sense of “king” but rather as “councilor” (Kroeber), “property-holder” (Ginsberg,

nations for functions that are performed by men in Qumran and in the Mishnah in Whitley, *Koheleth*, 4–5 (and already in Delitzsch, 204–5; Loretz, *Qohelet*, 146–47). In Ezra 2:55–57 there are several “names of the kind a master can give to his slaves to describe their characteristics or something similar: Hassophereth (v. 55) = writer, teacher; Peruda or Perida (v. 55) = apart, alone; Giddel (v. 57) = great (. . .); Pochereth-hazzebaim (v. 57) = gazelle catcher” (A. H. J. Gunneweg, *Ezra* [KAT 19.1; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1985] 63). Here too indetermination and determination alternate just as in Qoheleth. From this standpoint Michel’s (*Qohelet*, 4) statement that in Qoh “12:8 and perhaps also

Yet it is not entirely clear in what this consists: “The name Koheleth remains as enigmatic today as ever before.”¹² 6 translates קהלת *qōhelet* with ἐκκλησιαστής, “participant in a popular assembly” (Gk. ἐκκλησία = Heb. קהל *qāhāl*),¹³ Jerome with *concionator*, “popular speaker” (cf. Luther: “preacher”). Thus there are two directions in which the designation קהלת *qōhelet* from the Hebrew verb קהל *qhl* can be understood:¹⁴ (1) a function that is defined in some way that is over against and in relation to a popular assembly (however it might be more closely defined¹⁵), or (2) a representation of this popular assembly or its participants themselves (and the two possibilities do not have to be mutually exclusive).

In the first case the teaching authority of the book of Qoheleth would be characterized by the name קהלת *qōhelet* as a person who had in special measure devoted himself to “the people” (cf. 12:9) and rejoiced over the corresponding recognition and esteem.¹⁶ Then one could imagine with Lohfink “that Qoheleth offered his

teaching publicly [= for the ‘people’] in the marketplace, as did the Greek peripatetic philosophers. Now that must have been something new in Jerusalem, and it would have excited a lot of attention. A group of students gathered around him, and from this he acquired the name ‘Qoheleth.’ Either he, or his editor, flirted with this allusion in the book that later gathered his teaching together.”¹⁷

In the second case the designation קהלת *qōhelet* could indicate that in the book of Qoheleth the “voice of the (simple) people” is brought to expression: “I, the patient, silent public, bored by archaic teaching—I now speak for myself, in order to say what all the world down below ultimately thinks.”¹⁸

If one reads the book of Qoheleth as a continuation of the book of Proverbs,¹⁹ the title in Qoh 1:1 fits into a series of (sub)titles in Proverbs (Prov 1:1; 10:1; 22:17 [see *BHS*]; 24:23; 25:1; 30:1; 31:1).

12 Gordis, 193.

13 σ: παροιμιάστης, i.e., one who speaks in proverbs or parables.

14 Other derivations are found, for example, in Ginsberg, *Studies*, 33–35 (“the Convoker,” from Syr. *qhl*), E. Ullendorf, “The Meaning of קהלת,” *VT* 12 (1962) 215 (“the arguer,” from Aram.-Syr. *qhl*), and Whitley, *Koheleth*, 6 (“the Sceptic,” from Syr. *qhl*, “to consider”).

15 קהל *qāhāl* “can designate a team gathered for war, a judicial community, a cultic group, and the full assembly of the Jewish cultic community, but . . . also more limitedly, a ‘company of evildoers’ (Ps 26:5)” (Michel, *Qohelet*, 5). H.-P. Müller (“קהל *qāhāl* assembly,” *TLOT* 3:1132) wonders “whether there was a wisdom *qāhāl* which may also be envisioned in Sir 15:5,” and he points to *b. Abod. Zar.* 18a, where *māhyl qhlwt* means “the gathering of students by a rabbi.”

16 For the former see P. Joüon, “Sur le nom de Qohelet,” *Bib* 2 (1921) 53–54; for the latter see Loretz, *Qohelet*, 146–48.

17 Lohfink, 10–11.

18 “Moi, le Public, le patient, le muet, lassé d’un enseignement périmé, voici que je parle à mon tour, pour dire ce que tout le monde a fini par penser tout bas” (Pautrel, 9–10, quotation according to Michel, *Qohelet*, 3). In Michel’s view (*ibid.*), Pautrel’s “interpretation was not adopted by anyone, although it is grammatically closer than the one previously sketched.” Cf. also the recommendation of A. S. Kamenetzky (“Die ursprünglich beabsichtigte Aussprache des pseudonyms קהלת,” *OLZ* 34 [1921] 11–15) to read *qhl* as *qēhillōt* as “popular assembly.”

19 Cf. the introduction above under the heading “Corpus Salomonicum.”

**Futile and fleeting,^a said Qoheleth,
futile and fleeting! All (that) is futile.**

2a Or: “Futility of futilities,” “futilest futility”; “fleetingness of fleetingnesses,” “fleetingest fleetingness.”

This “motto” in the form of a quotation of the “teaching” of Qoheleth is repeated almost exactly at the conclusion of the book in 12:8.¹ At the beginning of the book, it is highly ambiguous.

First, it is unclear in what sense we are to understand the predicate *hebel*, which is elevated to the superlative in the compound *hābēl hābālīm*.² The term *hebel* can (a) mean concretely “breath (of wind),” (b) be abstracted to “nothing, illusion, delusion” or “transitoriness, futility,” and in this abstract sense is (c) often used as a (derogatory) designation for “idols” and “idolatry.”³

Ⓜ (*ματαιότης*, “vanity, foolishness, transitoriness”) and Ⓥ (*vanitas*, “futility, empty appearance, fantasy, failure, boastfulness, mendacity”) accentuate more strongly the negative connotations of the Hebrew expression, whereas α’ (*ἀτμός* or *ἀτμός*, “steam, mist, smoke”) remains closer to its concrete background. Many scholars assume *one* special meaning of *hebel* throughout the book of Qoheleth, for example, “Eitelkeit” (“vanity”),

“enigma, mystery,” “incomprehensible,” “irony,” and “absurd.”⁴ Yet even here the meaning of *hebel* seems to vary according to context between the negative: “worthless, futile,” and the neutral: “transitory, fleeting.” The translation with “futile and fleeting” attempts to keep this range of meaning open at the beginning of the book.

Second, it is not clear to what *hakkōl* refers. Does it mean “the entirety” of the world, “the universe” as a whole with all its parts?⁵ Or does the expression point (cataphorically) to what follows in the sense of “all that (about which we are going to talk)?”⁶

In view of these ambiguities, the motto at the beginning of the book leaves open a number of possible meanings:

- Everything (that people do) is meaningless and worthless (cf. 1:3).⁷

1 On the sequence of title and motto in the form of a quotation of the book’s author or the teaching authority, cf. Amos 1:1-2 (v. 1: עַמּוֹס דִּבְרֵי דִּבְרֵי *dibrê ‘āmōs*, “the words of Amos . . .”; v. 2: וַיֹּאמֶר *wayyōmar*, “And he said . . .”), as well as Egyptian wisdom teachings (see Brunner, *Altägyptische Weisheit*, nos. 1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 13, 14, 24). Cf. the framing of Proverbs 1-9 by 1:7 and 9:10 (and Proverbs 1-31 by 1:7 and 31:30).

2 See GKC § 133: On the irregular compound form (*hābēl hābālīm* instead of *hebel*), cf. Schoors, *Preacher*, 75.

3 Cf. R. Albertz, “*hebel* breath,” *TLOT* 1:351-53; K. Seybold, “*hebel*,” *TDOT* 3:313-20.

4 See, respectively, A. Lauha, “Omnia Vanitas: Die Bedeutung von *hbl* bei Kohelet,” in J. Kiilunen, V. Riekkinen, and H. Räisänen, eds., *Glaube und Gerechtigkeit* (SESJ 38; Helsinki: Suomen eksegetische seura, 1983) 19-25; G. S. Ogden, “‘Vanity’ It Certainly Is Not,” *BT* 38 (1987) 301-7; W. E. Staples, “The ‘Vanity’ of Ecclesiastes,” *JNES* 2 (1943) 95-104; idem, “Vanity of Vanities,” *CJT* 1 (1955) 141-56; T. Polk, “The Wisdom of Irony: A Study of *hebel* and Its Relation to Joy and the Fear of God in Ecclesiastes,” *SBTh* 6 (1976) 3-17; finally,

M. V. Fox, “The Meaning of *hebel* for Qohelet,” *JBL* 105 (1986) 409-27; idem, *Qohelet*, 29-51; D. Michel, *Qohelet*, 84-86; idem, *Untersuchungen*, 40-51.

5 Cf. Jer 10:16; 51:19; Pss 103:19; 119:91; 145:9; 1 Chr 29:12, as well as Sir 36:1; 39:21, 34; 43:27, 33; 51:12d (cf. 18:1; 24:8); 11QPs^a 151: 28:7-8; 1QApGen 20:12-13; *m. Abot* 4:22. See Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism*, 2:94 n. 259; Lohfink, “Koh 1,2 ‘alles ist Windhauch’—universale und anthropologische Aussage?” in R. Mosis and L. Ruppert, eds., *Der Weg zum Menschen* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1989) 202-6.

6 Lohfink, “Koh 1,2 ‘alles ist Windhauch’—universale und anthropologische Aussage?” in R. Mosis and L. Ruppert, eds., *Der Weg zum Menschen* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1989) 201-16 (repr. in Lohfink, *Studien zu Kohelet*, 125-42).

7 Cf. the paraphrase in Gregory Thaumaturgus (ca. 213-70 C.E.): “How empty and useless human activities and all human pursuits are” (ὡς κενὰ καὶ ἀνόνητα τὰ ἀνθρώπων πράγματά τε καὶ σπουδάσματα, ὅσα ἀνθρώπινα). S. John Jarick, *Gregory Thaumaturgus’ Paraphrase of Ecclesiastes* (SBLSCS; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990) 8.

- Everything (that people assert) rests on illusion or error (cf. 1:10).⁸
- Everything (people? [cf. 1:4]—the world?) is transitory.⁹

In regard to the use of the expression *הֶבֶל* *hebel*,¹⁰ 1:12–2:26 and 3:10–12:7 can be read as different “interpretations” of the motto in 1:2 (and 12:8): whereas 1:12–2:26 illustrates the possibility of understanding it as a derogatory judgment on the whole of living reality (*הֶבֶל* *hebel* = “futile”), the following text beginning with 3:10 suggests an understanding as a statement about the transitoriness of all creatures (and humans in particular: *הֶבֶל* *hebel* = “fleeting”—which does not exclude limited negative judgments about certain phenomena). That indicates that 1:3–12:7 not only develops variations on one and the same basic thought formulated in 1:2 and 12:8¹¹ but also points to an overall argumentative inclination.

In 1:3–12:7 there are numerous qualifying nominal clauses with the predicate *הֶבֶל* *hebel* with comprehensive or limited reference that are comparable to 1:2.¹² In addition to such stereotypical formulations, *הֶבֶל* *hebel* occurs several times, starting with 4:7 (cf. 5:7; 6:4, 11; 8:14), especially as a qualification of human lifetime (*הַיָּמִים* [הַיָּמִי] *yēmê [hayyê] hebel*: 6:12; 7:15; 9:9 [2x]; in terms of content 11:8, 10 also belong here). With regard to the distribution and sequence of the *הֶבֶל* *hebel* statements in the book, it is notable that in 1:3–11, the section immediately after the motto in 1:2, and in the

corresponding section 3:1–9, the expression *הֶבֶל* *hebel* does not occur.

In 1:12–2:26 *הֶבֶל* *hebel* occurs exclusively in qualifying nominal clauses, in which *הֶבֶל* *hebel* has a pervasive (negatively) judging sense and refers to human action and human concepts of value (cf. the parallel “striving after wind,” רָעִיּוֹן רֵיחַ / רֵעוּת רֵעוּת *rē‘ūt / ra‘yôn rūaḥ*: 1:14, 17; 2:11, 17, 26). The comprehensive judgments in 1:14; 2:11, 17 (*הַכֹּל הֶבֶל* *hakkōl hebel*) are confirmed and reinforced by the limited judgments in 2:1, 15, 19, 21, 23, 26 (גַּם הוּא / גַּם הוּא *gam-hū? / zeh hebel*).

Beginning with 3:10 the stereotypical use of *הֶבֶל* *hebel* is overcome. Qualifying nominal clauses with *הֶבֶל* *hebel* in a (critically) judging sense now refer not only to definite, limited phenomena; *הֶבֶל* *hebel* is also used increasingly in the value-neutral sense of “transitory, fleeting.” In order to make the motto of 1:2 (and 12:8) more precise, we can look here particularly at statements from the opening and closing parts of 3:10–12:7. When 3:11 asserts that the Divinity “has made everything [or ‘the universe’: *הַכֹּל* *hakkōl*] so that it is beautiful in its time,” this stands over against a devaluation of the whole world. The general judgment *הַכֹּל הֶבֶל* *hakkōl hebel* in 3:19 clearly refers in its context to the transitoriness of all living beings. Correspondingly, the only further *הֶבֶל* *hebel* statement in the book of Qoheleth formed with *כֹּל* *kōl*, 11:8, points to the transitoriness of human future life (*כֹּל-שֵׁבַע הֶבֶל* *kol-šebbā? hebel*) in old age, where life is as fleeting as “youth and black hair” (11:10).

8 Cf. the quotation of the Cynic Monimos (ca. 340 B.C.E.) in Menander (frg. 215, Z, 7; cf. Diogenes Laertius 6.82–83): “He said, namely, that that which is assumed [as existing] is all mist” (τὸ γὰρ ὑποληφθὲν τῶφον εἶναι πᾶν ἕψη). See Y. Amir, “Doch ein griechischer Einfluss auf das Buch Kohelet?” in idem, *Studien zum antiken Judentum* (BEAT 2; Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 1985) 35–50.

9 For people see, e.g., Job 7:16; Pss 39:6–7, 12; 62:10; 94:11; 144:4. For the world see Isa 51:6; 65:17, as well as the “eschatological” interpretation of Qoh 1:2–3 in the wisdom writing of the Cairo Geniza (1:4): “This world is transitory, but the coming world is gain” (עוֹלָם הַזֶּה הוּא הֶבֶל וְעוֹלָם הַבָּא יִתְרֹן הוּא) *‘wlm hzh hbl hw? w’wlm hb? ytrwm hw?*).

10 Cf. here also N. Lohfink, “Ist Kohelets *הֶבֶל*—Aussage erkenntnis theoretisch gemeint?” in Schoors, ed., *Qohelet in Context*, 41–59; idem, “Koh 1,2 ‘alles

ist Windhauch’—universale und anthropologische Aussage?” in R. Mosis and L. Ruppert, eds., *Der Weg zum Menschen: FS Alfons Deissler* (Freiburg in Breisgau: Herder, 1989) 201–16, repr. in Lohfink, *Studien zu Kohelet*, 125–42; idem, “Zu *הֶבֶל* im Buch Kohelet,” in Lohfink, *Studien*, 215–18; M. V. Fox, “The Meaning of *hebel* for Qohelet,” *JBL* 105 (1986) 409–27; idem, *Qohelet*, 29–51; Backhaus, *Zeit und Zufall*, 332–44.

11 Thus Loader, *Polar Structures*, 9.

12 Comprehensive: *הַכֹּל הֶבֶל* *hakkōl hebel* (1:14; 2:11, 17; 3:19; cf. 11:8: *כֹּל-שֵׁבַע הֶבֶל* *kol-šebbā? hebel*); limited: *גַּם הוּא הֶבֶל* (*gam*) *zeh hebel* (2:15, 19, 21, 23, 26; 4:4, 8, 16; 5:9; 6:2, 9; 7:6; 8:10, 14; cf. 2:1: *גַּם הוּא הֶבֶל* *gam-hū? hebel*; 11:10: *הַיָּלְדוּת וְהַשְּׁחָרָת הֶבֶל* *hayyaldūt wēhāššāhārūt hebel*).

The motto of the book of Qoheleth is indeed “misunderstandable in the highest degree.”¹³ Its point in regard to what follows seems to lie, however, in its very openness and ambiguity. With the assumption of a subse-

quent collection and revising of the words of a “historical Qoheleth” (see above on 1:1), the interpretation of 1:2 and 12:8 as a “secondary” redaction framework of these “words”¹⁴ also becomes questionable.

13 Ellermeier, *Qohelet I/1*, 100.

14 Thus, e.g., Ellermeier (*Qohelet I/1*, 96ff.); Galling; Lauha; Whybray; contra, e.g., Barton; Gordis; Kroeber; Lohfink, “Koh 1,2,” 211 n. 16.

It is often assumed that the first three or four chapters of the book of Qoheleth comprise a larger literarily and argumentatively coherent composition.¹ A number of observations suggest that 1:3–4:12 can be regarded as the first major division, whose structure can be sketched as follows:

- 1:3 The question of “gain” in view of the totality of human toil
- 1:4-11 Poem: human activity on the horizon of distant times (עֹלָם *‘ōlām*)
- 1:12–2:26 Reflections of “King Qoheleth”
- 3:1-8 Poem: human activity on the horizon of changing times (עַתָּה *‘et*)
- 3:9 The “gain” question in view of the special effort in one’s activity
- 3:10–4:12 Reflections of the “wise man Qoheleth”

At the same time, 4:13 (“Better a child, needy and wise, than a king, old and foolish . . .”), which opens the next

major division (4:13–5:9), suggests that the reader, in retrospect, critically examine the comments made by Qoheleth in the guise of a “king” in 1:12–2:26. Section 3:10–4:12, in which Qoheleth speaks without this disguise (and thus as a “wise man,” according to 12:9), can be read as a critical commentary on 1:12–2:26, as already signaled by the revisiting of 1:13 in 3:10. The poetic sections 1:3-11 and 3:1-9 bracket the reflections of “King Qoheleth” and name basic experiences of human life that are variously interpreted in 1:12–2:26 and 3:10–4:12.

As a leitmotif, 1:3 and 3:9 formulate the question of a possible “gain” (יִתְרוֹן *yitrôn*) that a man can achieve from all his “work and toil” (עֲמָלָה *‘āmālā*). Verse 1:3 raises this question concerning the totality of human efforts (בְּכָל-עֲמָלֹה *bēkol-‘āmālō*) with regard to the finitude of the individual person on the horizon of distant time(s) (עֹלָם / עֲלָמִים *‘ōlāmīm/‘ōlām* 1:4-11). And 3:9 asks about the worker’s “gain” from the effort he has applied (בְּאֲשֶׁר הוּא עֹמֵל *ba’āšer hū’ ‘āmēl*), in view of the time-bound nature and contingency of human activity within the individual life (עַתָּה *‘et*: 3:1-8). Thus “gain” (יִתְרוֹן *yitrôn*) designates both what remains in the end from all human

1 The following divisions are recommended in recent research: 1:12–3:15 (Lohfink, “Das Koheletbuch: Strukturen und Struktur,” in Schwienhorst-Schönberger, ed., *Das Buch Kohelet*, 39–121; H.-P. Müller, “Theonome Skepsis und Lebensfreude: Zu Koh 1,12–3,15,” *BZ* 30 [1986] 1–19); 1:2/3–3:15 (D. Michel, “Huminität angesichts des Absurden: Qohelet [Prediger] 1,2–3,15,” in H. Foerster, ed., *Huminität Heute* [Berlin: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1970] 22–36; A. A. Fischer, “Beobachtungen zur Komposition von Kohelet 1,3–3,15,” *ZAW* 103 [1991] 72–86; idem, *Skepsis*, 183–250); 1:2/3–3:22 (Eaton; Backhaus, *Zeit und Zufall*, 87–158; Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Nicht im Menschen*, 12–125); 1:4–4:3 (D. Lys, “L’Etre et le Temps: Communication de Qohèleth,” in Gilbert, eds., *Sagesse*, 249–58; idem, *L’Éclésiaste ou Que vaut la vie? Traduction, Introduction générale, Commentaire de 1,1 à 4,3* [Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1977]); 1:2/3–4:16 (G. R. Castellino, “Qohelet and His Wisdom,” *CBQ* 30 [1968] 15–28; S. de Jong, “A Book on Labour: The Structuring Principles and the Main Themes of the Book of Qohelet,” *JSOT* 54 [1992] 107–16, repr. in D. J. A. Clines, ed., *The Poetical Books: A Sheffield Reader* [BiSe 41; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997] 222–30; Seow); 1:12–6:9 (A. G. Wright,

“The Riddle of the Sphinx: The Structure of the Book of Qoheleth,” *CBQ* 30 [1968] 313–34, repr. in J. L. Crenshaw, ed., *Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom* [New York: Ktav, 1976] 245–66, repr. in R. B. Zuck, ed., *Reflecting with Solomon: Selected Studies on the Book of Ecclesiastes* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994] 45–65; idem, “The Riddle of the Sphinx Revisited: Numerical Patterns in the Book of Qoheleth,” *CBQ* 42 [1980] 38–51; similarly J. S. M. Mulder, “Qoheleth’s Division and Also Its Main Point,” in W. C. Delsman and J. T. Nelis, eds., *Von Kanaan bis Kerala* [AOAT 211; Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1982] 149–59; S. G. Brown, “The Structure of Ecclesiastes,” *Evangelical Quarterly Review* 14 [1990] 195–208). Cf. the concept and discussion of some recommendations in V. D’Alario, *Il libro del Qohelet: Struttura letteraria e retorica* (SRivB 27; Bologna: Dehoniane, 1992), 35–58; and Lohfink, “Koheletbuch.” On the division proposed used here (1:3–4:12) cf. also T. Krüger, “Qoh 2,24-26 und die Frage nach dem ‘Guten’ im Qohelet-Buch,” *BN* 72 (1994) 79ff., and most recently N. Kamano, “Character and Cosmology: Rhetoric of Qoh 1,3–3,9,” in Schoors, ed., *Qohelet in Context*, 419–24 (1:3–3:9).

toil (1:3) and the return available to one through one's own efforts (3:9; cf. 2:11). In either case, 1:4-11 and 3:1-8 show that the human possibilities of "gain" vis-à-vis the experience of finitude and contingency are in both respects limited. The reflections of "King Qoheleth" in 1:12-2:26 and the reflections of the "wise man Qoheleth" in 3:10-4:12 present two possibilities for interpreting and overcoming these basic experiences:²

For "King Qoheleth" the possibility of being able to achieve a lasting and available "gain" is the criterion for the judgment of his experiences (cf. 1:3 before 1:4-11): if there is no gain, everything is meaningless and worthless (2:11). Then there is nothing good that a person could and should realize through his or her activity (2:24; cf. 2:3). Tangential to his reflections (1:13; 2:24, 26), "King Qoheleth" also draws God into his considerations—and makes God responsible for the bad (1:13) and nonsensical (2:24-26) sides of human life.

For the "wise man Qoheleth," by contrast, the experience of finitude and contingency is the criterion for answering the "gain" question (cf. 3:9 after 3:1-8). It is constitutive for his judgment of the experience of reality that it—together with the possibilities and limits of human activity contained in finitude and contingency—goes back to God, who made everything beautiful (3:11, 14-15). While "King Qoheleth" regards work and possessions (2:22-23), as well as pleasure and enjoyment (2:24-26), as worthless, for the "wise man Qoheleth" pleasure and enjoyment represent the highest and only good

(3:12-13). Since they can be bestowed on people only by God, they do not constitute a lasting "gain" (יִטְרוֹן *yitrôn*) at one's disposal, but are one's "portion" (חֵלֶק *hēleq*, 3:22), which is not at one's disposal. Work (4:4-6) and possessions (4:7-8) have a relative value when and to the extent that they enable a person to have pleasure and enjoyment. Different from the "king," the "wise man Qoheleth" regards human life not only from the egocentric perspective of the individual but also on the level of social life in community (3:16-21; 4:1-12). In this context, a common effort for a "good reward" (שָׂכָר טוֹב *sākār tōb*, 4:9) is better than egotistical striving for individual "gain."

If one understands "ethics" as a "theory of the human conduct of life,"³ 1:3-4:12 can be characterized as a *discursive laying of the foundations of ethics*. Here it is specifically a matter of a "generally insightful answer to the question, in what does the good life or the highest good that human beings can realize through their actions actually consist"⁴ (cf. 2:3, 24; 3:12-13, 22; 4:9). In the refinement of the ethical question to the problem of the achievability of *self-determined* goals and purposes of the *individual* person (the "gain" question), the book of Qoheleth adopts the basic initiative of contemporary Hellenistic philosophy.⁵ In the critique of its development by the "king" (1:12-2:26) in 3:10-4:12, this individualistic narrowing of ethics in the sense of the Hellenistic zeitgeist is overcome in the critical reception of Old Testament traditions.

2 Cf. esp. 1:3 with 2:11; 1:10 with 2:12; 1:11 with 2:16, as well as 3:1-8 with 3:11a; then 1:8 with 3:11b; 1:9-10 with 3:15, as well as 3:9 with 4:6, 8-9 (with a significant terminological difference between "gain" [יִטְרוֹן *yitrôn*] and "wage" [שָׂכָר *sākār*]!).

3 Thus the definition of "ethics" in Trutz Rendtorff, *Ethik: Grundelemente, Methodologie und Konkretionen einer ethischen Theologie*, vol. 1 (ThW 13/1; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1980) 11. ET=*Ethics*, trans. K. Crim (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986).

4 This is a characteristic of "ethics as a philosophical discipline," according to Jan Rohls, *Geschichte der Ethik* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1991) 2.

5 Cf. Hossenfelder, *Philosophie*, 23ff., and below on 1:12-2:26.

1 Is There Any Gain with Regard to Eternity?

- 3** What does a man gain from^a all his work and toil^b under the sun?
4 A generation goes, and a generation comes,
 and the earth remains constant into distant time.
5 The sun comes up^a and the sun goes down,
 and hurries to the^b place^c where it comes up (again).
6 It blows to the south, and turns to the north;
 it turns, it turns, it blows, the wind, and because it turns, it returns,^a the wind.
7 All streams run to the sea, and the sea is not full;^a
 to the place where the streams flow, there they flow again and again.^b
8 All words^a are wearisome,^b no one is able to speak;^c
 the eye is not satisfied with seeing,^d and the ear is not full with hearing.
9 What has happened^a (once) is what will happen (again),
 and what has been done (once) is what will be done (again).
 And there is nothing fully new^b under the sun.
10 One may well say,^a "Look at this! This is something new!"
 It has long since already existed, in the distant times
 that were before us.^b
11 There is no remembrance of people of long ago,
 nor will there be any remembrance of people yet to come
 by those who come last.^a

- 3a** Thus with interpretation of the preposition בְּ b- in בְּכָל־עֲמָלוֹ *bēkol-‘amālō* as *beth pretii*; cf. E. Jenni, *Die hebräischen Präpositionen*, vol. 1: *Die Präposition Beth* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1992) 150ff., esp. 156, no. 1856 on Qoh 2:22; 3:9; 4:9; 9:9. Other possible translations: "what gain has a man (achieved) *in* all his work and toil" (thus Jenni, *ibid.* 345, no. 442, on Qoh 1:3), or: "what gain has a man (achieved) *through* all his work and toil" (*beth constitutionis*; cf. Jenni, *ibid.*, 90ff., esp. 93; on the syntactic structure cf. Prov 15:23 [Jenni, *ibid.*, 93, no. 1395]).
- 3b** Literally: "from all his work/toil with which he toils."
5a In view of the participles predominant in vv. 4-7 a correction of the vocalization of the verb וּרְחַח *wzrh* from וּרְחַח *wēzārāḥ* to וּרְחַח *wēzōrēāḥ* is suggested (see *BHK*); the assumption of a consonant metathesis (וּרְחַח *wzrh* < וּרְחַח* **zwrh*, thus *BHS*) is unnecessary. If, however, one vocalizes וּרְחַח *wzrh* with מ as *wēqātal* (with perfect meaning, as often in the book of Qoheleth), the following verb וּבָא *wb*^a should also be read as *wēqātal* (thus Lohfink, "Die Wiederkehr des immer Gleichen," *AF* 53 [1985] 128) and translated: "the sun came up and the sun went down . . ."
5b Literally: "its."
5c Contra the Masoretic accents, שְׁמֵי שָׁמַיִם *šmē šāp* could be bound to the preceding וְשָׁמַיִם מְקֻמָּוֹ *wēš-‘mēqōmō* (see *BHK*; *BHS*).
6a Or: "and returns to its turning" (cf. *Ⓐ*: et in circulos suos revertitur); cf. Schoors, *Preacher*, 201.
7a Or: "is not (yet) full."
7b Or: "continually." The understanding of v. 7b is disputed; cf., e.g., Ellermeier, *Qoheleth*, I/1, 195ff.; P. J. Holzer, "Die Mensch und das Weltgeschehen nach Koh. 1,4-11: Eine Textanalyse" (Th.D. diss., Univ. of Regensburg, 1981) 263ff.; Y.-J. Min, "How Do the Rivers Flow? (Ecclesiastes 1.7)," *BT* 42 (1991) 226-31. The above recommended translation assumes that שָׁב *šwb* + ל *l* + inf. cs. here means "do something again" (cf. GKC §120 and Qoh 5:14). Other possible translations: "to the place where the streams rise, there they return again in order to rise again" (= circulating water system; cf. *Ⓐ*) or: "to the place where the streams flow, there they return to flow (anew)" (= intermittently flowing waters; cf. *Ⓒ*).
8a Or: "things," but see the commentary below.
8b Or: "are exhausted."
8c The conjecture לֹא־יִכְלֵה *lō-yēkalleh* for לֹא־יִכְלֵה *lō-yūkal* is arbitrary (see *BHS*; cf. Galling: "no one can 'definitively say' something"; lit.: "no one stops [or finishes] talking").
8d On the problems of the usual German translation of the OT singular usage שָׁב *šb* + ל *l* + inf. cs. (הָרָח *rḥ*) with "satt werden *zu* sehen" see Backhaus, *Zeit und Zufall*, 15.
9a On the construction see, e.g., GKC §137c; Schoors, *Preacher*, 59-60; cf. 3:15, 22; 6:10; 7:24; 8:7; 10:14.
9b The expression עַל־כֹּל־הַדָּשׁ *‘en kol-hādāš* is ambiguous: depending on whether one combines כֹּל *kol* more closely with עַל־ *‘en* or with הַדָּשׁ *hādāš*, one can translate: "there is absolutely nothing new" or "there is nothing completely

new." The Masoretic accents point more to the second understanding, which better corresponds to the context. That there is something like "new" grain (Lev 26:10), a "new" house (Deut 20:5), a "new" king (Exod 1:8), or even a "new" wife (Deut 24:5) is hardly to be disputed (further examples in C. Westermann, "שֶׁנֶה *hādās* new," *TLOT* 1:394-95; R. North, "שֶׁנֶה *hādās*," *TDOT* 4:243; 778). All of that, however, is nothing "fully (of a) new (kind)"—as would be, say, a "new" covenant (Jer 31:31).

- 10a Literally: "There is a case in which someone says" or "a matter about which one says," or "There is a word that says."
 10b On the incongruence between עֹלָמִים *‘olāmim* (pl.) and הַיָּאָה *hāyā* (sg.) that results from this understanding of the sentence, cf. GKC §145a; Schoors, *Preacher*, 22-23, 157-58. The emendation to הַיָּאָה *hāyū* following some mss. is not necessary. Against

the alternative translation ventured by Lohfink: "But for ages there has already existed what has happened before our eyes," is that מִלְּפָנַי *millipnē* (מִלְּפָנַי *millēpānēnū*) seems to contain an element of distancing ("away from"). Michel's present-tense translation of הַיָּאָה *hāyā* ("what happens before our eyes") is hardly tenable.

- 11a The expressions הַרְשִׁינִי (הַ) *(hā)riʿsōnim* and אַחֲרֵינִי (הַ) *(hā)ʾahārōnim* can designate both "the earlier" and "the later" (things, people, generations) and "the first" and "the last." לְאַחֲרֵינִי *lāʾahārōnā* is found elsewhere in the OT only in Num 2:31 in the sense of "last" (cf., however, also בְּאַחֲרֵינִי *bāʾahārōnā* in Deut 13:10; 17:7; 1 Sam 29:2; 2 Sam 2:26; 1 Kgs 17:13; Dan 8:3). On the preposition עַל *‘im* (translated here with "by") cf. Schoors, *Preacher*, 201-2.

The section 1:3-11 is a poetically stylized¹ prelude that, with the "gain" question in v. 3 and the following statements about the position of individual people in the world, calls attention to the statement of the problem in the first major division of the book of Qoheleth (1:3-4:12). The key word הֶבֶל *hebel* from the motto in 1:2 is not taken up here. Verses 3-11 clearly assert only the transitoriness of all human beings (but not of humankind; v. 4). Moreover, it becomes clear that any possible "gain" achieved by individual people is likewise transitory (v. 11). By contrast, it is still an open question here whether in view of these experiences "everything" becomes meaningless, or whether it is an attitude toward life primarily oriented toward achieving a "gain" that proves to be nonsensical. "King Qoheleth" will draw the first conclusion in 1:12-2:26, but the "wise man Qoheleth" will vote for the second one in 3:10-4:12.

Initially the text shows no clear disposition. Each verse contains a relatively closed unit of meaning.²

As a question, v. 3 is different from the following statements. Verses 4-7 are bound together by the almost totally pervasive formulation of participial clauses, as well as the recurrence of a series of key words:

- הֵלֵךְ *hlk* (v. 4: "go"; v. 6: "blow" [2x]; v. 7: "flow" [3x])
- בּוֹא *bw* (v. 4: "come"; v. 5: "go down")
- שׁוֹב *šwb* (v. 6: "returns"; v. 7: "doing something again/continually"; cf. the similar sounding verbs שָׁפַח *šp*, "long for, strive" [v. 5] and סָבַב *sbb*, "turn" [v. 6 (3x)])
- מְקוֹם *māqôm*, "place" (vv. 5, 7)
- שָׂם *šām*, "where" (vv. 5, 7)

In syntactical construction, v. 8 corresponds initially to v. 7 (כֹּל *kōl*, "all," + determinative m. sg. noun + m. pl. participle; cf. also וְלֹא-תִמָּלֵא *wəlōʾ-timmālēʾ*, "is not full," in v. 8 with וְלֹא-תִמָּלֵא *ʾēnennū mālēʾ*, "is not full," in v. 7) but

1 With the exception of v. 3 and v. 10, Qoh 1:3-11 contains more or less clear (synonymous, antithetical, or synthetical) parallelisms. On the "poetic analysis" of the text, see Backhaus, *Zeit und Zufall*, 8ff.

2 Yet at first glance the transitions are often not clearly marked. Thus, v. 6aα, for example, can be read at first as a continuation of v. 5bβ: the sun comes up and goes to the south. Only with v. 6aβ does it become clear that the topic can no longer be the sun (cf. S. Japhet, "'Goes to the South and Turns to the North' [Ecclesiastes 1:6]: The Sources

and History of the Exegetical Traditions," *JSQ* 1 [1993/94] 289-322). Verse 8aα can be understood initially as a statement about "all things" that continues the preceding thought (cf. v. 7: "All streams . . ."). Only with v. 8aβ is it clear that the subject is not humankind and language. The end of the "quotation" in v. 10a is not expressly marked. The reader must recognize that it is contradicted in v. 10b. Cf. E. M. Good, "The Unfilled Sea: Style and Meaning in Ecclesiastes 1:2-11," in J. G. Gammie et al., eds., *Israelite Wisdom* (SBLHS 3; Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1978) 59-73.

then changes over to formulations with negated *yiqtōl* forms. In terms of content, the descriptive statements about experienced reality are replaced, beginning in v. 8, by statements about their knowability and nameability. With three statements, v. 9 draws a conclusion from what has gone before. Here the beginning (מה *mah*, “what”) and end (תחת השמש *taḥat haššemeš*, “under the sun”) of this verse correspond to the beginning and end of v. 3. Verse 10a formulates both an objection to v. 9 (taking up the key word חדש *ḥādāš*, “new”; יש *yēš*, “there is” vs. אין *’ēn*, “there is not”) and an illustration of v. 8 (picking up the key words דבר *dābār*, “word,” and ראה *rāh*, “see”; cf. also אמר *’mr*, “say,” in v. 10a with דבר *dbr*, “speak,” in v. 8). By contrast, v. 10b reinforces the assertion of v. 9 (each twice היה *hyh*, “to be”). Verse 11 makes clear both the reason for the objection formulated in v. 10a and—referring back to v. 8 and v. 9—its questionableness. (Syntactically v. 11, with אין זכרון *’ēn zikrōn*, “there is no remembrance,” refers back to v. 9 אין קל-*’ēn kol-ḥādāš*, “there is nothing fully new”] and with לא יהיה *lō-yihyeh*, “there will be no,” back to v. 8 לא יוכל *lō-yūkal* . . . לא תשבע *lō-tišba’* . . . לא תמלא *wēlō-timmāleh* . . . , “cannot . . . is not satisfied . . . is not full . . .”) In the sequence of “people of long ago,” “people yet to come,” and “those who come last,” v. 11 recalls the passing of generations mentioned in v. 4a. Verse 11a (אין זכרון לראשנים *’ēn zikrōn lārāšōnīm*, “there is no remembrance of people of long ago”) brings to mind the beginning of v. 3 (מה יתרון לאדם *mah-yitrōn lā’ādām*, “what does a man gain”).

The argumentative structure of 1:3-11 can be sketched as follows:

- 3 Question
- 4-8 Description of individual phenomena
- 9 General assertion (as summary or conclusion)
- 10-11 Discussion (objection and refutation)

■ 3 The question formulated in v. 3 regarding a possible “gain” (יתרון *yitrōn*)³ for human beings in view of the totality of their toil⁴ “under the sun” is not expressly answered in vv. 4-11. (The noun יתרון *yitrōn* does not reappear until 2:11.) Nonetheless, a partial answer to this question can be derived a fortiori from v. 11: if in the long view there will no longer be any remembrance (זכרון / זכרון *zikrōn/zikkārōn*)⁵ of a person,⁶ then the duration of any possible other gain from human endeavors must, in any case, be all the more limited (מה יתרון *ma-yitrōn?* – אין זכרון *’ēn zikrōn!*). The end of the remembrance of a man also brings the end of any other gain that he can achieve through work and toil (as long as one does not include the possibility of an “otherworldly” or “eschatological gain”—against such expectations, cf. 3:16-22).

■ 4 Verse 4a names a basic presupposition of this train of thought: in the sequence of generations⁷ the individual person is transitory. Therefore, one can ask about gain in regard to the *totality* of his toil under the sun (when he “goes,” that is, dies; cf. 5:15; 6:4). Against the transitoriness of individual human generations v. 4b sets

3 In the OT the noun יתרון *yitrōn*, “gain,” is attested only in Qoheleth. As a nominal formation of the verb יתר *yr* (niphil: “be left over, remain left over”; hiphil: “leave over, have left, have a surplus, have an advantage”), it means, say, “gain, yield, advantage” (cf. יתר *yeter* II, “what is left over, remainder, surplus,” and יתיר *yōtēr*, “what is left over, what is too much”). יתרון *yitrōn* “is possibly an expression of mercantile language (Gordis according to Plumptre) and designates the ‘surplus, gain’ of a business” (Zimmerli). On the difference between יתרון *yitrōn*, “gain,” and חלק *ḥēleq*, “portion,” see below on 2:11.

4 The basic meaning of *’āmāl* can be summarized as follows: *’āmāl* indicates primarily the process of work . . . and the trouble that it causes . . . then the result of work: either the gain, property for which one has worked . . . or the distress, the suffering

one causes others . . .” (S. Schwertner, “עמל *’āmāl* toil,” *TLOT* 2:925).

5 In view of the following זכרון *zikkārōn* in v. 11b, זכרון *zikrōn* in v. 11a (and 2:16) could be a construct form. In view of the numerous nouns of the formation *qiltōn* in the book of Qoheleth, however, we seem to have here, instead, alternate vocalizations of the absolute state. Cf. Schoors, *Preacher*, 63.

6 Cf., by contrast, the evaluation of posthumous reputation, e.g., in Prov 10:7; 22:1; Ps 112:6; Sir 37:26; 41:11, as well as Isa 56:5.

7 On the critique of the interpretation of דור *dōr* as the “circular motion” of nature (G. S. Ogden, “The Interpretation of *dūr* in Ecclesiastes 1.4,” *JSOT* 34 [1986] 91–92), see M. V. Fox, “Qoheleth 1.4,” *JSOT* 40 (1988) 109.

the constancy of the earth “into distant time” (לְעוֹלָם *lē‘ōlām*). The juxtaposition of human generations and the earth in v. 4a and b shows two ways of viewing the immeasurable duration of time (which in Hebrew can be indicated both by דּוֹר . . . דּוֹר *dōr . . . wēdōr* and by עוֹלָם *‘ōlām*⁸): while humankind endures through the change of generations, the earth remains the same.

■ 5 A third way is demonstrated by v. 5, which probably has an underlying conception of an orbit of the sun. It travels half the time (during the day) over the earth and half (at night) under it:⁹ the constant, uniform movement of an identical entity.

■ 6 In contrast to this, the wind is in (constant?) irregular motion.¹⁰ Here there is “nothing permanent but the fluctuation” (Delitzsch). Since the wind turns again and again, it also blows repeatedly in the same direction (and one may ask whether it is always the same wind that blows to the south or to the north).¹¹

■ 7 Like v. 4, v. 7a also formulates a contrast: the rivers, which like human generations are in constant movement

(cf. the use of the verb הָלַךְ *hlk* in both cases), contrasts with the sea as a tranquil point of reference (in correspondence to the earth in v. 4).¹² If the translation of v. 7b preferred above is correct, the rivers also agree with human generations in that they (in contrast to the sun and the wind) do not “return” but constantly flow off in the same direction.¹³

■ 4-7 The comment that the sea does not get full(er), in spite of the rivers emptying into it, makes clear that the flowing of rivers into the sea is a goal-directed process but not one that aims at “efficiency.” In retrospect, the reader can also make the same comment on the processes described in vv. 4-6: through their various behaviors, the earth, the sun, the wind, and the rivers produce no gain (and do not even seem to be trying to do so).¹⁴ Precisely this—along with the constant repetition of the same things in the world (cf. vv. 9-10)—seems to be the point of vv. 4-7. From the text we may draw neither the assertion of the unchanging (and unchangeable) nature of the world (so Lauha: “Everything is and

8 On דּוֹר *dōr* as a time concept, cf. G. Gerleman, “דּוֹר *dōr* generation,” *TLOT* 1:334; on עוֹלָם *‘ōlām* E. Jenni, “עוֹלָם *‘ōlām* eternity,” *TLOT* 2:852-62; H. D. Preuss, “עוֹלָם *‘ōlām*,” *TDOT* 10:530-45.

9 On ancient Near Eastern conceptions of the sun’s path, cf. Bernd Janowski, *Rettungsgewissheit und Epiphanie des Heils*, vol. 1 (WMANT 59; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1989) (see index, 207, s.v. “Sonnenlauf”). Cf., e.g., the Egyptian picture in Othmar Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World: Ancient Near Eastern Iconography and the Book of Psalms* (New York: Seabury, 1978) 32 no. 26, with the statement: “The majesty of this god [the sun god] enters the world of the dead through her [the goddess of heaven Nut’s] mouth. The world of the dead is open when he enters into it. The stars follow him into her and come out again after him, and they hasten to their place.”

10 Contra, e.g., Lohfink, “Wiederkehr,” 137, and R. N. Whybray, “Ecclesiastes 1.5-7 and the Wonders of Nature,” *JSOT* 41 (1988) 108, who also assume a circulation orbit here. According to Qoh 11:5, however, the turning of the wind is unpredictable and incalculable.

11 “South” and “north” here do not have to be the only possible or discernible wind directions. They complete the four cardinal directions after the course of the sun from east to west represented in v. 5. Thus the attempts by Paul Humbert, *Recherches sur les sources égyptiennes de la littérature sapientiale d’Israël*

(Neuchâtel: Secrétariat de l’Université, 1929) 113, on the one hand, and by Hertzberg, 71, on the other, to reconstruct a place of origin of the book of Qoheleth based on this passage are problematic.

12 Corresponding points of reference for the movements of the sun and the wind in vv. 5-6 were the “place” of the sun’s rising and the cardinal directions “south” and “north.”

13 Here the identity of the rivers does not seem to be problematic in the same way as in the famous dictum of Heraclitus (DK 22, B 91): “It is impossible to step into the same river twice” (ποταμῶ γὰρ οὐκ ἔστιν ἐμβῆναι δις τῶ αὐτῶ): Jaap Mansfeld, ed., *Die Vorsokratiker* I (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1983) 272-73, no. 96.

14 See the comparison of the “flow of capital” with the flow of rivers in Aristophanes’ *Clouds*: The debtor Strepsiades says to a creditor: “And how can the sea not grow at all, you moron, in spite of all the streams that empty into it; but you demand that your capital increase?” (1293ff.). Cf. Dialogue 1279ff.: “(Strepsiades:) What do you think? Does it always rain new water whenever it rains, or does the sun repeatedly scoop up the same water? (Amynias:) I don’t know. It’s all the same to me. (Strepsiades:) And you have the audacity to demand your money back, yet you have no inkling about heavenly things?” (based on Aristophanes, *Die Wolken* [trans. Otto Seel; Stuttgart: Reclam, 1963] 80-81) (cf. Braun, *Kohelet*, 59).

remains as before . . .”) nor the assumption of eternal nature of everything that is¹⁵ or a “cyclic theory” of the cosmos (Lohfink). The commonalities and differences between human generations, earth, sun, wind, and rivers make clear that the text “assumes a structural but not an individual sameness in the passage of time.”¹⁶

■ 8 Accordingly, v. 8 returns to the “gain” question of v. 3 (יָגֵעִים *yēgē'im*, “are wearisome,”¹⁷ takes up עֲמַל *‘āmāl* / עָמַל *‘ml*, “work/toil,” again; אִישׁ אִישׁ “human being, man,” takes up אָדָם *‘ādām*, “human being”) and, after consideration of the cosmological entities earth, sun, wind, and rivers/sea (vv. 4b-7), focuses attention again on humankind (v. 4a).¹⁸ Its position in the cosmos is most comparable to that of rivers.¹⁹ The fact that neither people nor rivers ever achieve a final goal or result

is demonstrated by v. 8 in an area in which human beings would seem at first glance to be different from the rest of the world: their ability to speak and know. Because the words of human language cannot do justice to the complexity of experienced reality (that may be meant by the metaphorical way of saying that they are “wearisome” or “exhausted”),²⁰ no one can successfully speak²¹ (v. 8a). And because the human perception of reality can never be finally “satisfied” or “filled,” the empirical possibilities of human knowledge are limited²² (v. 8b). Thus even when people seem to stand over against the world, there too they are part of the world (cf. v. 3: “under the sun”).

■ 9 That observation allows an extrapolation from the ongoing repetition of like things that can be experi-

15 Lohfink, “Wiederkehr,” 143.

16 Otto Kaiser, “Schicksal, Leid und Gott: Ein Gespräch mit dem Kohelet, Prediger Salomo,” in M. Oeming and A. Graupner, eds., *Altes Testament und christliche Verkündigung: FS Antonius H. J. Gunneweg* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1987) 30–51, here 38.

17 The verbal adjective יָגֵעַ *yāgēa‘* (cf. Deut 25:18; 2 Sam 17:2; Sir 11:11) is intransitive. That makes it difficult to translate: “all things are wearisome” (i.e., for human beings; thus Backhaus, *Zeit und Zufall*, 426). Backhaus’s auxiliary construction, that in terms of content יָגֵעִים *yēgē'im* in Qoh 1:8 “in intransitive use expresses an effect on a person in a qualifying way” (ibid., 38), is hardly convincing.

18 Initially, קְלִי־הַדְּבָרִים *kol-haddēbārīm* could be understood as a comprehensive expression for the phenomena described in vv. 4-7: “all things” (thus B and, e.g., Whybray, “Ecclesiastes 1.5-7,” 107). Yet vv. 4-7 contain no indication that they are “wearisome” or “exhausted” (יָגֵעִים *yēgē'im*). Moreover, as v. 8 continues, it is clear that the topic here is human beings and their speaking and knowing capabilities. This suggests interpreting קְלִי־הַדְּבָרִים *kol-haddēbārīm* as “all words” of which people make use in “speaking” (דַּבֵּר *lēdabbēr*).

19 Cf. v. 8a (יָגֵעִים *yēgē'im* קְלִי־הַדְּבָרִים *kol-haddēbārīm*) with v. 7a (הַחַיִּים *kol-hannēhālīm* הֹלֵכִים *hōlēkīm*) and v. 8b (לֹא־תִמְלֵא *lō-timmālē‘*) with v. 7aβ (אִנְנֵנוּ *‘ēnennū* מָלֵא *mālē‘*).

20 These limits on the possibilities of human speech are vividly illustrated by vv. 4-7: here we see the variational breadth of meaning of identical expressions, which comes to light in the translation. Thus בָּוָה *bw* in v. 4 means “come” in the sense of “appear, be born,” but in v. 5 “go down.” In v. 4 הָלַךְ *hlk* means the “going” (= “dying”) of a human gener-

ation; in v. 6 it means the “blowing” of the wind and in v. 7 the “flowing” of the river. In v. 6 שׁוּב *šwb* means “turn around, return,” but in v. 7 “do something again.” The variety of meanings in the language is further illustrated in v. 7 and in v. 8 itself by the ambiguous expression קְלִי־הַדְּבָרִים *kol-haddēbārīm*. The ambiguity of “words” is reflected in Stoic language theory; cf. the discourse in Diogenes Laertius 7.62: “Ambiguous is an expression that means two or more things, taken literally and actually and according to linguistic usage. Hence we may understand more than one thing by this expression. Thus the words *Αὐλητρὶς πέπτωκε* mean, first, ‘the farm has fallen three times’ and, second, ‘the flute player has fallen.’” (The understanding varies according to the separation of the words: *Αὐλη τρὶς πέπτωκε* or *Αὐλητρὶς πέπτωκε*.) Cf. John G. Gammie, “Stoicism and Anti-Stoicism in Qoheleth,” *HAR* 9 (1985) 178.

21 The verb יָכַל *ykl* “be able” can be used in the sense “be able to do something successfully,” “be equal or superior to someone,” and “be able to grasp or understand something” (cf. Ps 139:6). Verse 8aβ recalls the “catchword” of “incapability of speech” (*ἀφασία*) in Pyrrhonist skepticism (cf. Hossenfelder, *Philosophie*, 147ff.). Verse 10 shows, however, that this incapability of speech here is not meant to be absolute, as with the Pyrrhonists, but *relative*.

22 The problem of the origin of knowledge from the perceptions of the senses is especially considered in Stoic epistemological theory; cf. Hossenfelder, *Philosophie*, 69ff. Qoheleth 1:8 speaks against the assumption that the book of Qoheleth represents an “essentially empirical methodology” (thus Fox, *Qohelet*, 80; cf. 79ff. and idem, “Qohelet’s Epistemology,” *HUCA* 58 [1987] 137–55).

enced in the cosmological realm of events (הַיְהִי *hyh*) to a corresponding repetition of like things in the anthropological realm of human activities (עָשָׂה *śh*), which we find in v. 9. In both cases, therefore, there can be “nothing fully new” (שֶׁחַדָּשׁ *hādāś*). In any case, this places limits on the possibilities of human “gain”: there is no way that a man, through his own efforts, can produce something that has never existed. Thus when “King Qoheleth,” nonetheless, asserts this of himself (cf. 1:16; 2:9), he is deceiving himself. How such deceptions occur is shown by vv. 10-11.

■ 10 Verse 10a formulates an objection to the assertion in v. 9b: over and over, there are still events, conditions, and actions that are regarded and designated as “something new”! Verse 10b questions the correctness of such assertions by harking back to v. 9a and also indicating how such erroneous views come about: now and then similar things repeat themselves after long periods of time (לְעֹלָמִים *lē‘ōlāmīm*, “in distant times”). Such spans of time, however, cannot be surveyed by an individual generation (to say nothing of an individual person) in its own experience (cf. v. 4). It is dependent on remembering its predecessors²³ and their experiences.

■ 11 The next verse shows that this remembering has its limits.²⁴ Therefore, one can have the illusion of something “fully new.” Here the knowledge-critical line of argumentation in v. 8 is resumed and taken further. The

questioning of any remembrance of “people of long ago” is perhaps just as extremely formulated as the assertion in v. 8 that no person is able to speak. Yet רִשְׁוֹנִים (רָשָׁוֹן) (*hā’rī-šōnīm*) can also mean “the first ones.” Then v. 11 would not question that there are memories of ancestors, but rather that such memories reach back to the beginning of history (cf. 3:11b). Likewise, just as in the present there is no remembrance of the (distant) past (“people of long ago”) or the beginning of history (“the first ones”), at the end of history there will be no remembrance of “people yet to come” (from the standpoint of the present) “by those who come last” (עַם שִׁיחֵי לְאַחֲרֵיָהֶם *‘im šeyyihyū lā‘ahārōnā*). In the present, one may well imagine a beginning and end of history, yet one can no longer remember a beginning, and an end is not expected in the foreseeable future. (The future between now and the “end” will last at least two generations!)²⁵ Qoheleth 3:11 will bring this state of affairs into focus (and substantiate it theologically). That in the end there will be no remembrance of those now living can be inferred all the more strongly from the lack of remembrance of “people yet to come.” In the text it is highly effective that v. 11 does not mention the present, living generation at all. When, however, there is no remembrance (at least in the long term) of an individual, then there can, in any case, be no question of remembrance (זְכָרוֹן / זִכְרוֹן *zīkrōn/zikkārōn*) as a possible gain (הָרִוּן).

23 Basically, the expressions רִשְׁוֹנִים *rī-šōnīm* and אַחֲרֵיָהֶם *‘ahārōnīm* in v. 11 can designate both “earlier” and “later” *people* (or generations) (thus, e.g., Gordis, Lohfink), as well as *things*, events, or times (thus, e.g., Galling, Lauha; Galling relates v. 11bβ again to people [“who will exist later”], whereas Lauha also interprets this expression in the sense of events [“There remains no memory of what was earlier, nor of what happened later. One does not remember it—nor what will happen last.”]). Speaking for the translation preferred here is the fact that then “the content of v. 11 links back to v. 4, and in this way forms a frame” (Lohfink, 40), and that אַחֲרֵיָהֶם *‘ahārōnīm* in 4:16 likewise designates people.

24 זְכָרוֹן *zikkārōn*, like the Eng. “remembrance,” can designate both something that reminds one of something or someone and the process of remembering (cf. W. Schottroff, “זכר *zkr* to remember,” *TLOT* 1:383–84). Thus “remembrance” has an “objective” and a “subjective” dimension. Hence the text leaves open whether the lack of remembrance

results (only) from the later ones not being *able* to remember or (also) from their not *wanting* to remember.

25 Cf. the “eschatological *distant* expectation” in Psalm 102 and, on this text, Odil Hannes Steck, “Zu Eigentart und Herkunft von Psalm 102,” *ZAW* 102 (1990) 357–72. (According to Steck, the text is to be dated in the beginning years of the Seleucid hegemony between 200/198 and 194 B.C.E.) Cf. also J. C. H. Lebram, “The Piety of the Jewish Apocalypticists,” in David Hellholm, ed., *Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World and the Near East* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1983) 173: “If . . . we wish to calculate the date when the Kingdom of God is expected to begin from the chronological indications in 4 Ezra, for example, we come up with dates which are generations away from the probable time at which the book was composed.”

yitrôn) of human work and toil (v. 3; cf. 2:13-17; 9:5).

Verse 11 provides a first answer to the “gain” question of v. 3: in view of the transitoriness of the individual person, his or her “gain” possibilities “under the sun” are, in any case, limited. If, moreover, the world as a whole is also transitory, which v. 11 leaves open as a conceptual possibility (cf. 1:2), this would reduce human possibilities of “gain” all the more. The question of eternity or the finitude of the cosmos is, therefore, ethically irrelevant. In this sense 1:3-11 can be understood as a countermodel to contemporary, early Jewish conceptions of an “eschatological ethic.”

■ **1:3-11** In the interpretation of 1:3-11 we must note that this is the prelude of a larger argumentative section (1:3–4:12). Thus at this stage we must leave open the question of how the states of affairs named here are to be evaluated and what consequences are to be drawn for the human conduct of life. In 1:12–2:26 and 3:10–4:12 various possibilities are presented for working through the experiences mentioned in 1:3-11 (and 3:1-9). Likewise left open in 1:3-11 is the question of how the experiences named here are to be presented in theological perspective. (Until now the discussion has still not mentioned God!) For example, can the limits of possible human knowledge named in v. 8 be overcome (at least a little bit) with divine help? And are there perhaps “over the sun,” in the beyond or the eschaton (in spite of v. 11?), still possibilities of “gain” for human beings? These questions will be addressed and answered (negatively) by the theological reflections in 3:10-22.

In this connection, a deficit in substantiation that relates to the argumentation in 1:3-11, read for itself alone, is then also removed: the idea that not only in the cosmological but also in the anthropological realm there is “nothing fully new” (v. 9) is based here only on the fact that human beings are part of the world and not fundamentally different from the rest of the world (vv. 4-8). The limits of memory noted in v. 11 show how the illusion of something fully new can come about. In view of these limits, however, we also cannot exclude the possibility that one day there may actually have been something new (that is simply not remembered). This argumentative aporia is set aside in the theological argumentation of 3:10-15, in that both the repetition of the same kinds of things in the world (3:14-15) and the limits of the possibilities of human knowledge (3:11) are traced back to God.

The questioning of the experience of something “fully new under the sun” in 1:9 is often interpreted as “a mirror of the hopeless political and spiritual stagnation in Palestine in the Ptolemaic period” (Kroeber). As an assertion against appearance (v. 10), however, it seems to have time-critical dimensions.²⁶ It is more the reflection than the reflex of its time of origin. Hellenist rule and culture could be experienced as “something fully new” in the Palestine of the Ptolemaic period²⁷ and presented themselves as something “new” (and better than the “old”²⁸). The quarrel over the proper reaction to these novelties ultimately led in Palestinian Judaism to civil war.²⁹ When on the level of “distant times” there is

26 Ptolemy V (204–180 B.C.E.) has himself worshiped as “a king like the Sun (or the sun god Re)” (Austin, *Hellenistic World*, 374 [no. 227]) and his image put on coins with a sun crown. Could a contemporary reader thus also associate “under the sun” with “under the rule of the Ptolemies”?

27 Cf. Otto Kaiser, “Die Sinnkrise bei Kohelet,” in Kaiser, *Der Mensch unter dem Schicksal: Studien zur Geschichte, Theologie und Gegenwartsbedeutung der Weisheit* (BZAW 161; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1985) 101: “If one considers the time in which Qoheleth lived, one must wonder whether news especially of the military but also of the other accomplishments of Hellenistic civilization had not reached him in Jerusalem.”

28 So reads, for example, a Ptolemy “service instruction” to an *oikonomos* from the late 3d century B.C.E. (Austin, *Hellenistic World*, 429–34 [no. 256]: 432

[ll. 223ff.]): “Take especial care that no act of extortion or any other misdeed is committed. For everyone who lives in the country must clearly know and believe that all such acts have come to an end and that they have been delivered from the previous bad state of affairs, and that [nobody] is allowed to do what he wishes, [but] everything is arranged for the best.” It is a question here of a “recurring profession by the royal administration” (Austin, *ibid.*, 434 n. 20)!

29 In 2 Macc 4:10-11 the establishment of the “Greek way of life” (*τὸν Ἑλληνικὸν χαρακτήρα*) in Jerusalem under Jason is characterized as the abolishing of the “traditional constitution” and the introduction of “new, unlawful practices” (*καὶ τὰς μὲν νομίμους καταλύων πολιτείας παρανόμους ἐθισμούς ἐκαίειν*).

nothing “fully new” under the sun (v. 9b), then a view of the present as “progress” must appear just as questionable as its interpretation as “decline.”³⁰ By contrast, the concept of an ongoing repetition of the same kinds of things in world history by no means excludes the possibility of the perception, as well as the expectation, of fundamental historical changes; it limits only the range of possible changes (v. 9a). Here lies a critical potential of the text both with regard to an attitude that adapts itself to the Hellenistic normality and in relation to positions that expect a fundamental change in the world.³¹

It is indeed “hardly conceivable that a Jewish theologian of the third century B.C.E. could support this thesis [Qoh 1:9] without a side glance at the contemporaneous historical ideas of postprophetic eschatology and apocalypticism.”³² Qoheleth 1:3-11 does not basically exclude the possibility of an end of the world (v. 11!—cf. esp. Isaiah 65–66) but rather an eschatological imminent expectation or expectations of something “fully new” in the world.³³ Above all, however, the text reveals strong reser-

vations concerning the assumption that a person can still achieve some “gain” beyond the realm “under the sun”: this may perhaps be possible for those who will be there at the end—yet those presently alive will already be long forgotten (v. 11).

The eschatology of Isaiah 65–66 is thus ethically neutralized by being pushed into the distant future.³⁴ The eschatological holy gifts given to the presently living “servants of Yahweh” under the presupposition of the near expectation of the end of the world (cf. Isa 65:20-25)—circumscribed in Isa 65:13 with the catchwords “eat,” “drink,” and “rejoice!”—become in the book of Qoheleth the highest and only good in life, *under* the sun, in view of the distance to a possible eschaton (cf. 3:12-13, 22; 5:17-19; 8:15; 9:7-10; 11:7-10). Therefore, the book of Qoheleth can forgo helpful constructions like a resurrection of the dead and a retribution in the beyond that make the longer time until the eschaton bearable (cf., e.g., Dan 12:1-3; *1 Enoch* 22).

30 The objection in v. 10a is meaningful against the background of both conceptions. It does not necessarily have to be an “objection of those who hold that the times are getting worse” (thus Lohfink with a view to 7:10). As conceptions of a world historical decline (to the “eschatological turning point”), cf., e.g., Dan 2; 7 and *1 Enoch* 80.

31 The former is contra Frank Crüsemann, “The Unchangeable World: The ‘Crisis of Wisdom’ in Koheleth,” in Willy Schottroff and Wolfgang Stegemann, eds., *God of the Lowly: Socio-Historical Interpretations of the Bible* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1984) 64. The latter is with Crüsemann, *ibid.*

32 Kaiser, “Sinnkrise,” 100. Cf. T. Krüger, “Deonstruktion und Rekonstruktion prophetischer Eschatologie in Qohelet-Buch,” in A. A. Diesel et al., eds., *“Jedes Ding hat seine Zeit . . .”: Studien zur israelitischen und altorientalischen Weisheit* (BZAW 241; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1996) 107–29, repr. in Krüger, *Kritische Weisheit*, 151–72.

33 On the former expectation see Isa 65:17, where the creation of “a new heaven and a new earth” (cf. 66:22) is announced by the ptc. בֹּרֵא *bôrē* as “immediate or very imminent” (“futurum instans”); see GKC §116p. Does Qoh 1:11 (אֵין זְכֵרֹן לְרֵאשִׁימִים) *’ên zikrôn lāri’sōnim*, “there is no remembrance of the people of long ago”) refer (ironically) to the terminology of Isa 65:17 (וְלֹא יִזְכְּרוּהָ הָרֵאשִׁימֹת) *wəlō’ tizzākarnā hāri’sōnôt*, “the former things [heaven

and earth] shall not be remembered”? Cf. also Isa 41:22-23, 26; 42:9; 43:9, 18-19; 44:7-8; 46:9-10; 48:1-11. On the latter expectation see, e.g., Ezek 11:19-20; 36:26-27 (“new heart,” “new spirit”); Jer 31:31 (“new covenant”); Isa 62:2 (“new name”). In these passages the new does *not* “repeat the old . . . ancient pattern” (contra Lohfink, “Wiederkehr,” 144).

34 If Isaiah 65–66 originated in the first third of the 3d century B.C.E., as Odil Hannes Steck assumes (*Der Abschluß der Prophetie im Alten Testament* [BThSt 17; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1991] 91ff., 197; cf. *idem*, *Studien zu Tritojesaja* [BZAW 203; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1991] 217ff., 248ff.), its eschatological near expectation had, at the time of the origination of the book of Qoheleth, already been taken *ad absurdum* by the progression of history; cf. the roughly contemporaneous *distant* expectation in Psalm 102 (see above), as well as the cultic-wisdom reception of prophetic-eschatological perspectives on salvation in the late psalms, which interpret everyday providence as the experience of the salvific presence of divine governance; see Pss 104:14-15, 27-28; 132:15; 136:25; 145:15-16; 146:7; 147:8-9, 14; and also Reinhard Gregor Kratz, “Die Gnade des täglichen Brots: Späte Psalmen auf dem Weg zum Vaterunser,” *ZThK* 89 (1992) 1–40.

In its critical reservations against tendencies toward an eschatological re(!)orientation in contemporary Judaism, Qoh 1:3-11 has important traditions of the OT on its side. A comparable conception of the return of the same things in the cosmos is formulated in Gen 8:22.³⁵ “As long as the earth endures, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.” A view of *history* as the repetition of similar processes is found especially in the so-called Deuteronomistic history (Deuteronomy–2 Kings), whose view of history remained effective into the time of origin of the book of Qoheleth and beyond.³⁶ In view of these tradition-historical relationships, one can hardly maintain that the book of Qoheleth shows “an unbridgeable distance from all the basic Yahwist traditions.”³⁷

Qoheleth 1:3-11 adds cosmological observations to the answering of the basic ethical question of a person’s

possibilities of “gain.” This corresponds to the “common conviction of the Hellenistic age that the wise individual who understands the true structure of the universe is also the righteous.”³⁸ Unlike, for example, Sir 16:24–17:14 and *1 Enoch* 2–5,³⁹ however, the cosmos does not function here basically as an ethical model for humankind. The view of earth, sun, wind, and rivers shows human beings not primarily how they should act, but what they as part of the cosmos can or cannot achieve through their actions. (In this way, then, the cosmos is again also a “model” for human beings as it takes their striving for “gain” *ad absurdum*.) In this ordering of “cosmology” and “ethics” one may forgo cosmological speculations that go beyond daily experience, as they are documented for contemporary Judaism, for example, in *1 Enoch* 17–36 and 72–82 (cf. Qoh 1:8).⁴⁰

35 This text is compared with Qoh 1:3-11 by, e.g., C. C. Forman, “Kohleth’s Use of Genesis,” *JSS* 5 (1960) 256–57; and Kaiser, “Sinnkrise,” 101. Cf. further Psalm 104, which, after the creation of the ordered cosmos by Yahweh (vv. 1-9), describes the return of similar things *in* this cosmos (vv. 10-30) and in v. 30b possibly translates (and thereby neutralizes) expectations of an “eschatological” re-creation into everyday experience; cf. Thomas Krüger, “‘Kosmotheologie’ zwischen Mythos und Erfahrung,” *BN* 68 (1993) 72–73, repr. in Krüger, *Kritische Weisheit*, 118.

36 Cf. Klaus Koch, “Geschichte II: Altes Testament,” *TRE* 12:580–81. “The principles according to which Yahweh shapes history through his word and subsequent reaction to human activity remain the same for all times [in the Deuteronomistic History]” (581). Cf. esp. Nehemiah 9; Dan 9:4-19; Bar 1:15–3:8; Tobit 13, and also Odil Hannes Steck, *Israel und das gewaltsame Geschick der Propheten: Untersuchungen zur Überlieferung des deuteronomistischen Geschichtsbildes im Alten Testament, Frühjudentum und Urchristentum* (WMANT 23; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1967) 113ff.

37 Thus Crüsemann, “Unchangeable World,” 90.

38 J. J. Collins, “Cosmos and Salvation: Jewish Wisdom and Apocalyptic in the Hellenistic Age,” *History of Religions* 17 (1977) 137.

39 Cf. here Lebram, “Piety,” 188ff.

40 These Enochic texts show “that there existed in the third century B.C.E. broad areas of speculation of a pseudo-scientific kind in Judah and in Jewish circles . . . a rather sophisticated and rich realm of speculation and ‘sacred science’ within Judaism” (Michael E. Stone, *Scriptures, Sects, and Visions: A Profile of Judaism from Ezra to the Jewish Revolts* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980] 35; cf. 27ff.; idem, “The Book of Enoch and Judaism in the Third Century B.C.E.,” *CBQ* 40 [1978] 479–92; idem, “Lists of Revealed Things in the Apocalyptic Literature,” in Frank Moore Cross, Werner E. Lemke, and Patrick D. Miller, eds., *Magnalia Dei: The Mighty Acts of God: Essays on the Bible and Archaeology in Memory of G. E. Wright* [Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976] 414–52).

8 **Fleeting and futile, said Qoheleth;
all that is fleeting.**

Qoheleth 12:8 repeats (in somewhat abbreviated form) the “motto” of the book from 1:2 (cf. the textual notes and commentary there). After the reading of 1:3–12:7 and in connection with the immediately preceding text, the clause *הַכֹּל הֶבֶל* *hakkōl hebel* can now be understood more precisely. Human beings and all that they do are transitory and “fleeting.” And all convictions and wishes that do not do justice to this transitoriness of humankind are untenable and “futile.” This in no way

means that life is completely “meaningless” and “absurd,” as the “king” holds in 1:12–2:26. Rather, the meaning of human life consists in affording oneself and others the enjoyment of good things within the context of the possibilities and limits set by God (cf. 3:10–12:7). As a reference back to the beginning of the book, 12:8 exhorts readers at the end to read the book again and anew from this viewpoint.

Qoheleth was not only a wise man but also taught the people knowledge.^a He heard^b and examined^c (and^d) corrected^e many proverbs. 10 Qoheleth sought to find pleasing words and to correctly record^d true words. 11 The words of the wise are like goads, and like nails driven home are collected proverbs.^a They were given by *one* shepherd. 12 And beyond these—my son, be warned!—many books are made,^a without end, yet much study^b tires the body. 13 At the end of a talk we^a hear all this: fear the Deity and keep his commandments! For everyone is to do that.^b 14 The Deity brings every deed into a judgment of everything hidden, whether good or evil.

- 9a In addition to this interpretation of the construction . . . עוֹד . . . שִׁי יִתֵּר׃ *wēyōtēr še . . . ‘ōd . . .* (lit.: “in addition to [Qoheleth being a wise man, he taught] also [or: always] . . .”), the following understanding is also syntactically possible: “*And it remains (to be said) that [Qoheleth was a wise man:] also [or: always] [he taught . . .]*”; cf. in detail Lohfink, “Zu einigen Satzeröffnungen im Epilog des Kohelethbuchs,” in Diesel et al., eds., *Jedes Ding*, 131–47.
- 9b Thus with the interpretation of the verb וְיִזְזֵנּוּ *wē’izzēn* as יִזְנ׃ *zn piel* (cf. the ancient versions). *HALOT* assumes here a verb יִזְנ׃ *zn II piel* “balance,” derived from the noun מִזְנֵי׃ *mōzēnayim*, “scale”; see, however, Seow.
- 9c Or: “researched.” The meaning “search out,” assumed by *HALOT* for the piel of הִקֵּר׃ *hqr*, which is attested only here, seems less likely in view of the qal (“research, find out”) and the niphāl (“be discovered”) of this root.
- 9d The conjunction is found in some Heb. mss., ⚙, and α’.
- 9e תִּקְּנֵ׃ *tqn piel* (cf. also 7:13 and Sir 47:9; qal: 1:15) is interpreted here mostly in the sense of “put into a good order, arrange a collection of proverbs” (thus *HALOT*); cf. Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (2d ed.; Oxford: Clarendon, 1988) 32 (“to edit”). Yet the assumption of a meaning of “correct, put right” seems less forced; cf. 7:13, as well as the (later) תִּקְּנֵ׃ סֹפְרֵי׃ *tiqqūnē sōpērīm* (“copyist corrections”), Murphy; N. Lohfink, “Les épilogues du livre de Qohélet et les débuts du Canon,” in P. Bovati and R. Meynet, eds., *Ouvrir les écritures: Mélanges offerts à Paul Beauchamp* (LD 162; Paris: Cerf, 1995) 87–88. The *NJPSV* interprets תִּקְּנֵ׃ *tiqqēn* as a noun (“propriety”) and translates: “He listened to and tested the soundness of many maxims.”
- 10a ⚭ reads וְכָתוּב׃ *wktub* as pass. ptc. וְכָתוּב׃ *wēkātūb* “(it is) written” (cf. ⚙). Some Heb. mss. read a finite verb וְכָתַב׃ *wēkātāb*, “he wrote”; likewise α’ σ’ Hier ⚭, which, however, could also have interpreted an inf. abs. וְכָתוּב׃ *wēkātōb* as a finite verb (cf. 4:2; 8:9). The translation proposed above assumes that וְכָתוּב׃ *wktub* as inf. abs. (וְכָתוּב׃ *wēkātōb*), just like לִמְסֹ׃ *limsō’*, is dependent on בִּיקְּשֵׁ׃ *biqqēš* (cf. 7:25).
- 11a מְסֹפְרֵי׃ *ba’ālē ‘āsuppōt* can designate not only (personally) “masters = leaders of [or: participants in?] assemblies” (or also “authors of collections [of sayings]”?) but also (impersonally) “elements of the class ‘gathered (words/sayings)’” = “gathered sayings” (cf. Isa 41:15; Prov 1:17; Qoh 10:20; Dan 8:6, 20), which more closely parallels “words.”
- 12a Or: “And beyond this there is still more (to say): My son, be warned! Many books are made . . .” or: “And it remains (to be said): Against them [scil. the words and sayings named in v. 11], my son, be warned! . . .”; cf. above n. 9a.
- 12b Instead of the *hapax legomenon* לַהֲגֹ׃ *lahag* (“study”) one should perhaps read לְהַגֹּ׃ *lēhāgō* (from הִגַּ׃ *hgh qal*) (“read half out loud, consider while mumbling”).

13a Thus with the interpretation of נִשְׁמָעַי *nišmāc* as 1st person pl. impf. of שָׁמַע *šmāc* qal (cf. B). The form could also be read as niphāl ptc.: “(all this has been) heard,” without essentially changing the meaning of the statement. וְ and עֵ presuppose the impv. m. sg. (שָׁמַעַי *šmāc*).

13b For this usual but not entirely certain interpretation of the sentence, Seow refers for comparison to Pss 110:3; 109:4; 120:7; Job 8:9.

Verses 9-14 correspond to the title in 1:1. As there (and in 1:2; 12:8, as well as 7:27), here too we find the words of the “editor” of the book in addition to those of “Qoheleth”—which does not exclude the possibility that concealed behind the two voices is one and the same author.¹ In the literature, however, it is mostly assumed that the “epilogue” of 12:9-14 goes back to one or more (according to Jastrow, more than eight) authors who are different from the author of the corpus of the book in 1:(2)3–12:7(8).

Thus Lohfink (12–13), for example, presumes that the book of Qoheleth was introduced with the (secondary) framework in 1:1 and 12:9-11 as a text book in the Jerusalem temple school in addition to Proverbs (and Canticles?); 12:12-14 was then added somewhat later in order to counter the attempt to replace the “Corpus Salomonium” (Proverbs + Qohelet [+ Canticles?]) with the book of Sirach as a new (and more comprehensive!) textbook; at the same time the “orthodoxy” of Qoheleth is defended here vis-à-vis the more strongly tradition-oriented book of Sirach. Finally, according to Lohfink, the book of Qoheleth as a textbook, like other writings common to the Jerusalem temple and the synagogues, “fell automatically, as it were, into the canon” (see Introduction above under “Influence”).

Yet when following and further developing observations and hypotheses of Sheppard, Wilson, Dohmen/

Oeming, and Koenen, one could also assume that 12:9-14 already had in mind the embedding of the book of Qoheleth in a larger context of “(proto)canonical” writings: first, the (“Solomonic”?) wisdom literature (v. 11: “sayings of the wise”), then (in one or more further steps?) also the “Torah” (v. 13: “commandments” of God) and the “prophets” (v. 14: “judgment” of God).² Then one might ask further whether vv. 12-14 express a more critical attitude toward the book of Qoheleth (and the “words of the wise”) than that in vv. 9-11 (thus, e.g., Lauha).

A closer examination of the text, however, reveals that its statements and admonitions contain a number of underlying ironical allusions that make it seem possible to understand the epilogue of the book of Qoheleth as its original literary conclusion through which it is once again pointedly inscribed in the context of contemporary theological discussion.³ At the same time, for the reader the “teaching authority” of Qoheleth is again critically relativized here at the end of the book, as it was already at its beginning (see above on 1:1): its observations deserve attention because of their underlying experiences and reflections (vv. 9-10). For this very reason, however, they are also to be tested critically by the readers through their own reflection and in view of their own experiences—especially since there are in addition further “sayings of the wise” (v. 11), as well as other rele-

1 Cf. M. V. Fox, “Frame Narrative and Composition in the Book of Qohelet,” *HUCA* 48 (1977) 83–106.

2 G. T. Sheppard, “The Epilogue to Qoheleth as Theological Commentary,” *CBQ* 39 (1977) 182–89; idem, *Wisdom as a Hermeneutical Construct* (BZAW 180; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1980) 120–29; G. H. Wilson, “The Words of the Wise: The Intent and Significance of Qohelet 12:9-14,” *JBL* 103 (1984) 175–92; C. Dohmen, “Das viele Büchermachen hat kein Ende (Koh 12,12): Wachtstumsspuren in der Heiligen Schrift,” in Dohmen and M. Oeming, *Biblischer Kanon warum und wozu? Eine Kanontheo-*

logie (QD 137; Freiburg: Herder, 1992) 30–54; K. Koenen, “Zu den Epilogen des Buches Qohelet,” *BN* 72 (1994) 24–27.

3 Fox, “Frame Narrative.”

vant books (v. 12) and pertinent cultural traditions (vv. 13-14: “commandments” of God, expectation of a divine “judgment”).

Regarding structure, 12:9-14 is especially comparable to Sir 50:27-29:⁴

- 27 Instruction, insight, and proverbial writings on
(various) life situations
by Simon, the son of Jesus, the son of Eleazar,
the son of Sirach,
which poured forth from the seeking of his heart,
and which he let pour forth in insight.
- 28 Happy are those who ponder (יִחְגְּלוּ *yhgh*) them,
and those who take them to heart will become
wise.
- 29 For the fear of the Lord means life.

In both cases a presentation of the “author” and the production of his writing (Qoh 12:9-10; Sir 50:27) is followed by a closing “parenthesis” with an admonition to the reader (Qoh 12:12-13; implicit in Sir 50:28) and a look into the future (Qoh 12:14; Sir 50:29). Moreover, there are also content parallels between the two texts (Qoh 12:12: (חֵן) לְהִגְלוֹת *lhg(hi)*/Sir 50:28: יִחְגְּלוּ *yhgh*; “fear of God” in Qoh 12:13 and Sir 50:29). The parallels in structure could indicate that both texts were conceived according to a conventional pattern for the conclusion of a “wisdom teaching”⁵ (which is not a compelling argument for the literary unity of Qoh 12:9-14 but makes this possibility worth considering).

These verses describe the work of Qoheleth out of which the present book arose.

■ **9abα** Verse 9a designates Qoheleth as “wise” or as a “wise man” (חֲכָמִים *hākām*). In 1:3–12:7 the “editor” of the

book interprets and clarifies the ambivalent “self-”portrait of “Qoheleth”: if “Qoheleth” initially presents himself in the role of a “king” as unsurpassed “wise man” (1:16; cf. 2:15), later in 7:23, after giving up this role, he points to the failure of his search for wisdom (cf. also 8:16-17). Nonetheless, statements like 4:13; 7:16-17; 9:13ff.; and 10:10 reveal a relative valuation of wisdom by “Qoheleth.” In that the “editor” now in closing designates “Qoheleth” as a “wise man,” he defines with the help of his “persona” *his* understanding of “wisdom”: a “wise man” is precisely one who—like “Qoheleth” and not like the “king”—is conscious of the limits of his “wisdom” (cf. Socrates). The fact that in the epilogue of the book Qoheleth is no longer given the title “king” is a final indication that in 1:1 and 1:12–2:26 it is a question of a fictive travesty.

Because of the ambiguity of the construction of v. 9a and 9bα it must remain open whether the text sees in the instruction of the people an aspect of Qoheleth’s “being (a) wise (man)” or an additional activity that could not yet be taken for granted.⁶ For comparison Lohfink points to “the call of wisdom through the streets and marketplaces in Proverbs 1–9.” In addition, one may mention the presentation of various types of “wise men” in Sir 37:22ff.:

- 22 There is also a wise man who is wise for himself;
the fruits of his knowledge will be to his
advantage.
- 23 There is also a wise man who is wise for his
people;
the fruits of his knowledge will be to their
advantage.

4 Translation after G. Sauer, *JSHRZ* III.5; on the varied text tradition of Sir 50:20 see Sauer on this passage.

5 On the “parenthetic” conclusion cf., e.g., the Egyptian teaching of Amenemope (Brunner, *Allägyptische Weisheit*, no. 14, 540ff.): “Look at these thirty chapters; they delight and they teach; they stand at the head of all books; they bring the unknowing knowledge. Whoever reads them to the unknowing man makes him a pure man. Fill yourself with them; put them in your heart; indeed, become a man who can interpret them by explaining them as a teacher. A

writer who is experienced in his office is found worthy of being in the court.”

6 For the former see, e.g., Fox: “public instruction is an aspect of being a *hākām*.” For the latter see, e.g., Lohfink: “An attempt to make education available to simple folk, or even the unrestricted offering of teaching to the general public, must have been something new or unusual—otherwise it would not have been so emphasized.”

- 24 One who is wise for himself is filled with enjoyment,
and all who see him call him happy.
- 25 The life of a person lasts numerable days,
yet the days of the life of the people Israel are without number.
- 26 One who is wise for the people gains esteem,
and his name stands fast in eternal life.⁷

If at first glance Qoh 12:9 and Sir 37:23 seem to exhibit the same type of “wise man,” a closer examination reveals, nonetheless, a crucial difference. The “wise man” of Sir 37:23 applies “his knowledge” (דעתו *d’atw*) for the benefit of the people (גוי *gwy*). “Qoheleth,” by contrast, conveys to the “people” (עמם *hā’ām*) their own “knowledge” (דעת *da’at*). Here one sees the contrast between the concept of an “elite” education of a “leading class” for the people (cf. Sir 38:24ff.) and the concept of an “education of the people.” When in 12:9 the “editor” presents “Qoheleth” as a “wise man” in the sense of the second concept, he is reinforcing the vote for a “broad education” developed in 9:13–10:3.

■ **9bβ-10** With his representation of the production of the book by “Qoheleth” in vv. 9bβ-10 the writer reinforces the fiction of “Qoheleth” as “author” of the book and stylizes himself as its “editor.” Verse 9bβγ (“he heard and examined [and] corrected many proverbs”) is often interpreted as a description of the production (and composition) of proverbs by “Qoheleth”: “He pondered and searched out and set in order many proverbs” (NIV).⁸ Yet a comparison with the prologue of Proverbs and the presentation of the wise man in Sir 39:1ff. makes it more likely that the topic here is “Qoheleth’s” dealing with traditional “proverbs” already available—and that the writer did not have in mind (only) “com-

pletely new (i.e., Greek) cultural tradition” (Lohfink). In the context of describing the purpose of the book of Proverbs, Prov 1:5-6 states:

- 5 Let the wise man hear and increase (his) education
and let the understanding man acquire ideas,
6 to understand a proverb and a parable,
words of the wise and their riddles.

And Sir 39:1-3 says of the “wise man”:

- 1 He seeks out (ἐκζητήσει) the wisdom of all the
ancients
and is concerned with prophecies.
2 He observes the speeches of famous men,
and he penetrates the expressions of the proverbs
(παραβολῶν).
3 He seeks out (ἐκζητήσει) the mysteries of parables,
and he is concerned with the riddles of proverbs
(παραβολῶν).⁹

At first, Qoh 12:9bβγ also seems to deal with the adaptation of traditional “wisdom” (“hear”). Then, however, there is a critical testing and *correction*. Wisdom is accordingly defined here no longer primarily by a material tradition but by a capacity for critical reflection on tradition in view of one’s own experiences.¹⁰ Corresponding to this is the sequence of “seeking,” “finding,” and “recording” in v. 10—in which it is not entirely clear whether “pleasing words” (דברי חֵפֶז *dibrê-hēpes*) and “true words” (דברי אֱמֶת *dibrê ’emet*) are used here synonymously, or whether *from* the “pleasing words” that he found “Qoheleth” *selected* (and wrote down “directly”—that is, without regard to “aesthetics”?) “true/reliable words.” Also in this characteristic, the presentation of

7 Translation after Sauer, *JSHRZ* III.5. Cf. also Sir 24:34: “Observe that I did not labor for myself alone but for all who seek her [i.e., wisdom]”; contra Prov 9:12: “If you are wise, you are wise for your own benefit.” That Sirach too was not a “wise man” entirely unselfishly is shown by 51:27-28, in addition to 37:26.

8 Cf. also Whybray: קָנַן *qan* “may mean ‘arrange’ (. . .); but in rabbinic Hebrew it can mean ‘set in order’ or ‘establish, ordain.’ In Sir. 47:9 (Hebrew text) it may mean ‘compose (music).’ Taken together, these three verbs may refer to the stages in

the process of literary composition: experimenting with, working on, and shaping proverbs.”

9 Translation after Sauer, *JSHRZ* III.5.

10 If v. 9(ff.), as Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation*, 29–32, presumes, was shaped after the model of a scribal colophon (cf., however, Fox’s critical notes [on 12:9]), this could be a carrying over of the model of “correct writing” (v. 10b) from the form to the content of a text.

“Qoheleth” by the “editor” agrees with his “self”-portrayal in 1:3–12:7, for he often carries on or encourages a critical engagement with “words” (cf. 1:10; 5:6; 6:11; 7:21; 10:12ff.).

■ 11 Beginning with v. 11, the talk is no longer directly of Qoheleth; to the extent that he was a “wise man” (v. 9) and worked with “words” (v. 10), however, what is said in v. 11 about the “sayings of the wise” applies both to the “words” of traditional wisdom, with which Qoheleth has dealt critically, and to his own “words” (cf. 1:1). The comparison in v. 11a between “words of the wise” and “collected proverbs,” on the one hand, and “goats” and “nails driven home,” on the other, presents several puzzles.¹¹ In any case, however, it is clear that here educational activity and agriculture (as well as handiwork?) are placed in parallel. One possible point of this statement is shown by the comparison with the juxtaposition of the “wise man” (Sir 39:1ff.; see above) and those who are active in agriculture (38:25-26) and handiwork (v. 27: worker, artisan; v. 28: smith; vv. 29-30: potter) in 38:24–39:11: “How can one who holds the plow become wise, and one who glories in the shaft of the goad, who drives cattle and turns the oxen?” (38:25)¹² By contrast, Qoh 12:11 states: as the farmer busies himself with ox goads and the craftsman with nails, so the wise man with words. At the same time, this recognizes the activity of the “wise man” as an independent “occupa-

tion” and rejects an elitist distinction regarding the worth of “head” and “hand” work, “white collar” and “blue collar” jobs.

Moreover, the juxtaposition of “words of the wise” (דִּבְרֵי הַחֲכָמִים *dibrē ḥākāmim*) and “collected proverbs” (בַּעֲלֵי בָּאָלֶה *ba‘ālē ‘āsūppōt*) in v. 11 perhaps “justifies the gathering of the sayings of teachers in books” (Lohfink). Then the comparison with “ox goads” and “nails” could emphasize the varied functions of (oral) “words” and (written) “collections.” Whereas the former above all provoke, stimulate thinking, and give instructions for action, the latter offer security and support in the form of a comprehensive orientation. Yet the comparison would be quite ambivalent. Like “ox goads,” the “words of the wise” can also incapacitate and injure hearers,¹³ and like “nails,” “collected proverbs” can also lead to “dogmatic” hardening and inflexibility.

Verse 11b (“they were given by *one* shepherd”) is often understood in the sense that the “words of the wise” and the “collected proverbs” were “given” by God or by King Solomon.¹⁴ Probably, however, the statement simply continues the comparison of v. 11a (cf. Fox): as one and the same shepherd employs in his work both “ox goads” and “nails” (say, in the building of a shelter or a fence), so one and the same wise man works with both (oral) “words” and (written) “collections.” This again justifies “the gathering of the sayings of teachers in books” (Loh-

11 Cf. Lauha: “דָּרְבָּן [dārbān] (only here and in 1 Sam 13:21; Ugar. *drb*) is the barb with which one drives and leads a draft animal. . . . The image comes from farm life. The comparison tries to convince one that the instruction of the wise can give to listeners or readers stimulating impulses and useful suggestions. . . . מַשְׁמֶרֶה [masmērā] ‘nail’ occurs only here and in Jer 10:4 (cf. מַשְׁמֶרֶת [masmēr] Isa 41:7; 1 Chr 22:3; 2 Chr 3:9). נָטַע [nā‘] (3:2) ‘to plant’ has here the specific meaning ‘drive nails.’ Either the farm image is continued here (nails = barbs), or the image passes into the realm of the craftsman: as nails give a building solidity, the teacher of wisdom helps a person stand fast.” M. Rose, “Verba sapientium sicut stimuli,” in D. Knoepfler, ed., *Nomen Latinum: Mélanges . . . offerts au professeur André Schneider* (Neuchâtel: Faculté de lettres; Geneva: Droz, 1997) 209–18, attempts to make the text more understandable with the help of conjectures.

12 Translation after Sauer, *JSHRZ* III.5.

13 Cf. Fox: “The goad prods one on to thought and

better behavior, but it also hurts. . . . The words of the sages, in other words, are a bit dangerous. Compare the far more emphatic warning of R. Eliezer b. Hyrkanus to beware of the words of *ḥākāmim*, for ‘they burn like fiery coals, bite like jackals, sting like scorpions’ (Avot 2:15); cf. also Ogden.

14 For the former see, e.g., Lauha; Dohmen, “Das viele Büchermachen”; idem, “Der Weisheit letzter Schluss? Anmerkungen zur Übersetzung und Bedeutung von Koh 12,9-14,” *BN* 63 (1992) 12–18. For the latter see, e.g., Delitzsch. Lohfink and Crenshaw leave both possibilities open. Galling recommends vocalizing מִרְעֵה אֶחָד מִרְעֵה *mr‘eh yd* as מִרְעֵה אֶחָד מִרְעֵה *mēr‘eh ‘ehād* (“from a friend”): “The words of the wise and thus *also* and especially the words of Qoheleth are handed down” by a “pupil and friend of the deceased who remains anonymous.” Speaking against this, however, is the fact that v. 11 does not speak especially of the “words of Qoheleth.”

fink) but, at the same time, it is relativized: it represents only *one* realm of activity of the “wise man.”

■ 12 Like the comparisons in v. 11, the warning (הַיָּהָרִי *hizzāhēr*, cf. 4:13) against the “making” and “studying” of “books” in v. 12, introduced by the conventional addressing of a student or reader as “my son” (cf. esp. Proverbs 1-9; Sir 2:1; 3:8, 12, 17; 4:1, 20; and elsewhere), is ambivalent.¹⁵ It can be read as “a warning to avoid the writing of more books and endless study . . . (cf. Gordis, Lohfink)” or as “a solemn counsel to any who would follow the sage that such a decision calls for a sincere commitment to an endless and all-consuming task” (Ogden).¹⁶ In this ambivalence v. 12—especially in comparison with Sir 50:28: “Happy are those who ponder (יהגה *yhgh*) them [sc. the teachings of Sirach] . . . !” (cf. Josh 1:8; Pss 1:2; 37:30)—has the effect of a parody of the final parenthesis in a wisdom teaching text.

Depending on how one interprets the syntax and semantics of the text (cf. the note on the translation), the warning of v. 12 can be related to the book of Qoheleth (vv. 9-10) and other wisdom writings and traditions (v. 11) or to “books” that come from other traditions and conceptual contexts (“beyond these [words of

the wise and collected proverbs]”). This ambiguity of the text (cf., e.g., 5:7-8; 8:2-5) gives expression to an irony—which is also thoroughly self-critical.

■ 13-14 Verse 13a (הַכֹּל נִשְׁמָע סוּף דְּבַר הַחֵלֶל *sōp dābār hakkōl nīšmā*) is usually interpreted as a signal for the closing of the book of Qoheleth.¹⁷ The exhortation “Fear the Deity and keep his commandments!” in v. 13b can then be understood either as an additional, complementary admonition of the “editor” or as a summary of the teachings of “Qoheleth.” Quite the same can be said about the expectation of a divine judgment in v. 14. The undetermined סוּף דְּבַר *sōp dābār* (“end of a talk”) could, naturally, indicate that v. 13 does not refer at all to the book of Qoheleth but rather to the other kinds of writings mentioned in v. 12—which then are apparently (in the view of the “editor”) a matter of boring and monotonous “pious” treatises. Verse 14 would then likewise be understood as a stereotypical assertion of this “religious” literature—or as another statement of the “editor” that subjects this literature (not without irony) to the final judgment of God (cf. v. 14: כֹּל-מַעֲשֵׂה *kol-ma‘āseh* with v. 12: עֲשׂוֹת כִּפְרִים *‘āsōt sēpārīm*).

15 Deviating from the usual linguistic usage (כתב *ktb* + ספר *sēper*), עֲשׂוֹת כִּפְרִים *‘āsōt sēpārīm* has given rise to the assumption that עשה *‘sh* here means “use” books (Loretz, *Qohelet*, 139), “working at books” (P. A. H. de Boer, “A Note on Ecclesiastes 12,12a,” in R. H. Fischer, ed., *A Tribute to Arthur Vööbus* [Chicago: Lutheran School of Theology, 1977] 85–88, repr. in de Boer, *Selected Studies in Old Testament Exegesis* [ed. C. van Duin; OTS 27; Leiden: Brill, 1991] 168–71), or “compare,” “compile” (Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation*, 31). Perhaps the whole spectrum of dealing with books should be held open. Nevertheless, עשה *‘sh* is probably used here to make clear that the production of books is also subject to divine judgment over human activity (מַעֲשֵׂה *ma‘āseh*) (v. 14). In any case, the text does not expressly say that it is a question here of *new* textbooks (thus, e.g., Lohfink) or of *foreign* (say, Greek) literature (thus, e.g., Barton).

16 Ogden favors the second meaning. The prologue to the Greek translation of the book of Sirach shows that the reference to an “endless production of books” in no way has to be automatically valued negatively:

1 Because of the many and great traditions that were given to us through the law and the prophets 2 and the others who followed them

. . . 4 and since not only those who can read [these writings] should receive understanding 5 but those eager to learn should be in a position also to be of service to those who find themselves on the outside, 6 through words and through writings (καὶ λέγοντας καὶ γράφοντας), 7 my grandfather Jesus, who even toiled greatly 8 over the knowledge of the law 9 and the prophets 10 and the other books of the fathers 11 and had gained from them a sufficient knowledge, undertook 12 also to write down something himself. . . .

This would be even more valid if in v. 14 one could, with Loretz (*Qohelet*, 142), understand ἐπιπροσθῶσιν in the sense of “add”: “. . . 13 so that the scholars, hereby enriched, 14 in the course of their lives faithful to the law added still much more” (contra Sauer, *JSHRZ* III.5: “. . . 13 so that those who strive for learning and constantly hold fast to it 14 could more easily make progress in regard to life according to the law”).

17 Cf. Dan 7:28 and, e.g., the conclusion of the Egyptian Instruction of the Papyrus Insinger (Brunner, *Altägyptische Weisheit*, no. 17): “End of the teaching” (followed by a blessing for the author) or the close of the Teaching of Ankh-Sheshonq (Brunner, *Alt-*

Because of this ambiguity vv. 13-14 can be read in different senses:

- as a critique of an overflowing production of religious or theological literature that, however, only repeats and varies a few stereotypical statements and admonitions,
- as an (ironic) attempt to acknowledge the religious and theological “correctness” of the book of Qoheleth,¹⁸ or
- as an (ironic) reinforcement of the “essentials” of traditional piety and theology vis-à-vis the irritating and provocative ideas of the book of Qoheleth.¹⁹

The formulations in vv. 13-14 show similarities and differences both in regard to comparable statements in the corpus of the book of Qoheleth and in regard to other contemporary texts and theological concepts. Like the ambiguities of the text, these allusions also call for readers to accept the responsibility of receiving the book of Qoheleth in the context of the contemporary discussion. The text confronts its readers not simply with the decision to reject either “Qoheleth” or the religious convictions criticized by him; with its formulations the text (in a way similar to 12:1-7 concerning eschatological expectations) raises the possibility of a critical reception and new interpretation of religious traditions.

In his analysis of vv. 13-14, Sheppard comes to the conclusion that “only Sirach has exactly the same ideology as Qoh. 12:13-14, a perspective not expressed in the body of Qoheleth itself. It is, therefore, probable that the redactor of Qoh. 12:13-14 either knew of the book of Sirach or shared fully in a similar, pervasive estimate of sacred wisdom.”²⁰ On closer examination, however, it is apparent that Sheppard’s observations need to be refined and his conclusions corrected accordingly:

1. The “ideology” and “perspective” of vv. 13-14 is in no way totally foreign to the rest of the book of Qoheleth. The admonition to fear God in v. 13b corresponds word for word with 5:6b. The keeping of the commandments is not otherwise expressly called for in the book of Qoheleth (on the formulation cf. 8:5); but 5:3 quotes almost word for word the commandment in Deut 23:22, and at no point in the book is the keeping of the commandments of God criticized. Thus both imperatives in 12:13 could be understood as a—like 1:2 and 12:8, highly selective!—résumé of the “words of Qoheleth.” Just like 1:2 and 12:8, however, 12:13 is then also to be interpreted from the standpoint of 1:3–12:7. Then “fear of God” here not only means—as frequently in the Psalms and in the OT wisdom literature—“piety” and “moral behavior” in a rather unspecific sense,²¹ but also includes the numinous element of fear before God (cf. 3:14; 8:12-13) and is in any case not identical with “wisdom” and “righteousness” (cf. 7:15-18). And the “keeping of the commandments,” according to statements like 7:15; 8:14; and 9:2, cannot in any event be linked with an expectation of prosperity thereby guaranteed.

The same is true of 12:14: the expectation of a “judgment” of God on a man and his actions (v. 14a) is also formulated in comparable terminology in 11:9b, which is therefore often excluded as a gloss. In the context (11:7–12:7), however, this “judgment” of God is redefined here in the sense that it consists in the accidents and “strokes of fate” to which life subjects a person and, finally, in death. In a similar way 3:17 identifies the “judging” of God with the change of time. On this basis, then, 12:14 also does not have to be read as a reference to an “eschatological” judgment of God. In addition, the judgment of God on human actions is, according to v. 14, expressly based on points of view that are “hid-

ägyptische Weisheit, no. 15): “(It is) written.” By all appearances, סֵפֶר *sôp* does not mean “sum” or “result” but simply “end” (cf. 3:11; 7:2; Hitzig; Sheppard, *Wisdom*, 122 n. 6). Cf., however, also Sir 43:27: “More of this sort we do not want to add, and the end of the talk (וְקֵץ דְּבַר) *wqs dbr*): he [God] is everything/the universe.”

18 Thus, e.g., Lohfink (13): 12:12-14 “defended the orthodoxy of the book.”

19 Thus, e.g., Dohmen and Oeming, “Das viele

Büchermachen,” 51: 12:12-14 attempts “to immunize the book of Qoheleth . . . by declaring that . . . its study is superfluous in regard to the only important thing: living a life pleasing to God.”

20 Sheppard, *Wisdom*, 127.

21 Cf. H.-P. Stähli, “אֵיֶרָא” to fear,” *TLOT* 2:575-77.

den" from human beings (cf. 9:1). This, however, makes it unpredictable for human beings.²² To this extent, the reference to the coming "judgment" of God here contains no promise for those who "fear God" and are "faithful to the law" (v. 13); rather, it substantiates a "fear of God" in the sense of awe before God.

2. A close connection between "fear of God" and "keeping the commandments" corresponding to Qoh 12:13 is otherwise found in contemporary literature only in Sirach. It is already anticipated, however, in "a few wisdom psalms" in which "the concept of the 'fear of God' becomes a 'nomistic' concept and refers exclusively to the law: *y^r* designates those who have pleasure in Yahweh's commandments (Ps 112:1), those faithful to the law (Ps 119:63) who walks in his paths (Ps 128:1). In Ps 19:10 *yir'at yhw^h* signifies the 'law' itself."²³ In the book of Sirach one may compare Qoh 12:13-14 especially to Sir 1:26ff., where, in addition to the parallelism of "fear of the Lord" and "keeping the commandments"²⁴ that corresponds to Qoh 12:13, one also finds a reference to God's judging activity in the future, which is comparable to Qoh 12:14:

- 26 If you desire wisdom, keep the commandments, and the Lord will lavish her upon you.
- 27 For wisdom and learning lie in the fear of the lord, and fidelity and humility are his delight.
- 28 Do not be hypocritical in the fear of the Lord, and do not approach it with a doubting heart,
- 29 Do not be a hypocrite before others, and keep watch over your lips.
- 30 Do not exalt yourself, so that you will not fall and thereby bring dishonor on yourself; the Lord will reveal your secret thoughts, and cast you down in the midst of the community.²⁵

A comparison of this text with Qoh 12:13-14, however, shows considerable differences in "ideology" and

"perspective"—especially if one interprets Qoh 12:13-14 in the sense of the comments of 1:3–12:7: in contrast to Sir 1:26ff., this passage lacks a direct connection between "fear of God" and "keeping the commandments," on the one hand, and "wisdom," on the other.²⁶ In any case, the "fear of God" here is not the "beginning of wisdom" (Sir 1:14; Prov 1:7; 9:10; 15:33; Ps 111:10); it stands rather at its "end" (v. 13a): "wisdom" does not lead to a higher form of "piety" and "morality" but, on the contrary, to an insight into the value of elementary "piety" and "morality." "Fear of God" and the "keeping of the commandments" in no way guarantees a person divine "delight." And the judgment of God of "everything hidden" has as its object not only "secret thoughts," which the "hypocrite" hides inside but otherwise knows well, but also the "unconscious," which remain inaccessible to every person. If every person is obligated by the "fear of God" and "keeping the commandments" (v. 13b), this nips in the bud a functionalization of "piety" and "religion" for the educational process, as discernible in exemplary fashion in Sir 1:26-30.

In a way similar to Qoh 12:13, Job 28:28 also reduces the wisdom accessible to human beings to "pious" and "moral" behavior. Wisdom is "hidden from the eyes of all living" (vv. 21-22); God alone knows the way to her" (vv. 23ff.); "he saw her and counted her; he established her and searched her out (v. 27); then he said to humankind: 'See! The fear of the Lord [read <Yahweh>?] is wisdom, and staying away from evil is understanding" (v. 28). Here the previously established inaccessibility of "wisdom" for humankind is in no way taken back: "Fear of God" is, according to v. 28 not the "beginning of wisdom"; it "is wisdom" and, together with "staying away from evil," the *whole* of wisdom that is accessible to humankind.

3. If v. 13 designates the fear of God and the keeping of the divine commandments as the duty of every person, this can be understood first to mean that indeed all

22 On the possibility—foreseen, according to Lev 4:13ff.—of atoning for "hidden" guilt as "oversight," cf. the polemic in Qoh 5:5.

23 Stähli, *TLOT* 2:577-78.

24 Cf. further Sir 10:19 ("an esteemed race is the one that fears the Lord . . . a despised race is the one that breaks the commandment"); 23:27 ("nothing is dearer than the fear of the Lord, and nothing is

sweeter than the fulfillment of the commandments of the Lord"); 32:22-33:1.

25 Translation after Sauer, *JSHRZ* III.5.

26 Cf. Fox, 320. Indirectly, there is naturally such a connection if one reads vv. 13b-14 as a "summary" of the "words of Qoheleth," who was indeed, according to v. 9, a "wise man."

people should worship the Deity Yahweh and obey the Mosaic Torah²⁷ (to which then “Israel”—in contrast to Bar 3:9–4:4—could, in any case, make no exclusive claim). One can, however, also interpret v. 13 with its final clause as a purely pragmatic recommendation to all people in daily life to hold “undogmatically” to the religious and cultural norms that they find in their particular living environment.²⁸ That would correspond to a skeptical way of life as described by Sextus Empiricus in his “Outline of Pyrrhonist Skepticism” (1.23-24): “We hold on . . . to phenomena and live undogmatically according to the everyday experience of life”; that includes, among other things, the “tradition of laws and customs” from which “we accept for everyday life the idea that we regard the fear of God as a good, and godlessness as an evil. . . . Yet we mean all of this undogmatically.”²⁹

Delitzsch remarks on v. 13 in his commentary: “It is a great thought that is thereby expressed, viz., the reduction of the Israelitish law to its common human essence.” Instead of a “reduction,” however, one should perhaps speak rather of a “relativization” of the Torah, which is more nearly reduced to its “common human core” by the ethical maxims of fearing God and keeping away from evil, as advocated in the book of Job (cf. Job 1:1, 8; 2:3; 28:28). These maxims presuppose that human beings can themselves autonomously determine what is good and what is evil (cf. Job 31:1[ff.]). Qoheleth 12:13, by contrast, does justice to the fact that in their ethical judgments and decisions human beings are already confronted by traditional directives (cf. the close connection of “fear of God” and “instruction” in Prov 1:7ff. and 9:1ff.) that they can consider critically (and must; cf. Qoh 6:1ff.) but from which they cannot fully liberate themselves, and which therefore retain a relative validity.

■ 9-14 The observations sketched regarding 12:9-14 in the context of the book of Qoheleth and of the contemporary discussion of various “wisdom” or “learning” concepts, as they are discernible above all in comparison

with texts for the book of Sirach, show that it is possible, as recommended by Fox, to interpret this text as an integral component of the “original” book of Qoheleth.³⁰ By appearing in the role of the “editor” behind his protagonist “Qoheleth,” the author creates distance between himself and “Qoheleth.” In this distance he reinforces the “words of Qoheleth” by stylizing “Qoheleth” as a type of a “critical wise man” (vv. 9-10). At the same time, however, he also relativizes them by classifying them in the realm of wise “words” and “writings,” and he shows their possibilities and their limits (vv. 11-12). In this way he makes clear that the critical wisdom represented by “Qoheleth” is also self-critical. As such it cannot lead beyond an elementary piety and ethic, but it can contribute to their critical self-clarification—without basically calling them into question (vv. 13-14 in light of the conceptions of the “fear of God” and a “judgment” of God developed in 1:3–12:7). Thus, in a thoroughgoing disputation with conceptions of a tradition-bound, elite, and religious wisdom, as they become perceivable especially in the book of Sirach, 12:9-14 defends both freedom of thought vis-à-vis an imposition of will by traditions, expert knowledge, or forced profession and the independence of simple piety vis-à-vis (presumed) theological wisdom.

Qoheleth 12:9-14 could also have these functions, however, if this section—perhaps divided into two stages (vv. 9-11, 12-14)—was added secondarily. Then it would not necessarily have to be interpreted as an “orthodox” correction or as a “pious” misunderstanding of the “words of Qoheleth” but could rather be understood as a defense of the critical wisdom of Qoheleth vis-à-vis competing orientation possibilities. If, however, the epilogue (in part or in whole) was written with the intention of criticizing and neutralizing the reflections of Qoheleth from an “orthodox” standpoint, the apparent failure of this effort in the present text would have ultimately and unintentionally confirmed the critical wisdom of Qoheleth.

27 Cf., e.g., Deut 4:6-8 (but also v. 19); Isa 2:3-4; 42:3-4; 51:4-5; Mic 4:2-3 (but also v. 5).

28 On model “piety” outside of Israel (and without the Torah), cf., e.g., Genesis 20 (v. 11!); Jonah 1; 3; Mal 1:11, 14; Ruth; and Job.

29 Sextus Empiricus, *Grundriss der pyrrhonischen Skepsis*

(introduced and translated by Malte Hossenfelder; Frankfurt on Main: Suhrkamp, 1985) 99.

30 Fox, “Frame Narrative.”