

Ethic

Joy and Decisiveness 9:7-10

- +2:10 7 Go ahead, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a happy heart, for God long ago determined your activity as he desired. 8 Always wear clean clothes, and care for your head with hair creams. 9 Experience life with a woman you love, all the days of your life of breath that he has given you under the sun, all your days of breath. For that is your portion of life, and of the possessions for which you labor under the sun.
- Prov 5:18f
- ✓ John 9:4 10 Everything that your hand finds worth doing, do it, as long as you have the strength! For there is neither action, nor accounting, nor perception, nor knowledge in the netherworld to which you are going.

Overview of 9:7—12:8

At the end, the book leads anew into considerations of living and acting. It concludes, one might say, with an ethic. From the ethical field, religious behavior has already been dealt with in 4:17—5:6, in order to give the book a center. Here at the end of the book an ethic is developed that is directed rather at secular areas of living.

There is a problem in characterizing the beginning and the end of this ethical section. Most of the text consists of a series of sayings linked primarily by association—more or less the section 9:11—11:3. Yet this thematically elusive material appears to be held together by a framework that contains the main directives. Its opening section prepares the ground for developments in the closing section. Joy in living, the theme of the closing poem and its introduction in 11:7—12:8, was also the theme of 9:7-9—that seems to be a frame. Tenacious effort, the theme of 11:4-6, was also commanded in 9:10—that would be another, inner frame. Thus there would result a framing of the last section of the book, and it would begin following 9:6.

9:7-9	Frame A	Joy in living
9:10	Frame B	Tenacious effort
9:11—11:3	CORPUS	
11:4-8	Frame B	Tenacious effort
11:9—12:8	Frame A	Joy in living

Concerning the starting point of this section of the book, however, a certain confusion arises through some additional observations.

First, 9:7-9 (or even 10), analogously to 8:15 that forms a closure to 8:1-14, could be a closure to what would then be considered a unit in 8:16—9:6 (see the repetition of the key word “portion” from 9:6 in 9:9). In both cases the theme of happiness would complete a long reflection.

Reflection	8:1-14	8:16—9:6
Happiness	8:15	9:7-9(10)

This would indicate a parallel development of two units within the same section of the book. It could mean either that the deconstruction of ideology section continues to 9:10, or that the last ethics section begins already in 8:16. In any case, 8:15 remains an objective account. In contrast, 9:7-10 is a directive. One cannot be precisely clear about where 9:10 belongs in this consideration.

Second, at the end of the concluding poem dealing with joy in life, the themes of death and God emerge clearly in the foreground (12:1-7), so that once again one could argue that 9:1-6, where the theme of death is also dominant, already belongs to the outer frame of the concluding section of the book.

But as the analysis above showed there are also good reasons to consider just 8:16—9:6 as part 10 of the ideology deconstruction section. There are many links by content and key words to the preceding section—a feature that is not continued in this way from 9:7 on. What is more, the exhortation by allocution in the second person singular resumes only in 9:7. So I have decided to draw the line after 9:6. But it seems that there is not just a simple line. A problem remains.

The problem can only be solved by assuming the interweaving of a twofold structure in a single unit of the text—similar to what was to be seen at the beginning of the book (see commentary to 3:1-15). As is often to be found in polyphonic music, the limits of various parts differ according to changing points of view. The points of view change during the process of listening and reading. We should try to reconstruct the experiences of a first reader.

The readers who have come to the section from 8:16—9:10 experience this at first as a conclusion to what precedes. The impression that something new begins only in 9:11 persists for some time, especially because 9:11-12 presents itself as a dispenser of key words for many proverbs that follow. Thus 9:11-12 functions as an introduction. It is only much later that readers begin to have doubts about this impression—namely when in chaps. 11 and 12 the motifs of “tenacious effort,” “joy,” and “death/God” recur, and indeed in chiasmic correspondence to their occurrence in 8:16—9:10. Then readers will recognize, looking back from the end, a framing of the whole final section of the book that must have already begun in 8:16.

8:16—9:6	Frame A	God / Death
9:7-9	Frame B	Joy in living
9:10	Frame C	Tenacious effort
9:11—11:3	CORPUS (9:11-12 introducing)	
11:4-6	Frame C	Tenacious effort
11:7-10	Frame B	Joy in living
12:1-8	Frame A	God / Death

The readers saw correctly at the beginning and also at the end. The book had played with them. In the transition from chap. 8 to chap. 9 several structures had been woven together. It is really only for practical considerations that I drew the line in the text division after 9:6.

Also at the very end of the book the situation is somewhat more complicated than indicated until now. Examined more closely, the frame themes B (joy) and C (death) were already briefly touched on in 11:7-8, and with that the end of the structure really is attained. But then immediately these two verses are shown to be no more than a brief transition and introduction to the great closing poem. This follows as a coda to the overall structure of the concluding section. It extends the two themes broadly once more: “joy” in 11:9-10, “death” together with the theme “God” in 12:1-8.

Between the frame units, which, from 9:7 on and once again from 10:20 on, have the unmistakable character of direct admonition about what readers should do, 9:11—11:5 is made up of many forms. According to the tradition of wisdom forms one would expect to find here also the genre (*Gattung*) of direct admonition. Yet it hardly occurs: only in 10:4, 20; 11:1-2. Mostly there intervene texts that, on the basis of content or of form, we would expect to find in earlier parts of the book, rather

than enclosed here between the admonitions of the frame: 9:11-12, 13-16, 17-18; 10:5-7, 12-15. So Qoheleth retains a strong continuity with the earlier parts of his book also here in his ethic.

How is this possible? First, it must be noted that for ethics the wisdom repertory of literary forms also provided genres (*Gattungen*) other than admonition, for example, sayings about what is “better” than something else (see 9:16—10:1), contrasting profiles (see 10:12-17), observations of cause and effect (see 10:10-11, 18-19; 11:4). Moreover there occur fully pre-ethical descriptions of significant situations, for example, 9:11-16; 10:2-3, 5-11, 15; 11:3. In part they recall the popular folk cunning of early wisdom. From these it becomes clear that the word “ethic” does not characterize the final section under all points of view.

It is perhaps better to say that the book of Qoheleth, after deconstructing the existing body of an earlier worldview, wants now to support the underpinnings of society by constructing at least a beginning of a new worldview. However, the worldview of a society is expressed not only by a body of advice (one should act thus or so) but also, prior to that, by definitions of reality (one *is* thus or so). Only when both are present does a common understanding of the world exist upon which a human society can function. The old wisdom also handed down both, interwoven in its teachings. For this reason Qoheleth too can sometimes speak in a purely indicative mode in this concluding section, simply setting up the world anew through description. In doing so he can latch onto his own expositions along with their forms and concepts; he can also take concrete positions rather akin to the tradition he has so sharply challenged—because the battle before now was over the final most far-reaching general theory, rather than over the detail, of the world. In the latter much remains stable through all changes in society: compare Qoh 10:6-7 with Prov 30:22-23; Qoh 10:12 with Prov 15:2; Qoh 10:18 with Prov 20:4.

If such was the intent, then this section of the book, one must say, appears short and the selection very unsystematic. There must have been some principle of selection and some guiding idea. Specific areas are totally missing, for example, family behavior or neighborliness. It could be that the old lessons were still adequate in respect of such areas. The students, whom Qoheleth addresses here, may have already been educated in the style of the old wisdom. Qoheleth would then have intended to equip them only for what specifically was new, that revolution in commercial, political, and social life with regard to which the tradition offered no illumination.

Those addressed here were apparently losing their way in the stress of competition from their own circles to catch up with the dominant, leading Greek circles, or perhaps simply stress arising from their ascent among the limited group of the rich and influential families. Hence already the decisive examples in the anthropological and the social-critical sections, along with their constant pointing out that all the good fortune made possible through work is useless if they then do not really get to enjoy it. This now becomes the decisive admonition. On the other hand it seems to be more a concern to avoid a misreading of the relativizing of ambition for wealth and power, when enjoyment of life is placed side by side with energetic and timely action. In contrast with most of the Greek Peripatetic philosophers, with whom he otherwise has much in common, Qoheleth does not present the undertaking to provide a cornucopia of good things and to build a wealthier world as contemptible. He does not recommend dropping out, just as he never separates body from soul.

Certainly he must help his students to come to grips with their concrete situation in society, its opportunities and its limits, beyond the perspectives of the old wisdom that presupposed vanishing or already extinct conditions. Leadership is in the hands of strangers. There is hardly any opening to the levers of power in Alexandria. For this reason there are no admonitions regarding behavior at the royal court (8:14 was not an admonition, but an ironic rejection of ways of old-time courtiers). This is perceived as from a great distance, made simple as in a fable, in 10:16-17 as decisive for the well-being or woe of the land. It is present only in the form of omnipresent intelligence services and well-paid informers, in the face of which one must be on guard (10:20).

What counts is who has "power" locally or in the province, the "boss" of 9:17 and 10:4 (*môšēl*). We do not know whether the provincial governor is meant (the *stratēgos*), or the high priest, or another top official of the temple-state (e.g., there was, beside the high priest, a *prostatēs* [one who stands in front]—an office held for twenty years during the relevant period by Joseph the Tobiad who was at the same time the official in charge of farming out all the taxes of the whole province of Syria and Phoenicia). The Aramaic word *šallîṭ*, which also occurs in this context (in 10:5), is vague, at least as far as our knowledge of it goes. Since it can denote all the leading bureaucrats (Dan 3:2-3), it is translated by "official." In any case, the students needed to be prepared in advance for all possible good or bad encounters in the company of these "wielders of power." In contrast with the old wisdom, Qoheleth here sketches a rather depressing picture of the possibilities for influence that a cultured or competent person should expect. Often a very different kind of person

risers to the top. Thus, while keeping an eye on influence upon the “wielder of power,” one should also not neglect the advancement of one’s own possessions.

The text often remains at the level of images, and makes its statement only in coded language—probably for good reason! The commentary can do no more than point out the linkages through the use of key words, and indicate possible dimensions of meaning. The five-part structure indicated is very tentative. It follows some dominant themes and the use of some introductory formulas. The sayings are so strongly linked to each other that often a different division is equally possible.

At the beginning of 9:11—11:3 there is in 9:11-12 a very compact text, partially prose and partially verse, concerning the uncertainty of the future. To it there correspond thematically the concluding verses 11:1-3. These texts are once again a kind of frame, already in the inner text. Both discuss human ignorance, misfortune, something that fails. But the beginning text in 9:11-12 also has a further function. A whole series of words and formulas from it return again in the inner sections. In some way it provides the key words for the whole text. The details will be given below.

If one wants to divide further the series of sayings in 9:13—10:20, three divisions appear: the first is centered on the chances for advancement for a young man in the province (9:13—10:7), the third on one’s attitude regarding the distant royal court, which one can put into action only in terms of speaking about it—something not without danger, however (10:12-20). The intervening section in 10:8-11, if one is looking for an underlying intent, is almost impenetrable. It begins and ends by speaking about a snakebite—this motif provides the frame for this section. This may warn about political reversal, or at least suggest that one think and plan carefully before taking any action.

This triple division is given a foundation in what follows. However, one could take the middle section as part of the final section. There would then result for both sections, 9:13—10:7 and 10:8-20, exactly thirteen verses each.

Notes on 9:7-10

[9:7-9] Verses 7-9 are part of the frame. In form and content they derive from the songs about enjoying life that were sung at banquets in the ancient Near East and in classical antiquity.

The closest parallels are to be found in the words of the wine maiden of the gods in the old Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic, and in the harp songs in Egyptian burial chambers.

Gilgamesh Epic

Thou, Gilgamesh, let full be thy belly,
 Make thou merry by day and by night,
 Of each day make thou a feast of rejoicing,
 Day and night dance thou and play!
 Let thy garments be sparkling fresh,
 thy head be washed; bathe thou in water.
 Pay heed to the little one that holds on to thy hand,
 Let thy spouse delight in thy bosom!
 For this is the task of [mankind]!¹

Song of the Harper

Let thy desire flourish,
 In order to let thy heart forget the beatifications [funeral] for thee.
 Follow thy desire, as long as thou shalt live.
 Put myrrh upon thy head and clothing of fine linen upon thee,
 Being anointed with genuine marvels of the god's property.
 Set an increase to thy good things;
 Let not thy heart flag.²

For similar practices in Israel, cf. Isa 22:13. In the Greek sphere the combination of motifs had long penetrated into other genres, especially in didactic texts of popular philosophy. Qoheleth speaks here for the first time—with the exception of 7:14—to command joy, not just to tell about, reflect about, or praise it. The only concrete motifs until now, of “eating” and “drinking,” are extended to others all belonging in the realm of festivity. Qoheleth is no believer in the “small joys of everyday,” as many moralists would recommend. He envisions great banquets. The much discussed question of whether v. 9 deals with the wife of the addressee, or one of his wives, is not part of the topic of this text, and therefore also cannot be answered from the text. Joy should constantly be sought, and the reason is: whenever it occurs, it is God who has graciously shared it. The pleonastic insertion of the breath motif shows that this command to joy contradicts nothing of what has earlier been said in the book, but rather arises from it. That is made explicit in v. 9b.

¹ 10.3.5ff.; *ANET*, 90.

² *ANET*, 467.

[9:10] Verse 10 still belongs to the frame of the concluding section of the book. The message here, where Qoheleth treats of “action,” is already aimed at youth (“as long as you have the strength”), as in the final command to joy in 11:9-10. The unit that follows is linked together with 9:10 by “perception” (= “perceive”) and “knowledge.”

Time and Chance 9:11-12

9:11f: +3:1

- 11 Again, I further observed under the sun that:

The race does not go to the swift,
victory in battle does not go to the powerful,
nor does bread go to the knowledgeable,
nor wealth to the clever,
nor applause to the perceptive,
since time and chance await each one.

Prov 16:9; Rom 9:16

10:12; 1 Kgs 5:18

- 12 Moreover, humans cannot perceive their appointed time.

Like fish who are caught in an evil net,
or birds caught in a snare,
so every person is trapped in an evil time
when suddenly it falls upon them.

Notes on 9:11-12

[9:11-12] In order that it become clear once more that it is not in the power of humans to achieve joy and to assure success by our own effort, the teaching of the whole book on this point is brought together here in poetic form—introduced, however, in prose and at the beginning of v. 12 interrupted by a prose observation. The key word is “time” in the sense of *kairos* (see 3:1), in one case further determined by “chance” (which can be open to the good as well as to the bad), and in the other by “evil” (which leads only in one direction). “Evil time” (already expressed in the artificial wording “evil net”) does not necessarily mean immediate death. Rather, when human affairs turn sour, death foreshadows itself by early messengers. For the image of the net in v. 12, compare Homer, *Odyssey* 22.386-90:

Think of a catch the fishermen haul in to a half-moon bay
in a fine-meshed net from the white-caps of the sea:
how all are poured out on the sand, in throes for the salt sea,
twitching their cold lives away in Helios’ fiery air;
so lay the suitors heaped one on another.³

³ *The Odyssey*, trans. Robert Fitzgerald (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1961).

The five examples in v. 11 are really, when examined, only three: (1) the athletic competitor, (2) the military leader, and (3) the rich and powerful member of the urban aristocracy who strives to provide for his family (“bread”), to surpass that by achieving the financial growth that enables political influence (“wealth”), and this political power itself (“applause”). The three last examples are separated from the first three by the threefold repetition of “nor” (emphatic in Hebrew), and so identified as the concrete point being made.

The whole series could summarize the biographical ideal of a young Greek: success in sport as a youth, then a military career, eventually setting up a family, accumulation of wealth, public influence in the polis. We do not know whether the higher circles of third-century Jews appreciated competition in sports. Jewish soldiers, and officers as well, were a treasured element in the Hellenistic armies. But here too we must ask whether the Jerusalem nobility were involved. For the Jewish aristocracy, then, normally only the last, threefold area will have acquired importance. Wisdom upbringing aimed at it, and also the educational concerns of Qoheleth.

Here he refuses his students any guarantee of success. This stands in opposition to the usual professional self-praise of the educational industry, through which it motivates students to learn. But even if self-praise is ruled out, reflection on the later placement of students in society cannot be avoided. For this reason vv. 11-12, akin especially to the equally poetic text of 5:9-11, are also an introductory piece upon whose key words broader developments will later be fastened. The details will be indicated as they occur.

Up and Down in the Province 9:13—10:7

- 13 And this too I observed under the sun: an example of knowledge that I considered great: 14 There was a little city. It had few inhabitants. A great king marched against it. He surrounded it and built great siege towers against it. 15 In the city there was found to be a poor man who had knowledge. He saved the city through his knowledge. Afterward, however, no one remembered this poor man. 16 So I said:

Knowledge is better than power;
however, the knowledge of a poor man is discounted,
and his words are not listened to.

- 17 The cautious words of those who know are more acceptable
than the shouting of a boss among fools,

7:19; Prov 24:5

Sir 13:22f

- 18 and knowledge is better than weapons—
but a deviant individual can subvert much happiness. Prov 21:22
- 10:1 Dying flies—then stench and bubbles rise
in the creams of the perfumer;
a small stupidity proves more potent
than knowledge, than honor.
- 2 The mind of one who knows takes to the right; +2:14
the mind of the fool takes the left;
- 3 but the ignorant person—whichever way he walks,
the mind is not there,
though he has said of everyone else: he is ignorant.
- 4 If the boss is up in the air against you, 8:2-4
don't withdraw from your position;
for calmness cautions against
seriously deviant actions.
- 5 There happens an evil that I have observed under the sun—the +2:17
kind of oversight that tends to occur at the hands of an official:
- 6 Stupidity was placed on benches raised on high; Prov 30:22
and wealthy people had to sit beneath them.
- 7 I observed slaves on horseback,
and princes walking on the earth like slaves.

9:15: Another possible translation: "He could have saved this city through his knowledge. But no one thought about this poor person."

9:18 Literally: "an individual who does something wrong."

Overview of 9:13—10:7

Framed by two pieces in the style of a report of an observation, 9:13—10:7 deals especially with the chances an educated person has in political life, and in the ambiance of a "wielder of power," probably in the province. According to 9:13—10:7 the power of the educated person to make a mark in the realm of political power is questioned by ignorance (9:13-18), even the stupidity (10:1-3) of deciders in society, namely the "boss" (10:4) and his crowd (10:5-7). This is expressed in very coded language, and the exegesis that now follows is, in this measure, quite uncertain.

Linkwords that use formulations from 9:11-12

9:13 I observed under the sun
 knowledge

9:15	knowledge
	knowledge
	human being
9:16	knowledge
	power
	knowledge
9:17	those who know
9:18	knowledge
10:1	knowledge
10:2	who knows
10:5	evil
	I observed under the sun
10:7	I observed

To the words for knowing correspond, of course, words for not knowing that did not occur in 9:11-12. Beside these links to 9:11-12 there are other key words that also bind the very diversified sayings of this unit with one another.

Notes on 9:13—10:7

[9:13-15] The link to the preceding is the just-named life objective: “applause” for the “one who knows,” that is, political influence. A story shows the problems. The original readers will have recognized the event that is referred to. We do not know it. A number of Ptolemaic and Seleucid kings had assumed the (originally Assyrian) title *basileus megas*, “Great King.” In Hebrew the word “great” forms a key word against which the contrast word is first “little” and then “poor” (also 3 times).

[9:16] The lesson that Qoheleth draws from the story is formulated as a “True . . . but” observation. It reveals a first flaw in the efficacy of the intellect: knowledge must be supported financially, otherwise it is ineffective.

[9:17-18] Verses 17-18 form a further “True . . . but” train of thought, set in motion by its predecessor. We have once again, as in the section on deconstructing ideology, a dialectical interplay with sayings. “His words are not accepted” from v. 16 provokes a contrary affirmation from tradition; but this is extended by a sentence in v. 18a that is almost identical with the “true” affirmation of v. 16. Then the “But” of v. 18b opposes by noting a second flaw in the efficacy of the intellect: felicitous society

presupposes the harmonious cooperation of all; failure can occur if even one person proves false.

More is not said with articulated words. Yet the “deviant individual” may well have referred to the “boss among the ignorant” of v. 17, who may well stand for the “official” (10:5) and who is more notable for the strength of his voice than for his competence. Qoheleth does not hold back from his students their precarious future.

[10:1] This verse is a proverb offered almost as a proof for 9:18. In this sense one could take 9:17—10:1 as a literary unity. But 10:1 is more than an image parallel to 9:18. A new key word appears, “stupid/stupidity.” Up to now it was about a lack of education. It was something that could be remedied. It was not stupidity. Now we are shown a further flaw in the efficacy of intellect: the limits in the intelligence of those who set the pace.

[10:2-3] Verses 2-3 clarify the distinction between a lack of education and stupidity. “Right” and “left” are symbols of good and evil. The understanding of an educated person either leads to the good, and of an ignorant person to evil, or it leads the educated to success and the ignorant to failure. There we have sensible connections. The behavior of a stupid person, on the other hand, has no kind of rational basis, neither well developed nor badly developed. A foolish person lacks insight into his or her own reality, but projects it into other people.

The unidentified subject of 10:1-3 would be the “boss” once again, or at least his group. In favor of this interpretation is that now more openly, one after the other, the themes of “boss” (v. 4) and of the circle of the officials (vv. 5-7) are taken up, and that in v. 6 the closest circle of the powerful are considered as stupidity incarnate. Thus the full understanding of vv. 1-3 becomes possible only when one reads further on. It is important (and mostly overlooked by commentators) that this is not about the “king” (in Alexandria) but about locally available high officials, who were more significant for those addressed by this book. The expression translated “boss” (which in no way refers especially to a king) in v. 4 is possibly qualified by the old saying in 9:17. The person meant is probably identical with the “official” of v. 5 (and the one “wielding power”—the same Hebrew root—in 8:9).

[10:4] Linkwords connect back to 9:17-18 (“boss,” “cautions,” “deviant actions”). This is the first formal advice that Qoheleth gives after the

frame, and the only advice found in 9:13—10:7. Therefore it may be considered the decisive sentence in the whole unit. Its brevity does not make it unimportant. Once one has achieved a position, one should remain in it as long as possible. “Deviant actions” could refer to one’s own actions, namely giving up one’s position. But in view of the word links to 9:18 it means rather the deviant actions of the “boss,” actions he would take were his last good counselor to leave him.

How acutely contrary to the ironical advice proposed to the fictive courtier in Alexandria in 8:2-4. There, however, the concern was to reveal the fragility of the glory ascribed to a courtier’s life in traditional education. In the present context, no secret is made of all that, and yet responsible cooperation is demanded. The leading class, to whom Qoheleth is speaking, must have constantly faced the question whether they should continue to seek political influence, or retreat to commerce and trade and dedicate themselves only to enriching themselves and enjoying life.

[10:5-7] After the “boss,” the next subject is his crowd. “Oversight” (a cultic term; see 5:5) is ironic. “Stupidity” is *abstractum pro concreto*. Contrasted with the stupid are, surprisingly, not the cultured but the rich. This shows once again that the intention here is to examine concrete situations in Jerusalem, not to formulate abstract maxims. Already in the Persian period there existed a council of elders, 150 in number, with advisory, if not executive, functions. In it were assembled representatives of the wealthiest families (Neh 5:12; 12:40; 13:11). Later, Antiochus III gave direct political functions as well to this *gerousia*. The criterion of selection was the prominence and wealth of the family. In any case, our text presupposes as self-evident that only the rich could be both knowledgeable and also therefore politically competent. For who else had access to the educational institutions?

But now there was a social upheaval in the upper classes in Jerusalem. In it the old (and only right, even for Qoheleth) system of values was being lost. The process is “evil” (v. 5), just as evil, for example, as a social breakdown that impoverishes rich people and forces them into slavery (5:12—6:6). But Qoheleth’s students must know that, if they want to follow the upward track, they cannot count either on the protective power of established groups, or on advancement through real merit and real ability.

Dangers of Upheaval 10:8-11

- 8 One who digs a pit can fall into it;
the one who breaks through a wall, a snake might bite;

Ps 7:16; 9:16; 35:8;
57:7; Prov 26:27;
Sir 27:26

- 9 one who breaks stones can be wounded by them;
one who splits wood is endangered by that.
- 10 If the axe has become dull,
and its user has not sharpened it ahead of time,
then more muscle power is required—
he would have drawn profit from knowledge:
by having prepared his tool in advance.
- 11 If the snake bites
before he has charmed it,
the snake charmer
has no profit.

Sir 12:13

10:10 Literally: "Knowledge gives the profit of preparing."

Overview of 10:8-11

This piece stands almost without verbal links between 9:13—10:7 on the one hand, and 10:12—11:3 on the other; but this might be due to the fact that very concrete images of daily life are used here. Naturally they demand a specific terminology. There are, however, linkwords back to 9:11-12:

10:8	fall
10:10	power knowledge

The unit contains six "If . . . then" formulations. The first four (in which the "if" is expressed by a participle in Hebrew—"one who" in translation) are approximately equal in length to the final two (where the "if" is longer, formulated by a sentence, completed by a second negative sentence). The example of the dull axe in v. 10 links associatively with the splitting of wood in v. 9.

Does the unit as a whole perhaps intend to say: whoever undertakes responsible action is threatened by corresponding dangers—but at the same time, through the knowledge gained by education, one can at least render action easier and preclude many mishaps? So, therefore, there is one advantage to education, however limited it may be! But other possible meanings cannot be excluded.

One might also interpret as follows. In all four examples of 10:8-9 one thing is common: something massive and solid is being torn apart, and then danger lurks. Is that possibly a warning against taking part in the social upheaval alluded to earlier? Or was there even an action being prepared against the Ptolemaic leadership in Alexandria, in favor of

Antioch? In this case, 10:8-11 belongs to the text coming in 10:12-20. It would be understandable that the warning should focus on mindless talk. It would have been necessary to encode all this in images, but the recipients at that time would have understood. Unfortunately we have no way of verifying such an interpretive hypothesis. Moreover, Qoheleth not only warns against dangers, but in vv. 10-11 he emphasizes also that knowledge and preparative planning can help. Later, when he warns against talking too much, then certainly he does not appear to be opposed to the undertakings to which he referred.

Notes on 10:8-11

[10:8-9] Verses 8-9 could be formulated: when people are active, they place themselves in danger. For the possible background meaning, see above. It would certainly be wrong to interpret vv. 8-9, on the basis of other recorded sayings about digging holes (Ps 7:15 [MT 16]; 9:15 [MT 16]; 35:8; 57:6 [MT 7]; Prov 26:27; Sir 27:26), as meaning that actions aimed at harming others will strike back at oneself. That fits neither with Qoheleth's rejection of the principle of deeds-consequence relationship, nor with the other three examples.

[10:10-11] Verses 10-11 could assert: with the help of professional skill, used in timely manner, one succeeds better than without it. This is precisely what is affirmed in v. 10b, a bit of the text that bulges beyond the structure of the whole, and that is tied to the whole and given special emphasis through the key word "profit," which recurs in v. 11. We have here probably the original meaning of the word that Qoheleth had long before developed into a philosophical term.

Verse 11 is a saying that is remarkably tightly knit through several rhymes and assonances, not replicable in translation, and in the history of the text it may well have been the nucleus from which all of vv. 8-11 developed.

The Tongue and the Distant King 10:12-20

9:11; Prov 10:32;
15:2; Sir 21:16

12 Words from the mouth of one who knows are applauded;
the lips of a fool bring him confusion.

13 The onset of words from his mouth is foolishness,
the consequence of his mouth is evil delusion.

5:2; +6:12; 8:7

14 And the ignorant person talks on and on. But humans do not
perceive what is about to occur. And what will happen even after
that—who can tell?

- 15 The labor of the foolish will exhaust them, since they do not perceive how to make their way in the city.
- 16 Woe to you, O land whose king is a slave,
and whose princes feast in the morning Isa 3:41; 5:11;
Prov 31:4-7
- 17 Blessed are you, O land whose king is from noble stock
and whose princes schedule their eating
for self-control rather than carousing.
- 18 If one is slack, the framework sags,
if one drops one's hands, the house leaks. Prov 20:4
- 19 One feasts in order to laugh,
and wine gives joy to the living,
and money is involved in both. 2:2
Ps 104:15
- 20 Even in your thoughts, don't badmouth a king;
even in your bedroom, don't ridicule a wealthy person;
for a bird of the heavens can project your voice,
the winged one can broadcast the words.

Overview of 10:12—11:3

Even though 10:16-17, 20 deal with the king, the nobility, and the wealthy (surrounding the king), the focus has now turned from Jerusalem to Alexandria. But it is Alexandria as a far distant reality. City and country, houses, water, and trees seem to be close at hand. In v. 20 even students from more modest backgrounds (for whom a rich person belongs to a contrasting group), and in v. 15 those whose social advancement could fail, are the ones in view. Verses 8-10 had already brought the most elementary activities of country living to the fore, if primarily in the form of images. From 9:11 it is rather the sentence "bread to the knowledgeable" that is important. Linkwords to 9:11-12 are:

10:12	"knowledgeable"
	"applause"
10:13	"evil"
10:14	"do not perceive"
10:15	"do not perceive"
10:17	"power" (= "self-control" in translation)
10:19	"bread"
10:20	"wealthy"
11:1	"bread"
11:2	"do not perceive"
	"evil"
11:3	"fall" (twice)

At the beginning, 9:11 seems to dominate; 9:12 dominates in the concluding verses of 11:2-3.

The text appears to culminate in the two admonitions of 10:20 and 11:1-2. The first, a warning against careless speech, was prepared by what preceded. The second, a call both to boldness and to caution in commercial affairs, is motivated in the following verse, 11:3.

Notes on 10:12-20

[10:12-14] Verses 12-14 provide a contrast between the knowledgeable and the ignorant in full classical style focusing on the idea that the ignorant harm themselves when they speak. This contrast has a full-dress commentary in Qoheleth's style in v. 14. What is worst is that the ignorant person talks so much. Qoheleth comes after the foolish, now degraded to the ignorant, with combined citations from 8:7 and 6:12. These were originally directed not against the ignorant, but rather against the traditional knowledge and its claim to explain the world. The thought may be that this is true, *a fortiori*, of the ignorant.

[10:15] Verse 15 is attached to the previous verses by the linkword "foolish." The saying is difficult to interpret and to translate. "Move into the city" may be a proverbial phrase meaning to become rich and to rise socially. Qoheleth's referential group would have consisted predominantly of great landowners, who had, however, long been city dwellers. From there they managed their holdings, did business, and enjoyed life when they took the time for it. But Qoheleth might also have been entrusted with young people from families who had not yet made the leap. If they did not climb upward, but rather fell backward, they would end up doing the hard labor of the land proletariat. So Qoheleth could use this to threaten lazy students.

It is conceivable, however, that in this concrete context the "city" did not mean the city as such, but rather the capital city of the kingdom, Alexandria. The word "city" carries at least the association to which the following verse connects. Probably he had conditions in Alexandria in mind.

[10:16-17] Verses 16-17 are formally a cry of woe and weal over the land, but by their contents focus on king and princes. Whether or not a concrete situation is in view here the original readers would know, but we no longer can. Hebrew *na'ar* can mean either "boy" or "slave." The context would suggest "slave." But it is also possible that Qoheleth is play-

ing here with both meanings. Commentators who propose “boy” usually then refer to Ptolemy V Epiphanes, who ascended the throne in 205 B.C.E., at five years of age, while his guardian, Agathocles, and the latter’s sister Agathoclea were creating an uproar by their mismanagement and debauchery. This would allow us to date the book almost to the year. For there was a revolt in 203 B.C.E., and the hated brother and sister were slaughtered by the people of Alexandria. In this interpretation the “king from noble stock” would be identified as Antiochus III, who during these years in Antioch was preparing himself to conquer Palestine. Qoheleth then would be among his secret sympathizers in Jerusalem, and this veiled declaration would be the main point of this part of the text.

[10:18-19] These verses pick up motifs from vv. 16-17: those who begin the day with feasting naturally do not take care of the things that have been entrusted to their care. In v. 18 the “house” can be an image of the state, especially where the Ptolemaic kingdom ideology considered the state as the *oikia*, the household, of the king. In v. 19 “money” could stand for the money that was extorted from the provinces. In this sense the passage could conceal a sharp criticism. Or else, even retaining this contextual sense, the two sayings could have had also a more general meaning: an admonition for the student against laziness and in favor of financial effort, because this is the only path to laughter, to joy.

[10:20] Verse 20 is a return to the theme of “speech,” to which perhaps everything from v. 10 on has led. When a revolution is in preparation, then the greatest caution and cunning must rule one’s words. The image of the bird is like our expression, “The walls have ears.” If the historicizing interpretation of v. 16 is correct, then v. 20 fits in, because Agathocles worked especially hard with information sources and in taking account of denunciations.

Uncertain Future 11:1-3

- 11:1 Set your bread afloat upon the water,
for after many days you will find it again.
- 2 Divide your capital seven or even eight ways,
because you do not perceive what evil will occur in the land.
- 3 If the clouds swell with rain,
they will pour it out on the land;
if a tree falls toward the south, or toward the north,
wherever the tree falls, that is where it will be.

Overview of 11:1-3

Here the linkwords to 9:11-12 are numerous (see above). These three verses are not only prepared and launched by 9:11-12, but they also build with this text a frame for 9:11—11:3. Especially important is the return of the motif of not knowing. For this now evokes by association the next group of verses, 11:4-8.

In terms of content, the politics of the kingdom is left behind. Qoheleth is once again dealing with the formation of the personal life of his young listeners, which 9:11-12 earlier also had in view. This is another indication that now the frame of the final section of the book will begin.

Notes on 11:1-3

[11:1] The interpretation of the image in v. 1 is difficult. If it is purely an image, it means: you might set up something false with your possessions, through which they would simply be lost—it can happen that thereupon, and directly because of it, they are preserved for you. It belonged to the philosophy of those seeking prosperity in the Hellenistic world to distribute gifts and considerations widely on all sides. Perhaps one day it would pay off. Did Qoheleth mean this? The Jewish tradition had interpreted it mostly in that sense, giving it then, however, a pious turn as a recommendation of almsgiving (see “Make friends for yourself by means of unrighteous mammon,” Luke 16:9). Possibly, however, “set your bread upon the water” may have been a conventional image for commerce by sea, evoking naturally a special concern for boldness and risk.

[11:2] The approach presupposed in v. 2 is the greatest caution on the part of the businessperson. Qoheleth provides a motive for each of the approaches, precisely the one that we would give ourselves when deciding for the one or the other. The actual affirmation consists in the paradoxical pairing of the two recommendations. It signifies that no advice can be given. The daring entrepreneur, or the most prudent, can be right. Why?

[11:3] Verse 3a is a “True . . .” sentence: True, there are cases where causal connections can be recognized. To this v. 3b corresponds as a “But . . .” sentence: But there is also the unforeseeable chance event, and what it brings about remains. The connection to v. 2 through the expression “on the land” makes the rain clouds—even though rain is otherwise a bless-

ing—appear here rather as an image of misfortune. The same is true for the trees through the motif of “falling” that by 9:12 is set in the sense of misfortune, if not dying.

Taking Action and Enjoying 11:4-8

- 4 One who gapes at the blowing air will not sow;
one who stands observing the clouds will not reap.
- 5 Just as you cannot perceive the blowing air any more than the development of a child in a pregnant womb, so can you not perceive the action of God, who enacts everything. 6 In the morning begin to plant, and also toward evening do not let your hand rest, since you cannot perceive which will succeed, the one or the other. Or maybe both together will have a happy outcome.
- 7 Then will the light be sweet,
and happy for the eyes to see the sun.
- 8 Because, even when a human being has many years of life,
one should be joyful in each of them;
and one should remember the days of darkness:
they will be many.
Everything that comes (into the world) is a breath.

+3:11; +8:17;
Ps 139:15

11:8 Literally: “that they too will be many.”

Overview of 11:4-8

The exhortation toward which this text is heading stands in v. 6: continuously to be active. Qoheleth backs away from concrete advice about how to act (vv. 1-3), but not from the exhortation that act one must! He shifts here from the sphere of the merchant to that of the landowner, but the message is surely valid for both. The basis for the necessity of continuous action is precisely the impossibility of seeing the future (v. 6b, prepared for in vv. 4-5). The key word, translated “happy outcome” (v. 6), links to the outer frame, the command to enjoy life combined with the mention of the “dark days” (vv. 7-8).

The linkwords, and other linkages, from vv. 4-6 back to vv. 1-3 are so strong that one might also consider a chiasmic structure of vv. 1-6:

11:1-2a	exhortation
11:2b-3	invisibility of the future
11:4-5	invisibility of the future
11:6	exhortation

The linkwords are:

11:4	“clouds”	see v. 3
11:5	“pregnant”	see v. 3 (= “swell” in translation)
11:5-6	“perceive”	see v. 2
11:6	“happy outcome”	see v. 2, “evil” (as opposite)

The content of the two exhortations is diverse, however, and vv. 1-3, through their linkages to 9:11-12, also have a clear function as closure to 10:12—11:3. So here, toward the end of the book, we have to reckon with intended interlinking of one end with another beginning (similar to that between vv. 7-8 and 9-10).

Notes on 11:4-8

[11:4] From v. 3 the clouds symbolize the foreseeable; in v. 5 the wind will return as the symbol of the unforeseeable. Verse 4 is in the middle. The two images are compressed together, but something else is intended here: the danger that arises from the need for certainty on the part of those who are oriented toward knowledge. This need of certainty can get to the point that they hold back from acting.

[11:5] “Who enacts everything” means either “who causes both,” or it is a statement about universal divine causality (see 3:11 and 8:17). The second is more likely in view of the general argumentation. Here is found, quite casually, one of Qoheleth’s most basic theological statements.

[11:7] The verse is connected to what precedes through “and” (literally), which must have the meaning of “then,” introducing a consequence—a fact rarely seen by translators and commentators. Verse 6 ends intentionally with *tôbîm* (“happy outcome”). This key word is immediately picked up: “It is *happy* for the eyes.” The cosmos itself changes when good things from God enter human life. Verse 7, with its few words, throws the reader back into the mood of cosmic fullness and the power of light that was indicated by the introductory hymn in 1:4-11. See Euripides: “Sweet, passing sweet, is light for men to see.”⁴

[11:8] The sweetness of the world does not automatically follow from success in human affairs. Joy as a further human activity is interposed. People must appropriate happiness by being joyful and at the same time

⁴ “Iphigeneia at Aulis,” §1252, in *Euripides*, trans. Arthur S. Way, LCL (New York: Macmillan, 1916) 1:115.

reflecting on death—only then will the light be sweet. The thought of death in no way relativizes joy, but rather gives it its strength and justification.

The reader must connect “the dark days” with death in view of what precedes in the book. However, the image is open enough that 12:1-2, which speak of age and illness, can also be linked to it.

The logical connection, success—joy in view of death—cosmic awakening, finds syntactic expression in that a causal clause, beginning “because” (Hebrew *kî*), proceeds in modal verbs. Besides, it commands in the third person. The second-person address begins only in v. 9.

In contrast with the poem from v. 9 on, which begins with joy during one’s youth, v. 8 speaks of joy throughout life. Verses 7-8 thus open up, by an anticipatory interpretation, the immediately upcoming poem of closure—at least its opening position, which is modified later within the poem as well. Humans should be joyful as long as they can!

Stylistically, one must notice the repetition of the word “many” in parallelism, and the definition of death as “dark days” versus “light” and “sun,” which are the gifts of life. That living is counted in years and death in days is not intended to be significant. These are traditionally paired words for “time.” In the last line one could translate “All that comes is a breath.” But for Qoheleth it is not the dark days that “come,” but rather people (see 1:4). The word “breath,” which encapsulates so many analyses of the whole book, is the closing word of the unit 11:4-8. It will recur at the end of the first half of the closing poem (11:10), and then three times more in the concluding sentence of the book, which also ends the closing poem (12:8). Here, as in other particulars, can be seen structures of closure that are analogous to those used in music.

Closing Poem on Joy, Death, and God 11:9—12:8

11:9—12:8: 7:1-4

9 Be joyful my boy, in your early days;
have a happy heart during your boyhood.

Sir 26:19f

Get along on the paths where your heart leads you,
toward the visions your eyes put before you.

2:10; 6:9

[But perceive that God will bring you to judgment for all of that.]

10 Keep your mind free of vexation,
and protect your body from evil,
for youth and dark hair are a breath.

+2:23

12:1 Remember your Creator in your early days,
prior to when the days of evil come,
and those years overtake you
of which you will say: I have no interest in them;

- 2 prior to when the sun and the light and the moon and the
stars go dark
and the clouds return, even after the rainfall:
- 3 the day when the guards of the house tremble,
and the strong men are bent,
and the grinders give up, because they are too few,
and the women peering through the windows darken,
- 4 and the doors on the street are shut;
when the rumble of the mill is muted
the birdsong soars—
all the singers are bowed low;
- 5 also they fear the exalted one
because terrors lurk on the road;
the almond tree blossoms,
the locust plods along,
the caper berry bursts,
but a human being goes to his eternal home,
and the mourners circle through the streets.
- 6 Yes, prior to when the silver cord is loosed,
the golden bowl is shattered,
the jar on the well is smashed,
the broken wheel falls into the crater,
- +3:20f 7 the dust returns to the earth as it was,
and the air returns to God who gave it.
- 11 1:2 8 “A breath, a puff of breath,” this man named Qoheleth used to say,
“all are a breath.”

11:9 The bracketed prose sentence may not have belonged to the original form of the book.

Overview of 11:9—12:8

This concluding poem, from the point of view of structure, is a “coda” to the closing section of the book, expanding the motives of its outer frame. 12:8 still belongs to the concluding poem, even though it is a frame verse for the whole book.

The poem is most intensively prepared in 11:7-8. The phrases “one should be joyful” and “let them remember” in v. 8 announce the imperatives that organize the poem in its two parts: “Be joyful, my boy” in 11:9 and “Remember your Creator” in 12:1. “Everything that comes is a breath” in 11:8 announces the closing sentences of both parts of the poem in 11:10 and 12:8. Other repeating linkwords are:

“light”	12:2
“happy”	11:9

“eyes”	11:9
“the sun”	12:2, expanded through moon and stars
“years” + “days”	12:1 (and also “days” in 11:9)
“a human being”	12:5
“dark”	12:2, 3
“come”	12:1

The intensity of this linking is unique in the whole book. Within the poem this technique is used less frequently. There are within the poem poetically relevant repetitions only to signal the borders between the two parts of the poem: of the two parallel expressions “youth” and “early days” in 11:9, the first recurs in the last line of the first part (11:10) and the second in the first line of the second part (12:1). Therefore the play of repeated linkwords between 11:7-8 and the poem is meaningful. Now many of the linkwords in 11:7-8 are related to life, but in the poem are related to youth; many that relate to death in the poem are related to illness and to age. Therefore 11:7-8 presents itself as a prior interpretation of the poem.

The structure of the poem itself can be understood only when one perceives how—always in keeping with changes in content—formal expectations are built and then not fulfilled. They are even replaced by unexpected new forms. Syntactically the command to joy is maintained until the end. But death pushes in and grows so strong and overpowering that it covers everything and progressively crowds out the word of joy. A unique situation of poetic uncertainty results. The reader no longer really knows what the theme was: a call to enjoy life during youth or a reflection on death. Into this indecision of understanding there falls as the last word, with full voice, the word “God.”

The first half, 11:9-10, builds on—certainly not in monotonous, but still in strict, form—a classical literary structure in the style of Hebrew poetry. Dominant are the imperatives: “Be joyful” and “have a happy heart” (first parallelism). This is made explicit in the search for joy (“Get along” with double object: second parallelism), and in avoiding evil (“keep free” and “protect”: third parallelism, extended by a motive sentence that ends the whole).

We now expect an analogous structure in the second half, which—corresponding to the theme announcement in 11:8—clearly begins in 12:1. But here surprises begin. We expect “Remember death” or “Remember darkness.” But we get “Remember your Creator.” A trick to confuse the reader? A *ritardando*? An instinctive avoidance of the real

theme? Then we wait for the parallel. By analogy with the beginning in 11:9, there should be a second imperative (parallel to “Remember”) and a second time specification (parallel to “early days”). There is no second imperative. It can be dropped if the time specification has been amplified, and that is the case here (it is apparently even necessitated because the parallel word “youth” has been used up in 11:10 as a motif of closure). The time specification is a temporal clause introduced by “prior to.” But now a floodgate is opened. The time setting “prior to” suddenly now opens the indirect possibility of speaking about illness, age, and death, and this happens so strongly that all the remainder of the poem, long as it is, is based on this specification of time, on this ending of the second half of the first parallelism. The formal means of this volcanic outbreak is successive dividing.

As 12:2 begins, “prior to” has hanging on it only one parallelism, metrically grown quite long. But then v. 2 sets up parallel to it with another “prior to.” The parallelism that is naturally required here is extended in v. 3 by “the day,” and at that point the subordinate-clause status of the whole is almost forgotten, and an independent image of age is developed. Suddenly, with its classical series of marked parallels, this meets the enduring expectations of the first part of the poem, even though not when expected. In the middle of this measured flow of parallelisms the connection is abruptly broken, where the second stich of v. 4, through a temporal subordinate clause (“when the rumble of the mill is muted”), introduces a completely independent description that, at the same time, signifies a transition from the foregoing allegory to the direct description of a day of death. An introductory *gam*, “also,” in v. 5 raises this description toward its peak, which is reached finally at the end of v. 5. The description was built, at least in v. 5, as an antithesis: here nature bursting with life, there the funeral procession and the mourners. With this is reached an initial resting place.

Precisely here it is possible to refer back to the earlier extended suspension. For the third time there occurs “prior to” (v. 6), and now there follows a sixfold definition of death that once again meets the expectations of classical form at an unexpected point, thus bringing final closure: four times in metaphors, twice in anthropological-theological formulas, which, what is more, recall for this purpose the beginning of the Bible. Also put to rest is the question that remained troubling about the unexpected mention of the word “Creator” in 12:1.

The restructuring of content and form within the poem, and also the discrepancy between the introduction (11:7-8) and the poem itself, at

least its beginning, can best be explained as follows: Qoheleth is in no way of the opinion that young people should enjoy life because old age looks gloomy. Such can be read, of course, in Greek authors. But his teaching is that each one should be joyful at all times, if this is given to one, and that always in view of death. His message could clearly be misread, however, to yield a different sense in a cultural milieu under Greek influence. So he starts his song in keeping with this other sense, but then allows it to fall apart and transform itself into his own message. To make this absolutely clear, he also places before his poem an introduction that points right off in the direction of his definitive message. Qoheleth dissembles his voice when he instructs the young to rejoice in view of old age and illness. That is precisely what he wants to take them away from.

Notes on 11:9—12:8

[11:9] The prose insert may originate with the author of the second post-script (12:13-14); compare the similar, and otherwise rare, formulation in 12:14. The addition intends to protect the text from a libertine interpretation. Whether a next-worldly judgment of the dead is thought of is not entirely clear. It is rather unlikely. For in that case the book's statements about death as the radical end for each person would similarly have required an appropriate correction. For the context of this gloss see the surmise on pp. 11-13.

[12:1] In the Hebrew text the effect of "Creator" is somewhat more subtle than indicated above. The word is in the plural, surely as a plural of majesty (which is, however, unusual). Moreover, it sounds very similar to the word translated as "crater," an open pit, which again is commonly an image of the underworld and of death. This word occurs in v. 6. As the spelling in v. 1 is unusual, there probably, in the one word, both words could be recognized at the same time. The reader of v. 1 expects "death" but hears at first "crater," then realizes that "Creator" was what was said. At the end of the poem, this "Creator" is doubly recalled: through "crater" (v. 6) and "God" (v. 7).

[12:2] Into the normal triad "sun, moon, and stars" there is inserted the "light," recalling 11:7 and prolonging the view as in a long leave-taking. After rain in Palestine one normally has brilliant blue skies immediately. So something abnormal is described. The reader would be reminded of the prophetic, and possibly already the apocalyptic, topos of end-time catastrophes. Qoheleth here takes this theme down into an individual life.

Thus the darkening of heavenly lights, and the lingering darkness even during the day, can be related to the slow loss of sight of older people. Here begins something like an allegorical treatment of the empirical world.

[12:3] Now he is fully there. The house, which comes to rest in the evening, means the body with its various parts: arms, legs, teeth, eyes, mouth, ears. The comparison of the human body with a house, of arms with guards, and teeth with millstones is also found in Greek texts. Women grinders, in the ancient Near East, were house servants who turned handmills. The meaning of many of the expressions is easily understood: “tremble,” “bent,” “too few.” The persons who appear are in precise order: first men, then women (in Hebrew “grinders” is feminine plural), each time first the servers, then the owners (instead of “strong men” one could also translate “noblemen,” instead of “women” also “noblewomen”). Beneath the allegory, by the same token, are to be recognized the inhabitants of a house where catastrophe has occurred. In this pairing of image and reality lies the secret of these lines.

[12:4-5] Regarding the ears in v. 4, however, there is no mention of an object in the house. Still the allegory remains through the “rumble of the mill.” Besides, a transition occurs in this “when” clause from allegory to direct description of dying and death. The text here can be interpreted and translated in very different ways.

According to many translations, there begins at the end of v. 4 a characterizing of old age. Sleep at night is light and brief. Early, when the first birds twitter, the elderly wake up, but the birdsong is lost on ears growing deaf. The anxiety of old people about going out of the house, with all the possible complications this can entail (beginning of v. 5), imperceptibly leads the imagination from the old people into nature. A nature full of vitality and fertility is evoked by the almond tree, the locust, the caper berry, and then suddenly the old person is again in view: now dead and being carried to the grave. “Eternal home” is a fixed symbol for the grave.

According to our translation, the description of the house threatened by terror, which was the basis for the allegory on aging, now as such comes to the fore in v. 4. One learns gradually—it is clear only at the end of v. 5—that a person has died in the house. When the daily noises grow quiet, suddenly the birdsong, which has always been there, becomes audible. We see women singers bowing low. That is the beginning of the

grieving. The singers are anxious. Who is “the exalted one” whom they fear, when now they take the road (to the burial)? Death? God? Then comes the contrary image: overflowing nature, and finally the funeral cortege.

[12:6] The first two images may refer to a lamp that hangs as a bowl from the ceiling. Decisive are the precious materials: silver and gold. Also water from springs is costly. In the wheel we must see a wheel over a well, upon which runs a rope with a bucket. These technical novelties were introduced in Palestine only in the third century. From image to image the words have carried associations to that image which constantly unites grave, underworld, and death together, that is, the pit of darkness.

[12:7] With all the solemnity and the enrichment through theological dimension in this text, this sober definition of death also serves to block out all the mythical elements concerning death imagined in connection with “eternal home” and with “grave.” Death as end, in this context, is univocal. The point of view, no doubt polemical, in 3:21 is far away. Therefore, when here it is said, as taken for granted, that the air of breath returns to God, this is hardly in disagreement with 3:21.

[12:8] The verse belongs to the poem; see 11:10 and, earlier, 11:8. But by the same token it is the frame verse to the whole book. It shows no longer the fully developed three-step parallelism of 1:2. Such emphasis on something still unknown, just being introduced, is no longer needed here at the end. In the interim the clause has enriched itself with a bookful of reflections, and it needs now only to be heard in a whisper to evoke an echo in the reader.

Epilogue

First Postscript: 12:9-11

- 9 Qoheleth was a man of knowledge. But even more: he taught the people the art of perception. He listened, and tested, and he straightened out many a proverb. 10 Qoheleth sought to find interesting sayings, and these true sayings are here painstakingly recorded.
- 11 The sayings of those who know are like goads,
like driven pegs are the words of writers of collections—
both are wielded by one and the same shepherd.

Overview of 12:9-11

This postscript provides information about the author and his book. Its language derives from Qoheleth and yet comes from another hand. A surmise concerning the occasion and purpose of this postscript is to be found in the Introduction, pp. 11–13.

Notes on 12:9-11

[12:9] 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. If the call of Wisdom through the streets and marketplaces in Proverbs 1–9 had the same meaning, we would almost have to suppose that these chapters were dated no earlier. The wording “to teach the people recalls 2 Chron 17:9. Possibly there was no other Hebrew expression for peripatetic teaching.

In “listen” and “tested” (v. 9) we may see a veiled indication that Qoheleth has opened up a completely new (i.e., Greek) cultural tradition. By “he straightened out many a proverb” we are led to think of those parts of the book in which Qoheleth disputes the traditional wisdom ideology, most of which appears in the form of sayings. For “straightened out” see 1:15; 7:13.

[12:10] Verse 10 turns to the writing down of Qoheleth's teaching. Since the book's narrator presents the wise Qoheleth as a voice cited by himself, looking back, the book could be considered as one not written by Qoheleth at all. This is the only adequate explanation of the passive formulation at the end of v. 10. This tells us nothing about the real authorship. Qoheleth may have simply hidden himself behind a fictive editor. But also someone else may have put the book together based on Qoheleth's materials. It is not likely that the book consists of several separate collections, one superimposed on the other. Until now, no theory attempting to show a variety of hands at work in the history of the book's composition has proven to be convincing.

[12:11] As often occurs in Qoheleth, v. 11 brings closure by a saying. It deals with the effect of sayings collections. But its function in the context is to affirm, as taken for granted, that the Qoheleth book falls within the category (*Gattung*) of sayings collection. The first two lines of the saying, by the comparisons they introduce, note opposed effects. Proverbs in collections have a dynamic effect, they drive forward—at the same time they serve as nails or pegs to hold and stabilize. Remaining with the image, the third line says that every shepherd intends both of these effects in dealing with his animals. Thus why should sayings collections not be both progressive and conservative? The traditional interpretation of this saying presumed a translation "they are the gift of a single shepherd," and referred the affirmation either to Solomon or to God himself.

Second Postscript 12:12-14

- 12 From more collections, my son, be warned. Even if there is never an end to the activity of making book after book; and much study ruins one's health 13 after all has been heard, the final word would only be:

Fear God and keep his commandments!

For that is everything for humankind. 14 For God brings every activity to judgment, every hidden thing, whether good or evil.

Sir 43:27

3:14; 5:6; 7:18; 8:12;
Deut 5:29; 6:2; 8:6;
10:12f; 13:5; 17:19;
31:12; Sir 1:11-30
to 12:14; 11:9

Notes on 12:12-14

[12:12] This second postscript considers the reader as a normal student ("my son"). It starts by making the case against the preparing of new books (textbooks?), and perhaps even against the overburdening of students through ever more extensive textbooks.

[12:13-14] Verses 13-14, probably in the face of criticisms, reduce the book of Qoheleth (which one “hears” rather than “reads”!) to a simple orthodox formula, which originates in Deuteronomy. See also 11:9. The formula does not do justice to the book, but may well have helped it at that time, and given direction for its interpretation long after.

[12:14] In this regard v. 14 even seizes on an important aspect of Qoheleth’s teaching: that we humans do not see to the bottom of things (“every hidden thing”).

A surmise about the occasion and purpose of this second post-script is to be found in the Introduction, pp. 12–13.