

Title and Prologue

Title of the Book 1:1

1:1 The words of Qoheleth, the son of David, who was king in Jerusalem.

1:12; Prov 1:1;
1 Kgs 8:1

[1:1] This title must have been added to the book later. Its purpose is to associate the author, known in the book as “Qoheleth,” with the prototype of all the wise men of Israel, namely Solomon, if not to intimate gingerly Qoheleth’s identity with him. The material connection is built upon the royal tale in 1:12ff. The information in 1:12 is completed with the phrase “son of David” taken from Prov 1:1; and the name *Qoheleth* may possibly evoke in the minds of readers of the Hebrew Bible the fact that, according to 1 Kgs 8:1, Solomon assembled (*yaqhēl*) in Jerusalem all the ancients of Israel, and all the heads of the tribes. The purpose in making this connection was also achieved: the book joined the ranks of the official books of the Jewish religious community. For conjectures about how this may have come about in detail, see the Introduction, pp. 11–13.

Prologue 1:2-3

- 2 “A breath, a puff of breath . . . a breath, a puff of breath,” Qoheleth used to say, “they all are a breath.” 3 What profit does one draw from all the possessions for which one labors under the sun?

II 12:8; Job 7:16;
Ps 39:6; 62:10
✓ Rom 8:20
to 1:3; 2:11, 18-22;
3:9; 5:15, 17; 8:9;
9:9

Overview of 1:2—2:2

Like a formal dinner, which offers a tasty series of various courses prior to the main course, or like a classical sonata, which rapidly runs through its major themes before presenting the first movement, so the book begins with a lengthy approach through the first, and into the second, section, before getting to a broad and continuous development. In terms of literary

form, there comes first a formally presented saying of Qoheleth in 1:2, then a (rhetorical?) question in 1:3 (does Qoheleth himself speak here?), then an expanded poem objectively describing the world in 1:4-11, and finally, in 1:12—2:2, a subjectively stylized first-person narrative (now clearly he himself is speaking) concerning experiences and the thoughts derived from them, which, however, merely outlines in three brief glimpses what is yet to come. The real presentation begins only in 2:3. The nonlinear character of this writing, forever beginning anew, is mirrored by its content: important motifs of the book such as “breath,” “profit,” “possessions,” and “under the sun,” are briefly heard here to be later taken up once again. The literary technique of beginning with a slogan or summary (see Amos 1:2; Prov 1:2-6, 7; Isa 1:2-31; Ps 1) is further developed here in the spirit of the Cynic-Stoic diatribe. It is not interested in the objective and logical development of a thought, but rather about using all means to bring something home to the reader. Shock therapy, along with attention-getting suggestions, are employed to induce the appropriate expectations.

Notes on 1:2-3

[1:2] After 1:1 we would expect Qoheleth to be the speaker. But an unidentified authorial person speaks, and he cites Qoheleth. Without 1:1 we would have to say: “he is citing a leader of the assembly.” It is as though we had turned on the radio in the middle of a program—the quoted text puts the reader in the middle of a speech, or even at the last sentence. One does not know to what the “all” refers. In terms of form, 1:2 is an ancient, festive, three-step parallelism (see Ps 93:3), which first emphasizes the word “breath,” and then, by inversion, emphasizes “all.” And the meaning of “breath” is not univocal. In the lament psalms, “breath” is an image of the ephemeral character of human life, its brevity, the fruitlessness of its striving (like shadows or wilting flowers). A similar meaning is found in the wisdom literature, both in Israel and in surrounding cultures.¹ Moreover, in the Deuteronomistic writings, “breath” had become a designation for false gods, idols. What does it mean here? On the tongue of which leader of the assembly? An expression of what? Verse 2 throws readers into a world whose conceptual system invites them, and yet remains cloaked in darkness.

¹ Among the Greeks, *typhos* corresponds to “wind,” “smoke,” “vapor.” The Cynic philosopher Monimus is cited as saying that *typhon einei pan*, “everything is smoke.” Reported in Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 6.83; see R. D. Hicks, trans., LCL (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1950). But in the popular philosophy it had been given an anthropological twist: “dimness, blindness.”

[1:3] Verse 3 is connected by a linkword, which helps clarify a first question: “all—all the possessions.” But whose words now appear, those of the author or those of the assembly leader, whom he cites—that remains unclear. The language is suddenly banal, with expressions from the marketplace, or from the merchant’s stall (“profit,” “possession”). The sentence mutters along in prosaic form. When everything seems to have been said, still it goes on (where do we live and work, if not “under the sun?”). The style probably breaks a taboo, in that street language and, possibly, intellectual jargon in a Greek mode are here juxtaposed to the most elevated style. Behind “profit” one can discern *ophelos*, a Greek word often used by authors who were read in the schools; with “under the sun” we hear the *hyph’ hēliō* of school writers (in normal Hebrew, they wrote “under the heavens”)—it is like the German written by journalists and intellectuals today, in which English idioms can be detected.

The “possessions” for which it “labors” is an etymological figure of speech (*ʿāmālo šeyyaʿāmōl*) that may perhaps mirror the phrase used by Euripides and others, *mochthon mochthein*, “to take painful pains.”² Unfortunately, the English translation cannot do justice to this figure here and anywhere else it occurs. The root word in Hebrew denotes both our laborious work and its result, the possessions. In our translation the two aspects are divided between the main clause and the subordinate clause. Where the original text has only the noun, the translation will be “labor” (4:4, 6; 6:7; 8:15; 10:15). The opening question, 1:3, although it is clearly a question from the perspective of ruling classes who own and multiply possessions, refers explicitly to humankind. Thus it turns to the human race in general, and it simply presupposes that humans are essentially laborious beings, intent upon possessions: *homo faber*. The formulation is so open that it does not permit being limited to individuals: technical humanness, which modifies and thus takes possession of the whole earth, is included within the category. It asks (at this point we are not sure whether the question is real or rhetorical) what “advantage” or “profit” results from such a way of being human. If work brings possession, what then does possession bring? Indeed, “all” possession: all possible success in human mastering of the world taken together. “Under the sun” makes the question still more basic: no reachable space in the cosmos is excluded, the cosmos being taken in terms of the image that ancient cultures had of it. The question’s horizon is the world as such. This is a reality filled with light (“sun”), and yet within it there remains, for humans,

² See, e.g., Euripides, *Andromache* §134, and *Helen* §1446 (see Arthur S. Way, trans., LCL [reprint Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1959]).

the question of meaning. Was a preemptive answer given already in 1:2? Will it now be answered immediately? The word “profit” does not occur again until 2:11, where the question of 1:2 is answered in the negative. But this is still only a first indication. An answer appears in argumentative context first in 2:22 (without the word “profit”) and again in 3:9, and in both cases once again in the form of a question.

Cosmology

Change, Permanence, and Forgetting 1:4-11

- 4 A generation passes, another comes,
the earth stays in eternity. *1:4-11; 3:11-15;
✓ Sir 14:18*
- 5 The sun, which rose and then set,
breathless it races back to the place where it rises again.
- 6 Southward blowing, and turning to the north,
turning, turning, blows the air,
and because it turns, the air returns.
- 7 All the streams flow to the sea;
the sea does not fill—
to the place whence the streams flow
there they return to flow again.
- 8 All things are constantly restless,
more than humans can express:
the eye is not sated by observing;
the ear is not filled by hearing. *4:8; 5:9; 8:17;
Prov 27:20*
- 9 Whatever has occurred, that will occur again. *3:15; 6:10; 4:13-16*
What has been carried out, that will be carried out again.
There is nothing new under the sun.
- 10 At times something happens about which they say:
“Observe that—that is new”—
but it has already occurred in the eternities
that have gone before us.
- 11 There is no memory of the former ones;
and of the future ones, still to come,
there will also be no memory of them
among those who will come after them. *2:16; 9:5; Isa 41:4*

1:8 Another possible translation: "Human words are overstrained; no one can express it all!"

1:10 Another possible translation: "But for ages there had already existed what has happened before our eyes."

Overview of 1:4-11

The poem that now suddenly begins is a cosmology, placed within the context of the question opened in 1:3: "humans in the cosmos." As a coherent structure of language expressing an affirmation, it clearly sets itself off from the question in 1:3. It begins by gathering observable realities, calmly described, that associate step by step the four elements of ancient cosmology and then come to humankind. At that point is presented the unifying thesis in 1:9 (here the linkphrase "under the sun" reappears), which is then developed through a concluding discussion in the form of an objection and its answer. The dynamic in the form of the poem consists in the constant reoccurrence, in ever lengthier units, of the opposition "change—identity remaining in spite of the change" (v. 4 = 2 lines; v. 5 = 2 lines; v. 6 = 3 lines; v. 7 = 4 lines; vv. 8-11 = 15 lines). This dynamic, which of itself tends to unlimited extension, is caught and tied down by a fixed strophic form that also comes into play: after two 2-line units there follows a sequence of one 3-line and two 4-line units. This sequence is then repeated in vv. 9-11, so that with v. 11 (within the unified expression of vv. 9-11 that exceeds the strophic measures) there is a possibility of an ending. This announces itself positively in that the content of v. 11 links back to v. 4, and in this way forms a frame. Apart from this very subtle formal structuring of the poem, there are other levels of association, onomatopoeia, repetition, and play upon imagery, which the English translation has not always carried over. The greatest difficulty for modern readers of this poem is that our spontaneous reaction, in the face of its continuous assertion of the eternal return of the same, is to judge that this is a negative and depressing message. If we cannot break free of this prejudice, then we simply miss the entry into the poem. The poem praises the cosmos as glorious and eternal in this image of cyclic return. According to Greek sensibility, a reader would consider whether pantheism was implied. Humans, not as persons but in their activities, share in it also, because their activities always recur. Moreover, humans may speak about the cosmos. Humans do not perdure as subjects, however, and so we cannot unify in our experience and in our memory the extensions in space and time of being. As in all cyclic theory, from ancient myth through the Stoics to Nietzsche, what is at stake here is an analysis of the being in time of humans, an analysis that refuses to define this being as simply falling into nothingness.

Notes on 1:4-11

[1:4] Through the abstract concept “generation” a striking image is made possible for the fact that continuously humans die and others are born. The ancients imagined the world as a fixed disk upon which there existed a space that “one generation” left and another entered. The point being made is the “eternity” of the cosmos (“eternity” is also a liturgical formula).

[1:5] The sun, which sets, appears to be transient like humans, but it is not. It rises unchanged in its cycle—in the ancient imagination this is expressed as a speedy return during the night. Thus it too is “forever.”

[1:7] This sentence also looks to the notion of cycle. Some speech elements in 1:5 and 1:6 also signal this: they are found again at the end of 1:7.

[1:8] The first line here evokes the first line of 1:7. For this reason, *dēbārīm* (which can denote both “thing” and “word”) must be understood as an encompassing signifier of everything in the cosmos. See Menander: “For all things exert themselves within their duration.”¹

In line 2 “express” (*lēdabbēr*) picks up the root word, but now in an anthropological sense. Humankind links up with the four elements (earth, fire, air, water), in that it unites “what is” to itself through language. As language is ordered to meaning, and meaning is far from being adequate to the fullness of cosmic events, humans never come to the end of their task in speaking.

[1:9] The first line summarizes the teaching of eternal return for the cosmos. As the relation of humans to the cosmos is fixed in v. 8, here line 2 draws the conclusion (poetically: through parallelism) that eternal return also includes identical forms of human activity. (3:2-8 can provide some examples of this.) Line 3, as negatively formulated, gives a final, triumphal, universality. “New” is here a negative word. In a world of unending duration and return, what is “new” could only be worse—but then there is no such thing.

[1:10] For the first time in the book there appears an opposed view. This will often happen again. Here it is almost too clearly introduced. That

¹ See *Flor.* 29.19 in J. Stobaeus, *Anthologium*, ed. Curtius Wachsmuth and Otto Hense (Berlin: Weidman, 1884–1912). In the case of Menander, it is not always possible to refer to available English publications since editions and fragment numbers of this author are currently in flux.

will frequently not be the case later. The opposed view: in fact, experience always presents something “new.” In vv. 10b-11 the opposed view is answered in its own terms. If it is true that in v. 9 “new” connotes “worse,” however, then it could be that we are hearing now, for the first time, the voices of some of Qoheleth’s interlocutors; see later, especially 7:10. They have a pessimistic philosophy of history, perhaps representing the beginnings of apocalyptic. According to them, the world just gets worse and worse.

[1:11] How the opposed view of 1:10 could arise must be explained. As only human activities return, while those who carry them out do not remain identically the same, therefore no abiding or growing common human awareness can take form: memory is constantly breaking down.²

² Simonides, the lyric songwriter, already expressed this observation in the time of the Persian wars. See *Greek Lyric* §§581 and 594, ed. and trans. David A. Campbell, LCL (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1991) 3:464–65, 472–73.

Anthropology

Three Previews 1:12—2:2

- 12 I am Qoheleth. I was king over Israel in Jerusalem. 13 I had made up my mind to examine and to explore, with the help of knowledge, whether all that is carried out under the heavens is really a bad business in which humankind is forced to be involved, at a god's command. 14 I observed all the actions that are carried out under the sun. The conclusion: all are a breath, an inspiration of air.
- 15 What is bent cannot be straightened;
what is not there cannot be counted.
- 16 I thought to myself as follows. Look: I have increased and expanded my knowledge, so that now I have surpassed everyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me. I have often been able to observe knowledge and perception. 17 So I took upon myself to perceive what knowledge really is, and to perceive what delusion and ignorance really are. I perceived that this also is a spirit of air. 18 For
- Much knowledge—much vexation;
deeper perception—deeper pain.
- 2:1 I said to myself, Go ahead, try being joyful, taste happiness. The conclusion: that too is a breath.
- 2 About laughter I said: What nonsense!
About joy: What good is it?
- 1:1
3:1, 10; 8:9, 16f;
5:13

2:11; 4:4

1:8; 3:14; 7:13;
Prov 27:22

2:7, 9; 1Kgs 5:9f;
10:7, 23

2:12; 7:25; 8:16f

2:18; +2:23; 5:16
Prov 2:15

2:3, +10, 24; 3:12;
/Wis 2:6
10:19; Prov 14:13;
20:1; 23:29-35

Overview of 1:12—3:15

Wide-ranging prose dominates this segment of the text. It was already heard in 1:3. Now it is interrupted sometimes with proverbs, with an argumentative insertion (2:14), or with conclusions to an argument (1:15, 18; 2:2; perhaps 3:15). Sometimes it builds enumerations into half-poetic

passages (2:4-8; 3:2-8; perhaps 2:23). Its subject matter is a question about humanity that leads to a question about God. It is the most basic, and most coherent, development of the book. It does not by any means present itself as an objective and cool statement and analysis of facts, but rather as one person's account of his career, his success, his reflections on it, and his conclusions. This narrative form leaves the reader free to compare his/her own life with its experiences, and to accept its logic only after critical examination.

A subtle playing with the identity of the narrator further extends the free space for the reader. Whereas between 1:3 and 1:11 it remained unclear just whose words were heard, whether it was the authorial figure of 1:2 or a "leader of the assembly" quoted by the author, so now in 1:12 the author is free to identify himself as this "leader of the assembly." He had not dared, until now, to take it upon himself outright—but now he does. At the same moment, however, he veils himself once again by the literary technique of a royal make-believe, a masquerade in which he assumes the image of a philosopher king of Jerusalem, the famous Solomon (see especially the references to 1 Kgs 1:4-8); and yet he is not Solomon (see Qoh 1:6; 2:7, 9: in Israel's historical memory Solomon had only one single predecessor in Jerusalem—his father, David—not many). The royal robe then sinks imperceptibly to the floor; its last appearance is in 2:25. Still, Solomon's project in 1:3 begins to be answered only in 3:10, and so the royal masquerade may be thought truly to end only in 3:15.

Through use of this masquerade in which a person is presented in a higher social level, it is possible, without forfeiting the advantages of narrative presentation, to base an anthropology not on the experiences of people who fail to grow or to achieve anything in life, but rather on the experiences of the highest human possibility, in the most fortunate world situations, joyfully lived. This makes only more devastating what then appears: the inevitable approach of death, the uncontrollable freedom of others regarding that world reality which I have shaped, and the uncontrollability of joy even for those who have brought about all its conditions for themselves.

This leads humankind to the basic option of despair—although humans must hold on to the truth that everything that happens in this human world, though we cannot see it, is made perfect and eternal from God. Here a circle is completed back to 1:4-11, with the difference that while the perspective came from the cosmos alone there, here a theological dimension is added. This dialectic between anthropology and theol-

ogy distinguishes Qoheleth from most of the modern existential philosophers, although in other respects their analyses come astonishingly close to his.

To understand the apparently very loose prose of Qoheleth, it is important to realize that it is also very tightly held together and united through the use of linkwords, advance announcements, resumptions, associations and linking through opposites (all of which only in exceptional cases can be pointed out in what follows). Much can be understood only when the reader also recalls things said earlier, and when the interpretation remains open to still later resumption of the topic.

At first the narrative is still summarized and abrupt: three notices about an undertaking that was begun, but each time an immediate reference to its result and a conclusion in the form of a saying. Subsequently the reader perceives that Solomon/Qoheleth was giving only previews here of what he will then narrate fully and coherently in 2:3—3:15.

The relationship between the previews and the full narratives is marked on two levels: first, more superficially, by the recurrence of a specific sequence of words from 1:12—2:2 in 2:3-26; and then once again, shortened, in 3:1-15. The linkword sequence is *twr*, “explore” (1:13; 2:3)—*baḥokmâ*, “with the help of/the knowledge” (1:13; 2:3)—*‘śh*, “is carried out,” “bring about,” “take action” (1:13; 2:3; 3:9)—*taḥat haššāmayim*, “under the heavens” (1:13; 2:3; 3:1)—*libnê hā’ādām*, “humankind,” “humans” (1:13; 2:3; 3:10)—*ḥokmâ*, “knowledge” (1:17; 2:12)—*hōlēlôt*, “delusion” (1:17; 2:12)—*wěśiklût*, “and ignorance” (1:17; 2:12)—*śimḥâ*, “joy” (2:1, 26; 3:12)—*r’ḥ*, “taste,” “observe” (2:1, 24; 3:13)—*ṭôb*, “happy,” “happiness,” “blessed” (2:1, 24-26; 3:12-13). This recurring sequence shows at least that this should be a coherent text. It will further become clear that something new begins in some way with 3:1. Not by linkword sequence but rather by content, 2:3-26 can be divided into two smaller sections: 2:2-10 and 2:11-26.

However, the relationship between the contents of the three previews and the three full narratives has a chiastic form. 1:13-15 first announces the closing “theological” section of the narrative (3:1-15); then 1:16-18 announces the middle section, which contains the anthropological development properly so called (2:11-26); finally 1:1-2 announces the foundational section that follows immediately, in which Solomon/Qoheleth proves, through a report on his own experience, that it is possible for humans to shape the world through their knowledge and so come to good fortune.

The chiasmic relationship of the contents of the three previews can be clearly seen in their formulations—almost to the correspondence of whole sentences. See especially 2:3, 10 (for at least 2:3-10) with 2:1-2 (“joy,” “happiness”); 2:12 (for at least 2:12-17) with 1:17; and 3:1, 9-10, prepared in 2:26, (for 3:1-15) with 1:13-14. The repetition of linkwords from 1:18 in 2:22 expands the field of reference of 1:16-18 to 2:12-23. For further details see the verse-by-verse commentary.

Later passages in the book, of course, also link back to formulations from 1:12—2:2. The closing sayings in 1:15, 18; 2:2 were perhaps already familiar to the readers, but this cannot be documented. Most probably 2:2b has been reformulated.

When the readers are carried into the first-person narrative through 1:12—2:3 they probably should arrive deeply impressed by the word “breath.” Even the preview announcement (1:13-15) of the theological developments, in which after 2:26 the word “breath” does not occur, is shaped in such a way as to climax (1:14) in the “breath” formula. So at this point, despite the preview, the reader does not suspect that a very positive theology will seize upon so negative an anthropology.

Notes on 1:12—2:2

[1:12] The text in this verse corresponds to the style of royal documents, which begin with a self-presentation and then they start the narrative. The original readers may have had this sense of the sentence. Thus the royal narrative mode is expressed at the level of form as well.

[1:13] In the word “explore” (Hebrew *târ*; see Greek *têrein*, which was an important word for the post-Socratic empirical schools, and which also sounds similar for Semitic ears keyed to the consonants) the influence of Greek language is felt; and the language of commerce in the phrase “bad business” (see 5:13). There is a play on words between “bad business” (*inyan rāʿ*) and “forced to be involved” (*ʿny*). “Knowledge,” and not the usual “wisdom,” is the more exact translation in Qoheleth for the Hebrew *hokmâ*. Sometimes “education” or “culture” is appropriate. This is true for the whole book. The opposed concepts are stupidity, ignorance, knowing nothing, but not madness. It deals with that knowledge and skill which can be converted into technique and mastery, and that education which leads to social standing. See 2:3-10; 2:13-17; etc. Hellenism had imposed itself because it possessed new and more intelligent military strategies, more sophisticated methods in commercial bookkeeping and governmental administration, and more advanced methods in

farming and in the production of handcrafts. All that is “knowledge” and “skill” in the thought of Qoheleth. Of course the word *hokmâ* means for him sometimes ultimate knowledge, questioning of deepest realities, “philosophy.” So too here in v. 13. Qoheleth had a thesis in mind with which he disputes. For the second time, after 1:10, others are cited—this time not in direct, but in indirect, discourse. It may be the same group as in v. 10. Their thesis may originate in Greek culture (see the formulation “a god”) or else from early apocalyptic circles in Israel itself. In any case they found only evil in everything under the heavens.

Just as in 1:3, the question is about the meaning of the whole of what happens through humankind in the world. What is new is that here, in this sketch of a possible thesis, the sphere of “god” (*ʿēlōhîm*) is introduced. That happens here for the first time in the book, and not yet as a formulation of Qoheleth himself. Because of the passive formulation “all that is carried out under the heavens,” the original readers could come to the question whether human enterprise, which was clearly meant, was not to be understood at the same time as something with which God too was involved. It may not be by accident that Qoheleth does not say “under the sun” here, but rather “under the heavens.” He is already drawing the reader here toward God, about whom the text will immediately speak. See 5:1: “God is in heaven, you are on the earth.” The same is true of the passive formulations in the whole book. To this degree Qoheleth himself approaches the discourse about God, and the possibility of a pantheistic interpretation of 1:4-11 is put aside.

If Qoheleth throughout the book speaks only of “God,” without ever using the ancient name “Yahweh” for God, this is easily understood hundreds of years after the establishing of monotheistic thinking in Israel, and in a context in which, on the one hand, there is a rising wariness about using the name Yahweh, and, on the other hand, this name is more and more abused in popular magic. We must also take into account a certain formulaic pressure from the language of Greek philosophers who made fun of polytheism. It is completely inappropriate, however frequently it is done, to conclude from the absence of God’s name in the text to any cooling or depersonalizing of Qoheleth’s relation to God. In any case, what is special about 1:13 is that “a god” is very vaguely spoken of—this is not Qoheleth’s idea, however, but rather an idea that he wanted to examine. See the text that begins in 3:1, especially after 3:10. Here he carries out his examination.

[1:14] The expression translated “an inspiration of air,” used in tandem with or in place of “breath,” is hard to translate. Drawing on Hos 12:1

(MT 12:2) many translate it “herding of wind” or else “snatching at wind.” But in Qoheleth’s Hebrew, *rě‘ût rūah* and *ra‘yôn rūah* are interchangeable (1:17; 4:16). The second word occurs also in 2:22 in the expression *ra‘yôn lēb*, where it can mean only “the thinking, striving, stretching out of the mind.” Thus *rě‘ût rūah* could mean “windy, airy thinking; ineffectual longing.” We are dealing with a loanword from Aramaic, which makes sense in Middle Hebrew. This was always taken to be the case by Jewish exegetes in the medieval period and by Christians on into the nineteenth century.

[1:15] Line 1 suggests the bent back of an old man—the subtext is an early reference to death. Line 2 is taken once again from the merchant’s table, recalling the “bad business” of 1:13, and its thought will be taken up again in 3:14. Line 2 can just as well be applied to farmers who, because of a meager harvest in the autumn, cannot manage to deliver their dues to their lords and to the government. Both sayings touch on the theme of what lies beyond our control, which theme will become dominant in the theological section from 3:1 on. In 7:13 line 1 will be cited, but God will be the subject of the verb.

[1:16-18] Qoheleth’s reflections in v. 16 continue into v. 17a. Verses 16-18 are clearly a streamlined preview of 2:12-26. First the results of the foregoing pericope, 2:3-10, are indicated with formulations from 2:9 (1:16). Then the question that arises from this result is formulated using phrases from 2:12 (1:17a). The argumentation that follows 2:12 is represented only by the “inspiration of air” conclusion (1:17b: see 2:15, 17, 19, 21, 23, and especially 2:22). Finally 1:18 rehearses linkwords from 2:23. From this concentrated referring of 1:16-18 to 2:12-26 the analogy can be made to 1:13-15 and 1:12, where the preview character is less marked but is similarly indicated by linkwords. It is from this that the reader can see the chiasmic structure mentioned above.

[1:18] The saying, probably already familiar, deals with a theme of ancient school masters: they would make clear to their students that without effort, pain (including punishment), worry, and vexation, they would never achieve knowledge and a penetrating intelligence. See our saying, “No pain, no gain.” The motifs of “pains” and “care” will be taken up again in a very different manner (2:23; 5:16), and at that point this saying will be heard again in a different light.

[2:1-2] After the structure has been put in place, the third preview can be very brief, and basically introduce the theme of the first full development,

which follows immediately. Moreover, the author can change the form slightly. Instead of simply adding a full-blown saying (1:15), or introducing it with “For,” here he provides full introductory phrases and suggests the sayings in shortened form. Loud laughter is not appropriate in a cultured person (see 7:6). Then as a parallel is a skeptical saying about joy (also with a merchant’s dismissive tone). In this way joy is compared to laughing and thus discounted. At the same time the question about the “profit of profits” is recalled, which was heard in 1:3 and will be addressed at the beginning of a new unit in 2:11, though the word “profit” of 1:3 and 2:11 is not used here.

Human Happiness through Shaping a New World 2:3-10

- 3 I drove myself to exploration in order to bathe my body in wine.
And my mind kept leading my knowledge to pasture in order to
imprison ignorance until I might observe what kind of happiness +2:1
humans can bring about under the heavens during the few days of
their lives. 4 I expanded my action:
- I built houses for myself; 1 Kgs 7
I planted vineyards for myself. Song 8:11
- 5 I set out gardens and parks for myself;
in them I planted all sorts of trees. Song 4:13
Gen 2:5
- 6 I arranged overflowing ponds,
so as to water the stands of sprouting trees. Neh 2:14
- 7 I bought male and female slaves,
although I already owned house slaves. 1 Kgs 10:5
I owned also a large number of animals, cattle, sheep, and
goats, 1 Kgs 5:3; 8:63
more than all those who preceded me in Jerusalem. 1:16; 2:9; 1 Kgs 10:23
- 8 I collected silver and gold for myself as well 1 Kgs 10:21
and, as my personal possession, kings and provinces. 1 Kgs 5:1-8
I procured singers, male and female, trained for me, 2 Sam 19:36
and what a man desires: a large harem. 1 Kgs 11:3
- 9 I was already great, and I increased even more, so that I sur- 1:16; 2:7; 1 Kgs 10:23
passed all those who preceded me in Jerusalem. Moreover, my 1 Kgs 5:9-14
knowledge remained with me, 10 and whatever my eyes desired I 2:1, 10, 24; 3:12, 22;
did not withhold from them. I did not have to deny my heart any 5:17f; 8:15; 9:6, 7-9;
joy. For my heart could draw joy from all my possessions. And that 11:7-10
was my portion out of all my possessions.

2:3 The construction and meaning of the MT is not easy to unravel.

2:8 Another possible translation: “and the personal tributes from kings and governors.”—“A large harem”: literally “a beloved, many beloveds.” Meaning uncertain.

Overview of 2:3-10

With this unit there begins the ongoing narrative of Qoheleth/Solomon. He tells how he formed his royal life and world, through the application of his knowledge (outer frame motif in 2:3b α and 2:9b), and out of this “possession” as his “portion” he then had achieved that desired “joy” (2:10; see the motif of wine in 2:3 as a hint of banquet as the place of “joy”). That is the opening question in 2:3b β : whether good fortune could be managed. The answer in 2:10 is a yes based on experience.

Verses 4-8 display almost poetically the world-conquering activity of the narrator. Framed by 2:4a and 9a (the inner frame formed of motifs of the “greatness” of the king), 5 + 5 finite verbs carry two series of affirmations: the king sets up his world (vv. 4b-6) and fills it with inhabitants and treasures (vv. 7-8). Undoubtedly the similar two-fold disposition (the world/its inhabitants) in the creation narrative in Genesis 1 stands in the background, as it does in Genesis 2. Genesis 2 is closer to the image of gardens and parks. Naturally Qoheleth also reaches back to 1 Kings 5–11 (Solomon!) and may well have made use also of traditional narrative lists in Greek literature.

Above all, however, he had concrete examples before his eyes. A distant model may have been the palace of the Lagids, and the surrounding area of parks, lakes, and public edifices in Alexandria. This covered a third of the territory of the city. Nearer at hand were the buildings and formal gardens of the Greek aristocracy upon properties either privately owned or held in fiefdom from the royal estate in Palestine, which the Jewish upper classes tried, in part successfully, to emulate. The high point would have been the Tobiad family, with their army and their mountain palace beyond the Jordan. The image sketched here is a literary attempt to express the passion of world conquest and world transformation that shook the Ptolemaic kingdom in the full flush of its founding years. If to us the picture seems bourgeois-private, we must note that the Ptolemaic notion of kingdom styled the state as a kind of immense private household. Thus it fully intends the public wealth, even though its prosperity is depicted only in the prosperity of the king. We are astonishingly close to the basic impetus of our own civilization: technical, world transforming, hungry for progress, especially the longing to maximize happiness. In Qoheleth, who otherwise writes as a cosmopolitan and allows very little to appear that is narrowly Israelite, it cannot be unintentional that the king who succeeds in transforming the world and maximizing happiness is specifically a king over Israel, in Jerusalem (1:12; 2:7, 9). Does he not express here the unquestioning conviction that good fortune can happen to the world only out of Jerusalem?

Notes on 2:3-10

[2:3] “in order to bathe my body with wine”: exuberant description of the joys of a banquet. The supreme expression of human happiness is a banquet among friends, in which the flagon of wine is handed around—so it was in the ancient Orient and in the Hellenistic world. The two images “leading my knowledge to pasture” (for the use of Hebrew *b* with *nhg*, cf. Isa 11:6) and “imprison ignorance” are two sides of the same coin: to make full use of one’s own knowledge and skill in order to construct a world in which happiness can be achieved. The usual interpretation (to give oneself over to foolishness, though moderated by wisdom) rests on inexact translation and does not fit either with the two pictures or with 2:9-10. What he really did follows in 2:4-8. The mention of “the few days” of human life gives the whole enterprise a somewhat pressured cast, but it also implicitly announces that all of this will prove to be “a breath.”

[2:8] In documents from the second millennium B.C.E. vassal kings were already characterized as “personal possession” or as “privy purse” of the great king. Still the alternative translation, “personal tribute,” although it is not so certain, may well be more fitting in the Hellenistic milieu. The whole kingdom was the *oikia* (household) of the king; everything that came to it was attributed personally to the king.

[2:10] “Portion” is in itself a concept from ancient Israelite real-estate law. In Qoheleth it has become a positive philosophical concept. But whether the “portion” that is possible for humans is also a “profit” remains a question. The very next sentence will strike a negative note, and the whole house of cards collapses.

Knowledge and Wealth as Fleeting 2:11-26

- 11 And I reflected on all the actions that my hands had carried out, and on the possessions that I had labored to possess. The conclusion: they are all a breath and an inspiration of air. There is no profit under the sun. +1:3
- 12 I reflected, by observing what knowledge and what delusion and ignorance really are. Moreover, what kind of human will succeed the king whom they had earlier established? +1:17
 13 I observed: yes, a profit comes from knowledge, and not from ignorance, just as 6:8
 there is a profit from light rather than from darkness:

- 8:1; 10:2; Job 12:25
3:19; 9:2f; Job 9:22
7:16
- 14 One who knows has eyes in his head;
a fool walks in darkness.
But I perceived: Me too! For one and the same fate awaits each one. 15 So I thought to myself: the fate that awaits the fool also awaits me. Why then have I gathered knowledge beyond measure? And I said to myself that this too is a breath.
- +1:11; /Wis 2:4
Ps 49:11
- 5:12; 15; 6:1f; 10:5
- 16 For there is no eternal memory of a person who knows, any more than of a fool, for in the days just ahead both will be forgotten.
How can it be that the one who knows must die just like the fool?
- 2:18f; 4:8
1 Kgs 12:1-17
to 2:18; 2:12, 21;
6:1-7; Ps 39:7
- 17 And living became irksome to me, for the actions that are carried out under the sun weighed on me as an evil. Yes, all are a breath and an inspiration of air.
- 18 And also irksome to me were all my possessions for which I am laboring under the sun, and which I must leave behind for some human who will come after me. 19 Who perceives whether it will be one who knows or one who is ignorant? And yet someone will have power over all my possessions for which I have labored under the sun, and applied my knowledge. This too is a breath.
- 6:2; /Sir 11:18f
6:1
- 20 And then I turned to despair concerning all my possessions, for which I am laboring under the sun. 21 For it happens that the possessions which one person has accumulated through knowledge and perception and skill must be handed over as the portion of another person who has not labored for it. This too is a breath and a recurring evil.
- +1:3
- 22 What then does a person get out of all one's possessions and by weaving plans in one's mind, in all one's labor under the sun?
23 Day after day business consists only of pains and vexation; and even at night one's mind is not at rest.
That too is a breath.
- 1:18; 5:16; 8:16f;
11:10; Job 7:1-4
- +2:10
- 24 That happy disposition, whereby one can eat and drink and come to perceive happiness in one's possessions, is not a given in human nature. My observation has been rather that this comes from the hand of God. 25 For who, if not I, has something to eat, or is able to enjoy? 26 Now there are humans who are blessed in the eyes of God. They are the ones to whom he has given knowledge, and perception, and joy. And there are those whose life has failed. They are the ones whom he has commanded to be involved in the business of increasing and collecting, and then of giving it all to the one who is blessed in the eyes of God. That too is a breath and an inspiration of air.
- 7:26; Job 27:16f;
Prov 13:22; 28:8

Overview of 2:11-26

This unit, previewed in 1:16-18, is introduced by a kind of new preview in 2:11 that anticipates its disillusioning conclusion. “There is no profit” reaches all the way forward even into the theological section (3:9). 1:3 is answered here, but the answer is not yet based on an explanation. The whole section is constructed of a series of smaller units each ending in the “breath” expression. This expression was a structural signal as early as 1:13—2:2, though there it was always followed by a saying. Here the word “breath” in each case sums up the preceding intellectual activity. Thus 2:13—22 gives substance to the expression of 1:3. There are six units:

- 2:13-15 ending with “breath”
- 2:16-17 “breath” + “inspiration of air”
- 2:8-19 “breath”
- 2:20-21 “breath” + “evil”
- 2:22-23 “breath”
- 2:24-26 “breath” + “inspiration of air”

If one also takes into account the preview in 2:11 (“breath” + “inspiration of air”), there results in this important unit seven “breath” expressions, of which every other one is lengthened:

- 2:11 “breath” + “inspiration of air”
- 2:15 “breath”
- 2:17 “breath” + “inspiration of air”
- 2:19 “breath”
- 2:21 “breath” + “evil”
- 2:23 “breath”
- 2:26 “breath” + “inspiration of air”

This system of recurring endings distinguishes this unit from the theological unit, which follows and in which the “breath” expression does not occur at all (3:1-15). Even at this early point of the book, it is evident that what we read in the frame of the book about all being “breath” (1:2 and 12:8) is neither the whole, nor the most important part, of what the book has to say.

If in 2:21 the word “evil” replaces “inspiration of air,” this has already been prepared in 2:17 (“weighed on me as an evil”). “Evil” in similar form will recur in 5:12-15; 6:1-2, where the case of 2:21 is further developed.

It is clear that the word “breath” serves here as a structural signal. These are very small structures. They are units that are intimately linked to one another. We therefore must not infer from this structure in this part of the book that “breath” necessarily functions as a structuring element in other parts of the book in the same way.

All the units separated by the “breath” formula discuss what, in the following notes, will be called “limit situations,” using a term coined by the existentialist philosopher Karl Jaspers (*Grenzsituationen*, sometimes translated “boundary/borderline situations”).

Notes on 2:11-26

[2:12] Anaphorically picking up on 2:11, this verse indicates the organization of the two segments that follow: 2:13-17 will put in question knowledge and culture, and from 2:18 the theme “successor” is taken up.

[2:13-17] If “knowledge” has at first been shown to be a condition for providing prosperity and happiness, this “profit” disappears in the sudden perspective of human limits, that is, certain death. Death is the first “limit situation” Qoheleth considers. One technique for repressing it is the consideration of fame, through which a person can live on after death. Recalling 1:11, 2:16 cuts off that technique. There arises the tone of a lament song: “How can it be?” Lament is a first yes, painful as it may be, to hard facts. It leads immediately to a new attitude. The Hebrew word (*śānēʾtî*) includes everything that is opposed to love—from “hating” all the way down to something like “losing its appeal for me.” On this scale our translation has chosen “be irksome,” though it could be that nothing more was meant than that his previously habitual relationship with vigorous and involved living has been temporarily broken. Now living has become a burden. What once appeared to bring about good times (*tôb*, “happiness,” “prosperity,” 2:1, 3) now produces evil (*raʾ*, 2:17). Insofar as our happiness is mixed with unhappiness when we reflect on death, we humans transcend our fixation on success and pleasure.

[2:14-15] The words translated “fate” and “awaits” have the same root in Hebrew (*qrh*).¹

¹ As a Greek example of this notion, very widespread in the ancient world, see Menander, §538: “These are the bones and unsubstantial dust of men who once were kings, of despots, of the wise, of men who plumed themselves on noble birth, on wealth, and on their fame and bodies beautiful. . . . Hades is the common lot of mortals all. Look thou on these and know thyself the man thou art” (*Menander: The Principal Fragments*, trans. F. G. Allison, LCL [New York: Putnam’s Sons, 1930] 484–85).

[2:16] Until now death has been veiled, or spoken of in an abstract manner. Here, in the lament, the word “to die” is used for the first time.

[2:18-19] Through anaphora (“irksome to me”; see 2:17), the treatment of the theme “successor” (see 2:12) is made parallel to the foregoing text. The thought of death can similarly be repressed by consideration of one’s work (“possessions”) now as objective reality. Do the results of our working and of our creativity continue on, beyond an individual’s lifetime? In our own day, whole nations are urged to ever greater sacrifice, so that coming generations might live in a better world. But the “limit situation” of “the other” removes this escape hatch. After my death the objective goods that I have put together are delivered to “others,” whose capacities and even freedom escape any influence from me.

[2:20-23] The “limit situation” of “the other” regards not only what, after my death, will result from the world I made, but also possible events even before my death. It develops, then, into a further “limit situation” that Jaspers called “historicity.” In his fictive autobiography, Qoheleth had supposed the best possible outcome, namely that happiness actually resulted for the one who had formed his/her world with knowledge and skill. But there is no necessary link from productive work to happiness. For this reason he now (2:21-23) introduces a common case, as a possibility that he had already been concerned with earlier in his imagined time of being king. It is the case where someone makes an effort, but the good resulting from this effort, even during one’s lifetime, goes to another. Losing one’s possessions during one’s life time must be intended here, because the case of distributing possessions to heirs after one’s death has already been dealt with, and 2:22-23 seem to consider a life continuing (unhappily now) while one’s possessions have passed to another.

In this reflection the “king” here goes beyond his own experience, which he had first described in 2:3-10. Characteristic for that is the word *yēš*, “it happens,” which in more than half of its occurrences brings the experience, first described here, again and again into ever new light (2:21; 5:12; 6:1; 7:15; 8:14; 10:5). What happens is described in the third person rather than in the first, for it is no longer Qoheleth’s own experience.² Such things must have taken place in many upstanding third-

² For the experience itself, see Menander: “The one scrapes and saves honestly for himself; while the other, with malice, lays an ambush for the one who had long protected his possessions, and he triumphs” (*Die Komödien und Fragmente*, ed. G. Goldschmidt [Zurich: Artemis, 1949] §113).

century families in Judea, alienated as they were by foreign influence on all sides and threatened in their effort to climb commercial ladders. Such misfortunes led to debt slavery, as may be suggested in 2:23. Qoheleth will return to such experiences in later parts of the book (especially 5:12—6:10). Here he describes it briefly.

In 2:20, which parallels the introduction in 2:18, he introduces the unit by referring to a state of mind to which this process of thought has led him and which he, moreover, consciously assumes (2:20, “I turned to”). It is “despair” regarding all efforts and their results. Through it humans achieve a transcending distance from their own limited situation, even when the good times are there. Kierkegaard considered “despair” to be a “sickness unto death.” Apparently here it is not depressing, but rather it opens one’s eyes so that out of a discussion of “historicity” anthropology can become theology.

[2:24-26] The three “limit situations”—“inevitable death,” “the others,” “historicity”—profoundly modify the “happiness” that comes to the king/Qoheleth, as soon as they enter his mind. Just the same, “happiness” is not a given. He must return to the topic of “happiness.” He must ask from whom and how it comes to him, insofar as it does come. That is where the transition to the theological section begins—still within the preceding section. This transition opens with a thesis.

The reflection has come to be so dominant in the meantime that it is now hard to say whether Qoheleth in v. 24a is recalling a thought that crossed his mind during his imagined royal period, or whether he is speaking out of his present narrative moment. However, the following sentences indicate that he is still reporting his earlier thought.

After the thesis and the introduction of the themes of happiness and of God, he goes back to his experience in 2:20-23, which he now reformulates in theological terms. It is important to note that Qoheleth does not in some way infer God from the “historicity” of humans, but rather he begins with God, whose presence he takes for granted as the real mover in all that happens, and treats “historicity” as coming from God.

In 2:25, the last grammatical trace of the royal fiction, the objectivity of the speaker is underlined: out of his own experience he might well not have had to state it so drastically, since he always experienced success and good fortune. But then, in 2:26, he writes the troubling sentence about God’s rule over this world, outside all our moral expectations. There are *theophiloi*, “friends of God,” as the Greeks expressed it at that time, and other men and women for whom the circumstances of their life do

not come to a good end. God does not rule the world by cause and effect and moral principles, as humans would expect. Thus, even after the theological dimension has been opened, the repeated summary refrain holds true: even the distribution of good fortune and bad fortune is a breath.

In the meantime, the notion of “breath” has become clear to the reader. It looks to fleetingness, inevitable death, the uncertain linkage between effort and enjoyment of its fruits—in short, the amoral character of the world’s unfolding. However, one could translate it as “meaninglessness” or “absurdity” only in a very preliminary sense, because Qoheleth poses the question of ultimate “meaning” only from 3:1 on, after God has been introduced into the picture. After 2:26 the “breath” formula completely disappears until the end of the theological section.

With the formulation of a “business” in which humans have “been involved” by God, Qoheleth is quoting the expression of other people whose opinion he, according to 1:13, intended to investigate. He begins this investigation right here. What he must establish, at least preliminarily, is a category division: the affirmation of 1:13 does not include all individual persons, but only a specific group, namely those “whose life has gone astray”; moreover, Qoheleth does not speak here of a “bad” business. He will return to the question in 3:10.

God’s Action Inscrutable in Its Fullness 3:1-15

3:1 Everything has its hour. For every interest under the heavens there is an appointed time:

1:13; 3:17; 8:5f;
9:11f; 11:9; Ps 31:16

- 2 A time to give birth
and a time to die;
a time to plant,
and a time to harvest the plants;
- 3 a time to kill
and a time to heal;
a time to tear down
and a time to build;
- 4 a time to cry
and a time to laugh;
a time of lament
and a time of dance;
- 5 a time to throw stones
and a time to gather stones;
a time to embrace
and a time to stay arm’s length;

7:17; Job 5:26
Isa 28:23-29

6 a time to search
and a time to give up for lost;
a time to keep
and a time to throw away;

7 a time to tear
and a time to sew;
a time to be silent
and a time to speak;

Prov 15:23

9:1, 6 8 a time to love
and a time to hate;
a time of war
and a time of peace.

+1:3 9 When anyone takes action, what profit does he make from his labor?

+1:13 10 I had now observed the business in which humans are forced to
11:5; 3:14f be involved because of a god's command. 11 All that, he has
7:14, 23-29; 8:16f enacted perfectly in its time. Moreover he has put eternity in all of
Ps 139:13-18 it, but not in such a way that humans could find out the action
Sir 39:16 which God has carried out from its beginning to its end.

+2:10 12 I perceived that in all of it there is no happiness in activities,
2:24f except insofar as one can be joyful and in this way enact happiness during one's own lifetime. 13 And, what is more: when a person is able to eat and drink and taste happiness in all his possessions, that is always a gift of God. 14 And I perceived that every action that God carries out occurs in eternity. To it nothing can be added and nothing taken away, and God has made humans fear him.

3:14-15; 1:4-11
1:15
+12:13; Prov 30:6;
Sir 18:6; 42:21

+1:9f; Sir 5:3 15 Whatever is occurring now, has already been there;
and whatever is to be, has already occurred;
and God will search for whatever has been chased off.

3:11 Another possible translation: "Moreover, he placed in the human mind a notion of eternity."

Overview of 3:1-15

This is the theological part of what Qoheleth, clothed as Solomon, narrates. It corresponds to the announcement in 1:13-15, more precisely, in 1:13. To this extent it terminates the chiastic structure of 1:12—3:15. Yet it begins differently from the two preceding sections of the narrative in 2:2-10 and 2:11-26. It begins with a poem. This recalls the poem at the very beginning of the book (1:4-11). Indeed, it should recall it.

We must take into account that the book of Qoheleth is in some degree musically constructed. As in polyphonic music, various melodic themes are played at the same time. Various structures are laid on top of one another and enmeshed in one another. The theological text of 3:1-15 is apparently so important that it repeats again within itself the whole evolving form of the book up to now. Thus it stands as a sort of reiteration of all that was said up to this point. What before was stated in inner-worldly terms is now spoken in reference to God. The following schema provides an overview:

poem	1:4-11	3:2-8
reflections	1:12—2:13	3:10-11
no happiness text	2:24-26	3:12-15

For the third element, one might have described it simply as a “text dealing with joy.” The motif of “joy” appears in other parts of the narrative as well. In 2:24 and 3:12 we have not only this motif but in both a very marked beginning of the sentence that leads to the themes of “happiness” and “joy.” In Hebrew both texts begin with the phrase *’ên tōb* (“there is no happiness”). This is found only in these two places since the beginning of the book (and later in 3:22 and 8:15).

Through this evolving form there arises a unified whole that begins not only in 1:12, but already with the poem of 1:4-11. That this is intended is further shown by the series of formulations and motifs from 1:4-11 that recur in 3:14-15, that is, right at the end. That is a clear frame for the whole text of 1:4—3:15. Details about the frame are provided below.

In general, then, 3:1-5 has a double function: it is the third section and high point of the narrative of the “king” Qoheleth about his reflective journey to the peak of his existence, and it serves as theological elaboration, providing an illumination vis-à-vis all the purely cosmological and anthropological statements that precede it.

Notes on 3:1-15

[3:1-9] This section is a sort of meditative pause in Qoheleth’s otherwise concise account of his experience and reflections. It serves to universalize the experience base on which his sayings are built. This may well have seemed necessary just before the decisive theological statements. Until now the blessed existence of Solomon/Qoheleth and the equally observable counterexample—that someone painfully builds her/his world,

but does not get to enjoy it—would serve to substantiate his thinking. For the logic of the thinking that would suffice, but not for its cogency, which required a literary expression. So now the fact that each human situation is determined not by those who stand within it, but from outside (in the context: clearly from God), is developed in a poem consisting of $6 + 6 + 2 (= 14)$ pairs of opposites.

In the first strophe, vv. 2-3 deal with beginning and ending, v. 4 with sadness and joy. In the second strophe, vv. 5-6 deal with separation and uniting, v. 7 once again with sadness and joy. Thus there is a parallel development. The short concluding strophe names the most basic procedures in human relationship, in the private and the public spheres.

The first strophe opens with two opposed sentences, beginning with the positive one; all the others begin with the negative. The second strophe has all the opposed sentences begin with the positive one; only the last pair begins in the negative. In the concluding strophe the first opposed pair begins with the positive, the second with the negative element. In the whole poem, positive sentences form the outside frame. This classification as “positive” and “negative” arises naturally in our feelings. Yet the intention of the poem is to relativize these feelings.

The very first pair of opposites refers to activities that are independent of human freedom. This sets the tone for the whole. The leading concept, which occurs in each line, is “time” (Hebrew *‘et*), behind which is the Greek *kairos* (exact point of time, critical point, occasion, propitious time).

[3:1] Verse 1 sets up the universal thesis (“everything,” “everything that happens under the heavens”); 3:9 brings it together in the form of a rhetorical question. It is the answer to the question of 1:3, an answer already anticipated in 2:11.

Since everything is arranged from elsewhere, the question arises: Why should we make such an effort to change the world? Here it is formulated not as a positive conclusion, but only as a cautious rhetorical question. But the thinking goes further and this result, however right in itself, must clearly be set in a broader frame and thereby in some respects be further relativized. Toward the end of his book Qoheleth will call for energetic action (9:10; 11:4-6). How can he do this after all that precedes? 3:10-14 give the answer.

[3:5] A Jewish exegetical tradition may be correct in seeing here a veiled reference to sexual intercourse in the throwing of stones.

[3:7] Does the time “to tear” refer to the tearing of garments at the beginning of lamentation for the dead, and “to sew” represent a sign for an end of grieving?

[3:10-11] In this context, in the narrative introduction to the final step in this thought, the “business” must refer to all the various types of activity in human living that have been spread out in 3:1-9. At the same time 1:13 is cited. So what was there formulated only as a program is now to be laid out. Although the human activity in 2:17 was considered as something “evil” (*raʿ*) in the reflections of the king, and the discussion of “business” in 2:23 and 26 was always given a negative tone, the background explanation given in 1:13, that the employment imposed by a god was evil (*raʿ*), is not repeated. In fact, the position that now follows is totally positive, taking for granted, as it does, that human activity is always at the same time God’s activity.

[3:11] In v. 11 our translation (which is to be favored over the alternative possibility in the note) starts with “All that,” a phrase whose meaning is plural collective, then divides distributively through “in its time” (literally “in the single point in time of each one”) and later is unified through “in all of it” (literally “in their interior”; the word “all” is repeated in the translation to bring out the meaning). The alternative translation would affirm an infinite horizon of understanding in the human spirit.

According to the words of v. 11, every action that occurs in every moment is “perfect” or “beautiful” (*yāpeh*). The basis for this is that, by God, “eternity” falls to each action’s share (3:11, 14). This is to be understood in the sense of ever renewed return (3:15), through which what 1:4-11 said about the cosmos and human activity is now based on God’s doing. But this cannot be grasped by human understanding (“find out,” 3:11) because of our limitedness. Here, against human experience and against the analysis of this experience up to this point, “meaning” is affirmed in the light of the opening cosmology.

[3:12-15] It is not meaning and continuity of humans and for humans, but rather participation in the meaning and continuity that comes from God to the whole cosmos and hence also to human action. Nothing that accompanying time chases off is lost (3:15). To remain present in a situation that is by no means determined by oneself, but determined from without by an incomprehensible God, trusting that from God all is beautiful and real—

that surely is the “fear of God” of which 3:14 speaks: a shuddering before a God so inconceivably other, and yet so deeply implicated and close in one’s own action, the “fear and trembling” of Kierkegaard. Later, 7:14 will make this more concrete.

[3:12-13] Before the concluding sentences in vv. 14-15 are heard, vv. 12-13 pick up the end of the preceding section (2:24-26). There it was stressed that the happiness possible for humans is not based on ourselves. Here in 3:12 this is recalled by way of introduction: “there is no happiness in activities” (literally “in them”—referring more likely to the activities, i.e., the theme of 3:9-11, not to humans themselves, who were last mentioned in the singular, “human”). But now the emphasis is on the affirmation that happiness is possible—in this life; and it is underlined in a somewhat padded expression that this is a gift of God. Through 3:12-13 the unit 2:24-26 is mirrored and brought to a close.

[3:14] But there is more. Out of the critically developed reflection beginning in 2:12 there remains one positive fact: happiness, if God provides it, comes in to humankind as our portion (for the word see 2:10, 21). This fact is in some degree given new illumination in the theological reflections. It is *the* “gift of God” (3:13; see 5:18). The “fear of God” of 3:14 is silence before the divine mystery, which is closed to human understanding. Can the joy given to humans perhaps be the point where this silence is overcome in an experience of divine communication? 5:17-19 will reflect further on this question.

[3:15] The concluding sentence in 3:15b may be an old familiar saying, which here is to be newly understood within the meaning of Qoheleth’s theology. It closes the circle, along with 3:15a ending 1:12—3:15, with the central sentence of the opening poem in 1:9-10. Another framing link for the whole of 1:4—3:15 is the recurrence of the word “eternity” of 1:4 and 10 in 3:11 and 14.

Social Critique I

Injustice in Judgment 3:16-21

- 16 There is something else that I have observed under the sun:
in the very place of justice, there is lawlessness;
and in the very place of law-abiding, there is lawlessness.
- 17 So I thought to myself: it is God who judges both the law-abiding and the lawless. For
for every interest there is an appointed time,
and for every action in that place.
- 18 With regard to humans as individuals, I thought to myself, God has singled them out and (from this) they must recognize that in reality they are animals. 19 For
fate awaits each human,
and fate awaits the animals.
One single fate awaits both.
- As these die, so the others die. Both share the same air. There is in this no advantage for the human over the animal. Both are a breath. 20 They both pass to one place.
They both come alive out of the dust;
and both return to the dust.
- 21 Who perceives if the air of a human really goes upward, while the air of an animal descends down to earth?
- 3:16-22: 8:12-15
5:7
3:1
+2:14; Ps 49:13, 21
6:6
3:20-21: 12:7;
Gen 2:7; 3:19;
Ps 103:14; 104:29;
146:4; Job 34:14f
Sir 17:1; 40:11;
Wis 2:2f

3:19 Literally: "For each man is fate, and animals too are fate." Or: "For each human is chance, and animals too are chance."

3:21 Read with all the ancient translations: *hā 'ōlā* and *hāyōredet*. The MT has: "Who knows the air of a human, which goes up upward, and the air of animals, which descends down to earth?" MT has circumvented the prickly question of the text by making a small change in its pronunciation (article in place of interrogative particle). But then the text makes no sense in its context.

Overview of 3:16—6:10

This section, which is interrupted by the central pericope of the book—the religious critique—can be called “Social Critique.” In contrast with the preceding analysis, which began with the most favorable human opportunities, this section describes and critically reflects on the evil in society, and above all on the difference between poor and rich.

Now will be unfolded what was introduced by a single example (2:18-23) in the book’s major development of its argument, and whose complex character was also indicated in the poetic passage of 3:2-8. Just as one sees through the royal fiction, one becomes aware of a naive identification up till now with the mentality of a Jewish aristocracy fascinated by wealth and enjoyment, which had made its way up only by oppressing and exploiting the general population. With what unquestioning assurance had Qoheleth/Solomon in 2:7 provided himself with masses of slaves, and in 2:8 with concubines. But now the next section shows that that was only a dialectic step. We had to begin with the highest possible opportunities for happiness. Only when these had shown their dark side should the harder reality be fully introduced. Thus everything Qoheleth has reported to us as his past insight is now relativized. But not in the sense that the readers should relativize the existential philosophical insights we have gained, just because they were gained from a one-sided, and false, social perspective.

The new section of the book, unlike contemporary social critiques, does not aim at any change in society through reform of its structures. At most in 5:8 the Ptolemaic system of renting out the royal lands is preferred to the traditional system of free farmers on their own soil, which had long ago degenerated into a system of large holdings with masses of men and women in bondage, day laborers, and slaves. Moreover, it seems that, in the book, there is no awareness that society is something that humans themselves make. But rather the critical observations about the social sphere allow Qoheleth to repeat now one aspect, now another, of his already completed basic arguments, to clarify them and deepen them. Much that was only mentioned is now more broadly developed. After the demanding mental effort of the coherent logic of 2:3—3:15, the reader is not again asked to undertake any protracted reasoning.

One theme follows loosely upon another, and only from 5:12 on are the examples bound strongly together again through a continuing argument. The prose of first-person narrative is retained, but the structure of each unit is variable and here and there other stylistic forms occur. The beginning of the new section is recognized not only by the change in

theme, but also by the new introduction formula, which breaks off from the narrative flow: “There is something else that I have observed under the sun” (3:16; *wěʿôd* found only here in Qoheleth). The end of the section in 6:10 is inferred from the fact that 6:11-12 is clearly an introduction to a new section. One can dispute whether the line should be already drawn between 6:9 and 6:10. Then it would correspond exactly to the middle of the book, if one counts verses. But the “stronger” one of whom 6:10 speaks will be death, which was the topic above; and the forward references to the section of the book that lies ahead begin only in 6:11. For the limits of the pericope in the middle, see the overview of 4:17—5:6 (pp. 74–76).

If we leave the religious critique in the middle pericope aside, observations of form alone yield ten units, of which six precede and four follow the middle pericope:

1. 3:16-21 Injustice in judgment
2. 3:22 *Happiness as the sole portion for humans*
3. 4:1-3 Exploitation
4. 4:4-6 Rivalry
5. 4:7-12 One who is alone
6. 4:13-16 The fickleness of popular favor
[4:17—5:6]
7. 5:7-11 The power of office and greed
8. 5:12-16 Bankruptcy
9. 5:17-19 *Happiness and God*
10. 6:1-10 Living without joy

The second and second-to-last unit—texts symmetric in the structure—fall somewhat outside the continuous theme. They deal with happiness.

In contrast with 1:12—3:15, where Qoheleth relates essentially (at least in the sense of the fiction) personal life experiences and analyzes them philosophically, he now tells us about observations he has made on the fate of others here and there, and around the whole world. This is expressed in the phrase, repeated again and again in this part of the book, that Qoheleth had “observed” (3:16, 22; 4:1, 4, 7, 15; 5:12, 17; 6:1). In 5:7 he says to the reader—retaining the “you” address of the previous unit—“When you observe.” This expression “I observed” opens units. Only in 4:15 does it occur in the middle of a unit. That can be explained by the fact that the story of the example there had first to come to the decisive point before one could speak of observing. There is usually

added (or otherwise stands close by) the phrase that the observation is “under the sun,” or also within the sphere of “the earth,” “in the province.” In the previous sections of the book, as in the following, the expression “I observed” does not occur nearly as frequently or as regularly. So it may serve as the structural signal in this section of the book, as did the closing “breath” formula in 2:12—3:15. The word “breath” occurs ten times in the whole section 3:16—6:10, including the religious critique. But in this section it is used freely, and does not always occur in a conclusion. Obviously, it no longer has a structural function.

Not all the units of the social critique, presenting themselves in this form, are negative. The second, and the second-to-last, as mentioned above, speak of the good, and do not include the word “breath.” But they too are introduced as “observations” and therefore should be considered as separate units.

Notes on 3:16-21

[3:16] In v. 16a Qoheleth is certainly not introducing a familiar proverb that he would like to “observe” or test out. The location “under the sun” makes that interpretation unlikely, as this phrase will appear again and again in what follows, at the beginning of units without any proverb style.

The proverblike doublet in v. 16b is not about a judgment in the next world, since this is “under the sun.” Otherwise the development from v. 18 on would be unintelligible. This brings the reader to understand, at least upon reflection, that in v. 16 injustice in judgment means the condemnation of innocent people to death. Qoheleth presents this shocking fact, in a striking doublet, as his own personal observation.

The formulation in two affirmations sharpens its thrust also by the fact that the only variation consists in the introduction of the other member of the traditional pair, “justice and law-abiding.”

Apart from the mere arbitrariness of justice, especially in regard to the poor, which may have been widespread, in the case of Ptolemaic Judea we must also take into account the overlapping and confusion of different legal systems. A native-born tax collector, independently of any traditional and local justice, but on the basis of right-of-conquest (the land was conquered, rebellions had arisen and been put down), could have local magistrates condemned, if they had failed to deliver extortionary tributes because they felt responsible for the people.

[3:17] Immediately after the theological considerations of 3:1-15, Qoheleth builds on his new observation by pointing out first that God is

a participant, even in a horrible event like that. As proof he cites in v. 17 the general principle of 3:1 in a more contextualized form. One cannot exclude God from an event in the world, just on the grounds that something immoral is happening. Translators and commentators have almost always escaped this hard statement by interpreting v. 17 as God's judgment on human injustice in judging, whether this happen later on, or even in the next world. God would himself judge once again both just and unjust judges, when, in a time to be determined by him, this would occur "in that place," that is, before God. As 5:5 and 7:17 show, Qoheleth most certainly does hold that God gets angry and judges. But here the reference to the preceding theological reasoning, which is cited, makes this understanding of v. 17 impossible. Perhaps the second epilogist wanted to understand the text in this way; cf. 12:14, and earlier, 11:9.

The phrase "in that place" at the end of v. 17 means the places where humans render judgment (v. 16).

[3:18] Parallel to the role of God in connection with corrupt judicial practice, v. 18 turns to the victims of this practice (individual humans). It is clear from v. 17 that they are not only victims of human injustice, but at the same time God excludes them from the number of the living. From the experience of their own annihilating death they must learn that, as humans, they are also only animals. The Hebrew has a play on words: *šehem-bēhēmâ hēm̄mâ lāhem*; the translation ("that in reality they are animals") cannot successfully render this phrase.

[3:19-21] In vv. 19-21 Qoheleth further develops this comparison between humans and animals, a frequent topos of Epicureans, popular philosophers, and satirists. The key word is "fate" (cf. 2:14-15, where, in a less perilous context, the educated and the fool were compared). Verse 21 expresses skepticism concerning an otherwise unknown theory about the difference between human and animal death, which Qoheleth himself will work with even poetically in a modified form (12:7). It may have been developed from Genesis 2-3.

But there was also to be read at that time a sentence in Euripides that whatever sprouts from the earth returns to the earth in death, whereas whatever proceeds from the *aithēr* (heavenly sphere) ascends to it again.¹ This could be a formulation of a Platonizing belief in the immortality of the soul, found perhaps in the popular culture that Qoheleth addressed.

¹ See Euripides, *The Suppliants* 532ff., in *Euripides with English Translation*, vol. 3, trans. Arthur S. Way, LCL (New York: Putnam, 1930).

For in v. 22 he will pick up—by sheer association—the positive conclusions and observations of the “anthropological” section, namely that in this world and before death, happiness is possible, as joy that humans reap from what they do. Cf. 2:10, where this was stated positively, but not yet exclusively. 2:24 and 3:12-13 were making another point.

Happiness As the Sole Portion for Humans 3:22

- +2:10; +6:12 22 So I have observed that there is no happiness except insofar as one finds joy in one's activity. That is one's portion. Who could enable a person to taste something that will happen only afterward?

[3:22] As is shown in the clearer formulation (“under the sun”) found in the similar verse 6:12, “after him”—to translate MT literally—does not mean specifically “after his death, in another world,” but simply “later.” However, this seems to be directed at some of Qoheleth's contemporaries whose hopes were for a “portion” that awaited them “later” beyond death.

Exploitation 4:1-3

- 5:7 4:1 Again, I further observed all that is carried out under the sun in order to exploit people. Just look:
 the exploited ones weep,
 and no one comforts them;
 from the hands of those who exploit them comes violence,
 and no one comforts them.
- 7:2; Job 3:20-23;
 6:3-5; Jer 20:18 2 I always congratulate the dead, who have already died, and not the living who must still go on living. 3 I would consider to be still happier than either the one who has not been as yet, and who has not observed the evil activity that is carried on under the sun.

[4:1] The third “observation” of the social critique section is introduced in a kind of litany style, as was the first in 3:16. It is about the exploitation, by wealthier classes, of the people settled on the land and of the handworkers living in cities. In the framework of the institution of debt slavery, the wealthy had direct control over workers and their work; or else they alone, through their monopoly status, were in a position to gather money in return for the products of the harvest and crafted wares, in sufficient quantities to meet the various demands made by the government through its ever more systematic and powerful bureaucracy. The use

of violence was not at all excluded, especially in the case of debt slavery. If a family had put all its adults and children who were able to work at the disposition of a creditor, and had mortgaged all its houses, the last step in exploitation was the brutal sale of people into slavery in foreign countries, as this was practiced in the Greek system. (Cf. the situation that preceded the reforms of Nehemiah two hundred years earlier, Neh 5:1-5.) The oppression of the lower classes, according to the fourth “observation” in 4:4, is based on the fact that every transaction and business operation no less than every public service employment within the Ptolemaic system was characterized by rivalry.

[4:2-3] The exploitation begets the lamentation of the exploited (v. 1). Just as Qoheleth himself once reacted in 2:16 with a lament, there is here in v. 2 a lament disguised as its opposite, namely the praises of the dead and of those not born. These praises, found in the Old Testament in Job and Jeremiah, are unceasingly sung in Greek writers from Homer to Hegesias, a contemporary of Qoheleth and head of the Hedonist school in Alexandria. Here this turn of phrase allows Qoheleth to avoid identifying himself with the oppressed.

Rivalry 4:4-6

- 4 And I observed that every labor and every successful action means rivalry between people. That too is breath and an inspiration of air.
- 5 The fool folds his hands,
and eats his own flesh.
- 6 Better a handful with quiet
than two handfuls with labor and an inspiration of air.

Prov 6:10; 24:33

6:5; Prov 15:16;
16:8; 17:1

Overview of 4:4-6

The fourth “observation” in v. 4 shows that the oppressors are so entangled in the struggle of competition for the sake of success that they are just as badly off as the oppressed. Out of this, two proverbs are formulated in vv. 5-6 as closing argument for the “breath” formula. To the second at least has been added by Qoheleth the phrase “an inspiration of air” as a kind of coda.

Notes on 4:4-6

[4:5-6] Verse 5 is an astonishing saying of old-time wisdom: against all the rules, it can happen that also the unskilled and not so industrious

people can have enough to eat. Verse 6 praises moderation because it saves humans from too much strain. But in this context both these sayings have the same function as the ironic praises of the dead and not born in vv. 2-3: if not veiled lamentation, then at least an expression of perplexity. For one could stay out of the system of competition and its resulting exploitation of humans by humans, and still one would have enough to eat and a lot more peace and quiet. But what you would not have in that case is “happiness,” which, as full enjoyment of life, can come only through being fully wealthy.

If we do not take vv. 5-6 as precisely intending the opposite, by an ironically broken citation of current opinions (for which, after vv. 2-3, all reasons are given and which may be insinuated by the coda in v. 6), then we must tie Qoheleth, because of this text and this text alone, to those currents of popular philosophy that rejected wealth, withdrew from public life, and looked for happiness in that *hēsychia* (quiet) that is assured by modest restraint in lifestyle. Other utterances of Qoheleth about happiness do not support this.

One Who Is Alone 4:7-12

- 7 Again, I further observed a breath under the sun. 8 It happens that a person stands alone, and there is no second. Yes, not even a son or brother. But his possessions are limitless, and moreover his eyes are not sated by wealth. But for whom am I laboring, and why deny myself happiness? That too is a breath; it is a bad business. 9 Two are better than one, if it happens they are well rewarded by their possessions. 10 For if they fall, the one can lift up his partner. Too bad for the one who falls, with no second to help him up. 11 Moreover:

When two sleep together, they warm one another;
but how will one alone get warm?

- 12 And if someone can overpower one person,
still two will resist him;
and a three-ply cord
will not soon be broken.

1:8; 5:9; Prov 27:20
2:18f; Sir 14:4

1 Kgs 1:1-14

Notes on 4:7-12

[4:7-8] The new unit begins with the same words as 4:1, except that the theme, even before it is named, is introduced as a “breath.” By now “breath” has become a fixed concept. All analyses up to this point, except where they reach out into the domain of theology, have ended with this concept, so now Qoheleth can put this tag on something even before he

starts. Even though, according to 2:18-19, an ultimate situation is presented in that one has to hand over one's possessions to a successor whom one cannot then control, still the situation is equally problematic for a person who cannot leave off work and world building, even though one works alone and has neither child nor family members. In 4:2-3 and 5-6, Qoheleth identified deeply with the people he spoke of. But here in v. 8 he goes even further into empathy. He formulates the critical question by shifting to direct discourse in the first person. In it one realizes also that frantic work can itself be an obstacle to happiness.

[4:9-12] After the “breath” conclusion in v. 8, Qoheleth resorts again to the tactic of 1:13—2:2, and of the previous unit 4:4-6, namely presenting a justification for the “breath” formula through concluding proverbs. Here, however, he offers a broader proverbial composition that begins with prose. It deals in favorable terms with communal sharing among humans. Everything is set in opposition (v. 9, *haššēnayim min-hāʿeḥād*) to the case of a person standing alone (v. 8, *ʿeḥād wəʿên sēnī*). The examples of vv. 10-12 focus on situations in traveling: a tired traveler stumbles (v. 10), the cold at night (v. 11), ambush (v. 12). Compare Homer, *Iliad* 10.224-26: “When two go together, one of them at least looks forward to see what is best; a man by himself, though he be careful, still has less mind in him than two, and his wits have less weight.”²

But the beginning of the whole section in v. 9 shows that the idea of togetherness is not so much linked with the idea of friendship or even marriage. Here there is rather business cooperation in view. For the word “partner” is used, and as a condition for preferring community over being alone it is expressly indicated that one must take for granted that work and possessions would lead to “reward” or income. The “happiness” of v. 8 is undoubtedly what is meant here.

In 4:7-12 there is mirrored, probably unintentionally, the experience of individual isolation of Qoheleth's period, as the old social groupings fell apart—the cherished family and clan communities—and an ancient class-based ordering of society imposed itself. This was far more massively felt in the upper classes than among simple folk, for whom the old structures were just now breaking down.

Overview of 4:9—5:11

Why does Qoheleth take such pains here in 4:9-12, almost anticipating the style of chapters 10–11, to develop a picture opposed to what

² Richmond Lattimore, *The Iliad* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951) 224.

he described before, and that is envisioned in the way of traditional wisdom texts? It may be that he feels he has presented his analyses in very individualistic focus, especially through his royal fiction. As that is not his intent, he takes this occasion to make a small correction.

There may also be a structural reason, at this point, for the broadening of sayings that come in an almost ethical mode. In 4:13-16 there will follow a further “social critique” section; then the inserted, ethically oriented, “religious critique” central text of the book; and then the extension of the “social critique” in 5:7-8 follows and opens once again into a proverbial composition in an almost ethical mode (5:9-11). One can wonder whether the central text of 4:17—5:6 has not been fitted, far more carefully than one first thought, into a structured framework, through this purely formal concentric composition.

Ethic: sapiential	4:9-12	
Theme: governance	4:13-16	
Religious behavior		4:17—5:6
Theme: governance	5:7-8	
Ethic: sapiential	5:9-11	

This does not belong at the level of the real book structure, but it is a subordinate structure that supports the book structure and serves to underline the central text.

4:13-16: Sir 11:1-6

Prov 17:2

The Fickleness of Popular Favor 4:13-16

13 Better a poor young man who knows,
than a king who is old but a fool—

because he no longer perceived that he should take advice.

14 The young man was freed from prison and became king, even though he had come into the world destitute, while the other already reigned. 15 But I observed that all the living who walked about under the sun sided with the next young man who arose in his place. 16 The people carry on, whoever it is that leads them.

1:9-11

Moreover, the most recent generation will not be full of joy about him either. For that too is a breath and a spirit of air.

Overview of 4:13-16

The proverbs with which the foregoing unit ended are probably the occasion for beginning here not with the “I have observed” phrase that has become usual, but rather with a saying that is marked off from the previous sayings only by subject matter. The text moves then into narration,

and only in the midst of this there comes a point where it says, “But I have observed” (v. 15).

With the saying in v. 13, Qoheleth probably had in mind events that originally were either historical or legendary, familiar to his readers but not available to us. The narrative intention of this atemporal and generally applicable proverb appears only after “because,” when suddenly prose takes over and a narrative continues in the past tense, just as though what preceded had been narrative.

Generally vv. 13-16 deal with three leaders: the old king who was dislodged, the young man who was released from prison in order to dislodge him, and “the next young man” who “arose” in the place of the second. The rapidity of this description of a sequence of three leaders, and the gently ironic presentation of the approval “of all the living who walked about under the sun,” underline stylistically what this is about: the fickleness of popular favor and the insecurity at the top of the political ladder.

In passing, there is here introduced for the first time a form that will dominate later in the deconstruction section of the book: a traditional proverb placed at the beginning of a unit is refuted at the end.

Religious Critique

4:17—5:2; Jas 1:19

Hearing, Sacrificing, and Speaking at Worship 4:17—5:2

1 Sam 15:22;
Prov 15:7f; Hos 6:6

17 Watch your step
when you go to the house of God.
Enter in order to listen,
and not, as the fools do, in order to deliver a sacrifice.
They do not even perceive
how to do evil.

5:1 Don't be too fast with your mouth;
and in your heart don't burn
to make a speech in the presence of God.

2 God is in heaven,
you are on the earth,
so let your words be few.

Dreams come with a multiplicity of business;
and the voice of a fool with a multiplicity of words.

10:14; Prov 10:19

4:17 Another possible translation: "in order to give a sacrificial banquet."

Overview of 4:17—5:6

In 4:17 there is suddenly introduced the second person singular imperative form of a wisdom admonition, and it predominates until 5:6. Equally abrupt is the introduction of a new subject matter: it deals with religious behavior, and it warns rather than commands. It is not the behavior of sinners or lawbreakers that is criticized, but rather that of the *kēsîlîm*, the uneducated, the "fools" (4:17; 5:2, 3). It seems to be concerned with religious busybodies, with the typical goings-on of popular piety, where the line is not drawn between upper and lower class, but rather within Qoheleth's own circle of well-off readers (see 4:17 alternative translation; 5:2).