# Time in the Book of Qohelet

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## Abstract

This thesis explores the theme of time in the book of Qohelet. Throughout his work Qohelet depicts the temporal reality as intensely problematic for human attempts to fashion a meaningful existence, even in the present. A tension is established in the book between the temporal realities of the world and human time-experience. This tension becomes especially apparent in relation to the field of human cognition: our ability to understand and respond properly to our temporal conditions is drawn fundamentally into doubt by Qohelet. The lacking correspondence between temporal reality and human experience of time affects every temporal area in our existence. Qohelet does not allow the human being any meaningful access to either past or future because of the reality of oblivion. Unable to appeal to a meaningful human continuity, individual human beings are unable to make sense of their present existence too.

In addition to analysing Qohelet's conception of time, the thesis investigates the consequences which this time-conception has for the author's own philosophical endeavour. Significantly, Qohelet aims to describe an area of reality which he considers fundamentally inaccessible to the human mind. This results in an ongoing tension between statements of knowledge and statements of ignorance; between wanting to investigate human life in time and being unable to do so. This dichotomy is especially apparent in Qohelet's discussion of the lost temporal horizons of past and future. Past and future cannot be approached directly, but must either be discussed through an examination of their influence on the present or established negatively, simply by stating

their inaccessibility. Qohelet's three main narrative texts demonstrate this particularly clearly. A final chapter uses the analysis of Qohelet's time conception to undertake a comparative analysis of Qohelet and early layers of 1 Enoch.

## Long Abstract

This thesis explores the theme of time in the book of Qohelet. Time occupies a centre-stage position in this biblical work. The majority of passages in the book contribute to some degree to Qohelet's gradually unfolding discourse on time. In this discourse Qohelet investigates the cosmic, temporal reality, as well as the temporal situation of the individual human being. In addition to his interest in the individual's experience of life in the present he also examines the wider horizons of human, temporal existence – our past and our future.

Qohelet does not aim to describe the temporal processes of the world as a neutral reality. Outlining key features of his conception of time explicitly, Qohelet repeatedly depicts the temporal order as highly problematic for human attempts to fashion a meaningful existence, even in the now of the present. In other passages, Qohelet's understanding of time – including his questioning of the human capacity to relate meaningfully to the temporal order – affects and shapes his argument in a more indirect manner. The discourse on time runs throughout the work, and while it does contain tensions, the author presents a reasonably coherent thesis regarding the reality of time and the human experience of this reality.

Time, then, is not only one of the main themes in the book, but a theme which provides a degree of coherence in the work. Some passages, the content of which makes little sense when read on their own, become meaningful when interpreted in relation to the book's

discourse on time. Approaching structural ambiguities and other compositional uncertainties from the perspective of time in the book often helps elucidate them as well.

Despite the centrality of time in Qohelet, there has been a curious lack of scholarly attention towards this particular theme. Many commentaries mention cursorily in connection with the poem on times in Qohelet 3:1-8 that time is an issue which occupies Qohelet. Yet, an exhaustive analysis of Qohelet's understanding of time has been lacking. Such an analysis of the temporal discourse in the book of Qohelet is exactly what this thesis offers. It discusses Qohelet's overall conception of time – in terms of the human present, past and future, as well as in terms of the unchanging, cosmic realities. A particular focus is the human cognitive engagement with time. In the course of the analysis a close reading will also be offered of a series of passages in which the theme of time is an especially prominent concern. The book offers rich resources for this type of work, simply because so many passages in Qohelet have something to say about the problem of time.

The thesis is structured as follows: Chapter one discusses the state of scholarship regarding time in the Hebrew Bible. Especially I examine the linguistically focused approaches which have been dominant in the field. Scholars have suggested that the Hebrew language of the biblical writers shaped their understanding of themes related to time and that, for instance, time as a general notion was not a part of the biblical conception of time. It has even been argued by some scholars that the writers of the Hebrew Bible did not have a concept of time at all. I discuss the linguistic arguments

enlisted in support of these theses and argue that it is erroneous to assume a necessary connection between the lexical layout of a language and the mindset of the language speakers, including their conceptual capacity. Furthermore, this chapter emphasizes that Qohelet contains exactly the sort of discussion of temporal themes which scholars often claim is absent from the Hebrew Bible. A final section in the first chapter presents an overview of particularly pertinent scholarly work on the theme of time and themes related to time in the book of Qohelet.

Chapter two considers issues of structure, composition, and date. I am interested in evaluating the contradictory character of the book of Qohelet on its content-level, as well as in considering its structural peculiarities. In accordance with the majority opinion in current scholarship, I suggest that these features of the work are not best understood by assuming a complex history of composition with multiple redactors. Other approaches to the book's tensions and contradictions, as well as its difficult structure, are considered in order to ascertain whether it is even possible to discuss Qohelet as a whole. One possibility which is explored in some detail is to engage with the structure of the book on a macro-level.

Chapter three offers a close reading of the framing poems. This is an essential first part of the exegetical work because it is in the frame that Qohelet develops the basic understanding of time upon which he builds and to which he responds throughout his book. The framing poems reflect explicitly upon the cosmic, temporal structure, describing it as a reality of repetition and continuity. They consider too how the human

experience of life in time fits within this temporal framework, focusing in particular on the tensions which exist between the cosmic, temporal reality and the life-experience of the individual. The tension between the temporal realities of the world and the human time-experience becomes especially apparent in relation to the field of human cognition: our ability to understand and respond properly to our temporal conditions is drawn fundamentally into doubt by the author of Qohelet. An excursus considers the imagery connected to the semantic spheres of wind and sun, and how this imagery is used in differing ways to describe the temporal reality of both world and human being.

Chapter four discusses Qohelet's understanding of the present. Rather than discussing Qohelet's thinking on the present only in the context of the book's exhortations to enjoyment, as is often done, I argue in favour of approaching the present in close connection with Qohelet's wider discourse on time. The chapter offers both a general overview of Qohelet's presentation of the present and a detailed, textual analysis of 3:1-15. In relation to this text, I engage in particular with Qohelet's reflections on humanity's cognitive relationship to their life-conditions in the present. Human society as embedded in the temporal order is also explored in this chapter.

Chapter five examines the connections between the present and the wider horizons of past and future in the book. Qohelet emphasises repeatedly that the present must be understood in relation to the wider temporal framework of past and future, and that its relationship to these temporal dimensions strongly affects the possibilities of establishing a meaningful existence in the now. Humanity's inability to properly understand this

wider temporal framework, and indeed the entire temporal dimension of their existence, bears greatly upon their ability to engage with their life-conditions in the present. I investigate how Qohelet engages with these temporal dimensions, given his claim that they are not accessible to the human mind. I also examine how the inaccessibility of past and future affect human life in the present. The passages selected for detailed analysis are 6:1-6, 8:1-9, and 9:1-12.

Chapter six focuses more specifically on three narratives in Qohelet which all purport to be stories about the past: 1:12-2:20, 4:13-16, and 9:13-15. I discuss what happens on the content-level, as well as on the structural plane, when Qohelet attempts to tell stories about the past, regarding which he otherwise consistently states that we have no access. It will be argued that narratives which reach beyond the life-span of the individual, and which offer to order the human, temporal experience meaningfully, prove problematic to Qohelet's author. Indeed, Qohelet seems to have imported his worries regarding the inaccessibility of time into his stories. Thus, the stories come to play a central role in his demonstration of the problematic character of temporal reality.

The exegetical analysis of Qohelet's view of time will be used as a springboard in chapter 7 to discuss comparatively the theme of time in a roughly contemporary work, the book of 1 Enoch. I argue that the perspective on time in the book of Enoch is much less one-dimensional than has often been assumed in scholarly treatments of apocalyptic literature. Several perspectives on time and strategies for using the time thematic co-exist in the book. I survey two such perspectives, namely the interest in chronology and the

contraction of time to one, all-important moment. Whereas the second of these perspectives is absent from the book of Qohelet, an illuminating comparison can be made between the two books in relation to their interest in chronology and temporal stability.

The overall aim of the thesis is to show that *time* provides an invaluable lens for the study of the book of Qohelet. This theme is one of Qohelet's central concerns throughout. An analysis of the use of time as a theme in the book allows the reader better access to many of its difficult passages. Furthermore, the discourse on time helps create a degree of coherence in the work. On the basis of an analysis of time in Qohelet the reader may engage in a more informed fashion with other themes in this work as well. Among these I investigate in this thesis especially the interplay between the themes of time and cognition. Finally, it will be shown that the analysis of the discourse on time in the book of Qohelet can be a valuable starting-point for comparative analyses of other, roughly contemporary, literary works.

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# Introduction

This thesis explores the theme of time in the book of Qohelet. Time occupies a centre-stage position in this biblical work, and the majority of passages in the book contribute to some degree to Qohelet's gradually unfolding discourse on time. Outlining his conception of time explicitly, Qohelet repeatedly depicts the temporal order as highly problematic for human attempts to fashion a meaningful existence, even in the now of the present. In other passages, however, Qohelet's understanding of time, including his questioning of the human capacity to relate meaningfully to the temporal order, affects and shapes his argument in a more indirect manner. The discourse on time runs throughout the work, and while it does contain tensions, the author presents a reasonably coherent thesis regarding the reality of time and the human experience of this reality.

Time, then, is not only one of the main themes in the book, but a theme which provides a degree of coherence in the work. Some passages, the contents of which make only little sense when read on their own, become meaningful when interpreted in relation to the book's discourse on time. Approaching structural ambiguities and other compositional uncertainties from the perspective of the discourse on time often helps to elucidate them as well.

A few themes related to that of time have gathered significant scholarly interest. Thus, Qohelet's reflections on issues such as determinism, mortality, and creation have been studied carefully. These academic analyses have been highly useful in connection with

the exegetical work of this thesis. Especially valuable contributions include Schubert's monograph on creation in the book which offers pertinent reflections on Qohelet's conception of time from a creation-perspective. Berger, too, has touched upon the importance of time in the book, noting especially the prominent place in Qohelet's thinking of oblivion as a fundamental human problem. Finally, it is worth mentioning Machinist whose analysis of the notion of fate in Ecclesiastes includes a highly perceptive discussion of Qohelet's belief that human beings are unable to understand time properly.

However, despite the centrality of time in Qohelet, there has been a curious lack of scholarly attention towards this particular theme. Many commentaries mention cursorily in connection with the poem on times in Qohelet 3:1-8 that time is an issue which occupies Qohelet. Yet, an exhaustive analysis of Qohelet's interest in time has been lacking. Such an analysis of the temporal discourse in the book of Qohelet is exactly what this thesis offers. It discusses Qohelet's overall conception of time – in terms of the human present, past and future, as well as in terms of the unchanging, cosmic realities. A particular focus is the human cognitive engagement with time. In the course of the analysis a close reading of a series of passages in which the theme of time is especially prominent will also be offered. The book offers rich resources for this type of work, in that the majority of passages in Qohelet have something to say about the problem of time.

Thus, the frame of the book, 1:2-11 and 12-1:8, describes human existence primarily in temporal terms. The problematic character of time is a central component in the

conclusion of the royal fiction, especially in verses 2:14b-23. Time may be said to be the main theme in the whole of chapter 3. The reflection on human society in 4:1 is closely connected to a statement on the temporal aspects of humanity's general life-conditions in 4:2-3, and the short narrative in 4:13-16 also places ideas related to time, especially regarding past and memory, centre-stage. 5:12-16,19 contain reflections which are similar to those in chapter 2 regarding inheritance and the value of life in the face of death. While 6:1-6 is a passage which is rarely emphasized in scholarly discussions of temporal themes I would argue that this problematization of what would appear to be the human ideal life is in fact very much a passage about time in human life. The time-thematic remains a central concern in both 6:7-12 and 7:1-14. 8:1-9 is another passage which is not often interpreted in the light of the time-discourse in the book, despite the centrality of this theme in these verses. Possibly the theme of timing plays a part in 8:10-14 as well. 8:16-17 evaluates the search for wisdom more generally, but the focus on God's activity and the events under the sun suggest that the temporal dimension of human life is still in focus. 9:1-12 reflect in a sustained manner on mortality, memory, and our understanding of our temporal conditions. 9:13-15 investigate the temporal theme of memory through a short narrative. While chapter 10 seems a less well-organized and thematically somewhat less cohesive collection of sayings, here too one finds the occasional reference to time (10:11, 10:14-17). The slightly obscure piece of advice in 11:1-2 may have connections to the theme of time, and in any case 11:3-6 embeds the advice in a context of timing, reflection on the proper moment, and sensible human responses to the temporal reality. Finally, 11:7-10 consists of yet another sustained reflection on the temporal conditions of human life.

The thesis is structured as follows: Chapter one discusses the state of scholarship regarding time in the Hebrew Bible. Especially I examine the linguistically focused approaches which have been dominant in the field. In addition, I present an overview of particularly pertinent scholarly work on the theme of time and themes related to time in the book of Qohelet. Chapter two considers issues of structure, composition, and date. Chapter three offers a close reading of the framing poems. These poems describe human existence and cosmic reality in temporal terms and establish in an explicit manner Qohelet's basic conception of time. An excursus considers the imagery connected to the semantic spheres of wind and sun, and how this imagery is used to describe the temporal reality of both world and human being. Chapter four discusses Qohelet's understanding of the present, focusing especially upon the human attempt to understand their present life-conditions. Human society as embedded in the temporal order is also explored. Chapter five examines the connections between the present and the wider horizons of past and future. In particular, I discuss how Qohelet engages with these temporal dimensions, given his claim that they are not accessible to the human mind. I examine how the inaccessibility of past and future affects human life in the present. Chapter six focuses more specifically on three narratives in Qohelet which all purport to be stories about the past. I discuss what happens on a content-level, as well as on the structural plane, when Qohelet attempts to tell stories about a past to which he otherwise consistently states that we have no access. On the basis of the exegetical analysis of Qohelet's view of time, chapter 7 discusses comparatively the theme of time in a roughly contemporary work, namely the early layers of 1 Enoch.

The translations of passages from the book of Qohelet are all my own. Translations of passages from 1 Enoch are by E. Isaac in Charlesworth (1983). I am aware of the ambiguity inherent in the name “Qohelet” which can refer either to the book itself, its first-person narrator, or to its implied author. This is an ambiguity I have chosen to retain.

# Chapter 1: The Question of Time

*"Time weakens all things and leads them to oblivion."* (Menandri Sententiae, 831. Ed. Jaekel)

This thesis examines the theme of time in the book of Qohelet. In order to engage with such a research question, however, it is necessary first to confront the reservations expressed repeatedly in biblical scholarship regarding the ability of the Hebrew Bible writers to conceive of time as a concept in its own right. Even if these writers did possess a concept of time, scholars have argued, it was substantially different from and possibly more limited in scope than modern-day notions of time. The present study maintains that the book of Qohelet has not sufficiently been taken into account as positive evidence in the scholarly discussions on time conception in the Hebrew Bible. Qohelet's treatment of time as an independent, relatively abstract theme is somewhat unusual when compared with the majority of the Hebrew Bible books. Yet the book's discourse on this subject nonetheless shows that meta-reflection on the theme of time was both possible and present in its cultural and literary context.

## 1. Time Conception in Biblical Hebrew

The issue of Hebrew Bible conceptions of time has primarily been discussed in linguistic terms. Therefore, even if this is more of a literary project – investigating predominantly the compositional strategies that the author of Qohelet uses to discuss the theme of time – a short, linguistically focused survey is necessary in order to validate the research question. It will be argued in the first half of this chapter that one cannot dismiss the presence of time conception in biblical Hebrew on linguistic grounds, as has sometimes

been attempted. Furthermore, it will be shown that much of the scholarly discussion on the Hebrew time conception remains dependent on intensely problematic assumptions regarding the correlation between the Hebrew lexical stock and the mindset of the language speakers. The second half of the chapter prepares the further discussion of the time-thematic in Qohelet by reviewing some important pieces of scholarship which have engaged either with this particular theme or with related themes in the book.

### 1.1. A Limited Concept of Time: The Lexical Approach

The scholarship on Hebrew time conceptions reaches from the radical assertion that there is a complete absence of any temporal concept in biblical Hebrew and ancient Judaism to the viewpoint that the biblical writers unproblematically used both abstract and concrete temporal language, and that they sometimes reflected on the concept of time as a theme in its own right. Much more prolific than the scholarship supporting either of these more extreme views, however, have been scholarly attempts to understand the Hebrew Bible depictions of time as evidence of a limited concept of time.

Initially, therefore, the view that the biblical writers had *a qualitatively different concept of time* than we do in the modern Western world – and that this Hebrew concept was to some extent more *limited* than ours – will be examined. Scholars defending this position generally accept that one finds, scattered throughout the biblical material, references to the time at which point something happens or would be appropriate – e.g. the time of harvest, or the day of death. However, many of them would question whether such statements can best be understood as statements about the subject of time. Some have

argued that, since the focus in this type of statement is often on the activity which fills a period of time, one ought perhaps to discuss them as statements about events rather than time.[1] Even if they do say something about the temporal dimension or matters of "timing", biblical statements about time are predominately concrete, the temporal terms linked closely to actual events or activities. The biblical authors – so it is argued – are seemingly unaware of time as a more general concept.

Scholarship championing this viewpoint had its hey-day especially in the 1950s and the 1960s when several prominent scholars attempted to ascertain to what extent the biblical writers were able to conceptualize and understand the notion of time. These scholars tended to establish as a fundamental part of their analysis a distinction between either concrete/abstract or linear/cyclical conceptions of time. Often they made use of a comparative approach, contrasting the Hebrew way of thinking about time with either contemporary Greek reflections on the same theme or with modern-day, Western conceptions of time. Furthermore, their analysis was, in the vast majority of cases, underpinned by a lexical approach. The assumption was that the particular time-conception of the Hebrew Bible writers was reflected in, or perhaps even predicated on their language.[2] Thus, the proponents of the lexical approach would examine the meaning of stock terms from the semantic field of time in order to extrapolate from them and their

[1] For instance, Wilch, (1969) p. 164, argues in his analysis of the Hebrew Bible's use of עת that it "was used in the OT in order to indicate the relationship or juncture of circumstances, primarily in an objective sense and only secondarily in a temporal sense…" He further argues, p. 168, that there is a particular, Hebrew way of thinking about time which ties the concept of time closely together with the concept of occasion.

[2] While basic assumptions underlying prominent contributions within this broad area of research have been fundamentally questioned, not least in James Barr's highly influential "Biblical Words for Time" (1962), a few recent scholars work along very similar lines of inquiry. One such scholar is Stern whose thesis – that the Hebrew Bible writers had, in effect, no concept of time whatsoever, conceiving instead of "temporal" matters as processes – will be examined below.

interrelationship the time-conception of the authors. As Barr states in his evaluation of the method: "It is widely believed (…) that the layout of the lexical stock of biblical Hebrew constitutes a reflection or adumbration of the theological thought of the Israelites, and thus ultimately of the actual theological realities acknowledged in that thought."[3]

One of the most well-known products of this approach is the thesis of Oscar Cullmann that biblical Judaism conceives time as an upwards sloping line, rather than a circle, while in Greek thought time is understood as an "eternal circular course in which everything keeps recurring."[4] In his analysis Cullmann compares in particular the two terms καιρός and αἰών.[5] The sharp distinction between Greek (cyclical) and biblical (linear) thinking on time, which is now largely abandoned, has been attacked on several fronts. For instance, Momigliano makes the case convincingly that cyclical depictions of time are very much present in the Old Testament in its depiction of ritual and mythical time.[6] Similarly, Barr argues in "*Biblical Words for Time*" that even if one accepts the methodological premises underlying the lexical approach of researchers such as Cullmann, the Hebrew Bible contains plenty of evidence that Hebrew cyclical time-conceptions existed.[7] Conversely, the intense preoccupation with history in the Greek

[3] Barr (1962), p. 14.
[4] Cullmann (1962) p. 52.
[5] See especially Cullmann (1962), p. 39-49.
[6] Momigliano (1966) p. 8: "The ordinary Jew who every year eats the bread his fathers ate when they left Egypt, or who obeys the ancestral call 'To your tents, O Israel' is likely to know as much about cyclical time and eternal return as a Greek of old – whatever cyclical quality we may attribute to the time experience offered by certain Greek festivals and initiations." One may further note the establishment of seasons, religious festivals, and the regular change from day to night in Genesis 1:14-18 and the promise that the cyclical, constant nature of nature's shall remain uninterrupted after the flood, Genesis 8:22.
[7] Barr (1962), p. 141.

tradition surely suggests the presence of linear conceptualization of temporal matters, alongside instances of more cyclical thinking.

Another then-popular assertion, and one which still attracts support, was that of Marsh, Wheeler Robinson and, slightly later, Wilch, who stated that because biblical Hebrew lacks a separate term to describe abstract time, this way of understanding time must have been absent in biblical time – and consequently in the Hebrew Bible writings.[8] For instance Marsh argues that the Old Testament authors understood time as "realistic time" – that is, time as distinguished by its content rather than its chronological position.[9] The Greek language, he argues, is lexically able to differentiate between these two conceptions of time. Thus, a lexical approach underpins Marsh's distinction between chronological and realistic time, as he claims that χρόνος in the New Testament

[8] See Marsh (1952), especially pp. 19-34, Wheeler Robinson (1946), especially pp. 106-112, and Wilch (1969), especially. pp. 167-169. Trocmé (1958), p. 423-424, states similarly that the biblical idea of time never reaches the level of abstract thinking and he emphasises the vagueness of what appears to be chronological ideas, like the hour or the day, in the Hebrew Bible. Muilenberg (1961), p. 235-237, also stresses the concreteness of biblical time. It should be noted that some of the central notions about Hebrew Bible time-conception, propounded by authors such as Marsh and Wheeler-Robinson, were present already in the work of von Orelli (1871). Differently than these authors, however, von Orelli argues, p. 52, that the scope of עת may be widened to a sense of "time" in general, given the absence of a Hebrew word expressing specifically the concept of time.

[9] A much newer piece of research by Zimmer (1999) reiterates this view in connection with Qohelet specifically, see especially p. 82: "Zeit war bestimmt von den Geschehen (…) Zeit wird also weniger quantitativ als qualitativ verstanden." One may also note the overview, pp. 72-75, regarding what Zimmer deems to be the three most important words for time in biblical Hebrew, יום, עת, and עולם. Zimmer states here directly, p. 72: "Ein abstracter Zeitbegriff wurde im Hebräischen nicht entwickelt." According to Zimmer, p. 84, in the biblical view, a given time is always a time *for* something. Regarding Qohelet specifically Zimmer states, p. 75: "Kohelets Zeitauffassung und seine Verwendung der Begriffe (...) sind zwar weitgehend identisch mit anderen alttestamentlichen Texten..." However, Qohelet is unique amongst the biblical authors for making "Zeit und ihre Beziehung zum Leben auf Erden" an independent theme of reflection.

corresponds to chronological time and καιρός to realistic time, καιρός being the appropriate translation of the Hebrew עת.[10]

Marsh states explicitly that his distinction between two different time-conceptions is drawn from modern speech which, he argues, maintains this duality of thought.[11] As Barr notes, however, nothing in Marsh's work indicates that he had more than one English word for time in mind – he uses "time" for both modes of thinking about time.[12] Indeed, one may ask with Barr whether it is not problematic that in a "discussion, in which so much seems to turn upon the presence or absence of words for 'time in the abstract' or 'time as quite a general notion', no one seems to have quoted an actual word in any language which always or univocally means this."[13]

Wheeler Robinson voices a similar view as Marsh, defining biblical time as concrete time.[14] He argues that "the Hebrew mind conceives time in the concrete, in its filled content, and not as an abstract idea." Like Marsh, Wheeler Robinson turns to the lexical stock to find support for this, emphasizing in particular the term עת which he takes to denote occurrence.[15] Immediately after pointing out the "concrete" connotations in the etymology and common usage of עת, however, Wheeler Robinson surveys the term עולם and curiously enough he allows this term quite a broad scope of use: it spans, he argues,

[10] Marsh (1952), p. 20. Barr (1962), especially pp. 32-44, has convincingly shown that the distinction between chronological and realistic time is not very well worked out by Marsh and that while καιρός and χρόνος display opposition in some syntactical contexts, they do not in others.
[11] Marsh (1952), p. 19.
[12] Barr (1962), p. 23.
[13] Barr (1962), p. 97. It is also worth noting the argument of Jakobson (1966), p. 235-236, that: "the grammatical pattern of a language (as opposed to its lexical stock) determines those aspects of each expression that must be expressed in the given language."
[14] Wheeler Robinson (1946) pp. 106-108.
[15] Wheeler Robinson (1946), p. 109.

from a notion of eternity, in the form of the divinity's agelessness and non-bondage to time, to denoting, in a more relative use, simply a long time or the whole of a human being's life.[16] I would suggest that such a flexible use of a temporal term demonstrates exactly such a grasp of abstract notions relating to time and temporal conditions that Wheeler Robinson found to be lacking in the Hebrew understanding of time. Furthermore, the varied use of the term עולם would seem to imply that it caused the biblical writers and their readers no problems whatsoever to use the same temporal term to describe the qualitatively different relationships which divinity, individual human beings and humanity as a collective have to time and temporality.

Barr's criticism of the lexical approach attacks especially the underlying assumption that the lexical stock "forms a pattern symmorphous with the patterns of structure of thought" among the language-speakers.[17] However, Barr argues, only a small proportion of linguistic changes within a lexical stock are traceable to the influence of distinctions within a mental-philosophical system.[18] In addition to Barr's criticism, one may note that an exhaustive exploration of the theme of time in the Hebrew Bible ought also to concern itself with issues related to genre and stylistic conventions in order to consider how these could have influenced the biblical authors' engagement with notions related to time. In the works of Marsh, Wheeler Robinson and Wilch, however, the stylistic and literary

[16] Wheeler Robinson (1946), pp. 113-115. Wheeler Robinson provides a detailed list of biblical references. Especially worth noting are the references to the divine, temporal reality in Psalm 90 and Isaiah 40:28, and the references to the "eternity" of the covenant in Gen 17:2, the Davidic kingship in 2 Sam 7:29, and regarding the totality of the individual's life span in passages such as Ex. 21:6 and Job 7:16.
[17] Barr (1962), p. 105.
[18] Barr (1962), p. 105-106.

choices made by the writers in their discussion of themes relating to time were only sparsely noted.[19]

It should be remembered too that there is in general very little meta-reflection in the Hebrew Bible. It is unsurprising that this holds true too regarding themes such as historiography, chronology, time and creation, and cultic time. However, the scarcity of meta-reflection does not warrant the conclusion that the writers did not possess, for instance, the concept of time or that their understanding of the concept was so limited that they could only apply it to concrete events and occurrences.

### 1.2. Process-Thinking

Barr's comprehensive criticism of the lexical approach which previously dominated the engagement with Hebrew conceptions of time has largely deterred this type of scholarship[20] and as a result the discussion of time in the Hebrew Bible has been in something of a hiatus. The area of study is slowly being rediscovered in biblical scholarship, however, and a few recent works attempt to grapple with the issue of time in the Hebrew Bible, taking into account or challenging the arguments of Barr.

[19] A different strategy for engaging with the presentation of the time-thematic in the Hebrew Bible could be emphasizing more broadly the challenges surrounding a characterization and comparison of various pieces of literary material. Comparative exercises within the field of literature encounter challenges also when it comes to evaluating genre, imagery, use of metaphor, and other literary characteristics of the literary works considered. The interpretative judgements made here may well impact our evaluation of philosophical conceptions found in this material. Within scholarly research on the Hebrew Bible's poetic corpus, for instance, side by side with the notion that biblical descriptions are far more concrete than those of modern, Western poets, one finds the view of Hillers (1987), p. 108, that: "Old Testament imagery is not especially "concrete," or at least that it is misleading to single this out as an especially prominent characteristic. To put it positively, Old Testament poetic imagery is remarkable for its abstractness."

[20] Wilch (1969) is one of very few scholars who, in the immediate wake of Barr's criticism of the lexical approach, attempt a discussion of Hebrew words for time. In response to Barr's work, he transfers the focus from examining only individual words in the lexical stock to discussing the time-expression עת on the level of syntax, focusing on the contexts within which the word occurs.

These recent works show clearly that the debate about time conception in the Hebrew Bible is very much alive. On the one hand one finds, for instance, an encouraging and thorough linguistic study by Brin who documents carefully the range of terms that the biblical authors use to describe issues relating to time and calendar.[21] Brin accepts as a given that there is such a thing as time conception in the Hebrew Bible and focuses his work on determining how different temporal ideas, both concrete and abstract, have been expressed by the authors of its books. At the other end of the spectrum, one encounters the position of Stern that the Hebrew Bible writers had no concept at all of time as a general notion or of a time-continuum.[22] Here the stakes are higher than ever: Stern considers the concept of time to be completely absent from the Hebrew Bible, as well as from ancient Judaism more generally.[23] He argues, instead, that the flow of time was conceived of as "processes": "reality was conceived in empirical terms, as consisting of a multitude of discrete and concrete phenomena – activities, motions, changes, and events – occurring simultaneously or in a sequence, i.e. processes."[24]

While to the modern Western mind time is such a fundamental component of reality that it seems incredible to suggest that people can "account for empirical reality, and

[21] Brin (2001). Brin only refers to 8 verses in Qohelet, none of which he discusses at length. Yet his work remains an invaluable resource for the study of how notions related to time and temporality were expressed in the Hebrew Bible and the Dead Sea Scrolls.
[22] Stern (2003), especially pp. 107-112.
[23] Stern (2003), p. 8, notes that: "The Hebrew Bible is not the intended focus on this work (…) My interest in the Hebrew Bible (…) is only to show that a process-related world-view was not restricted or original to the Judaism of later antiquity. Not only is it attested in earlier Hebrew or Israelite sources (the 'Bible'), but it was also characteristic of all the cultures of the ancient Near East (in which I include all the lands from Egypt to Babylonia)." My analysis here will, however, focus on Stern's claims regarding time in the biblical material, as well as on the basic hypothesis upon which he bases these claims.
[24] Stern (2003), p. 3.

particularly the changes and events that occur in the real world, without knowledge of and reference to the dimension of time…" Stern argues that in many pre-modern societies "reality can be described in terms of an infinity of concrete, individual processes." Our modern concept of time is *abstract*, observable reality simply being "objects engaged in certain relations which we call 'events'. Sequences of events (…) are the only concrete reality, of which time functions merely as an abstract measurement."[25]

His argument rests to a significant degree on older, ethnographic studies, especially the ethno-linguistic work of Evans-Pritchard[26] and Hallpike.[27] Hallpike links primitive time-conception to process-thinking when attempting to explain the features of this type of "pre-operational" understanding of time. He defines a pre-operational understanding of time as spatialized and process-linked, and as unable properly to coordinate duration, simultaneity, and succession.[28] Despite his rejection of Hallpike's claim that time is spatialized in primitive cultures, Stern agrees that "time in non-modern societies is concrete, embedded, and process-linked." He argues further that this has as a

[25] Stern (2003), p. 2.
[26] Evans-Pritchard's analysis forcuses on the Nuer, see Evans-Pritchard (1978). This is not the place for a detailed, linguistic discussion of the Nuer language and its capacity for expressing temporal concepts. Yet it may be worthwhile to note briefly that this language does not lack grammatical strategies to express temporal aspects, making it untenable, at least, to base an argument about the Nuer not having a concept of time on the type of Whorfian-style, linguistic analysis which will be discussed below (section 1.3 of this chapter): For instance, the Nuer language distinguishes, through the use of different particles, between the indicative mood, the potential mood, a narrative mood, a colloquial mood, a resumptive mood which "expresses the idea of: entering upon some new action, taking up an action again…" (Crazzolara, p. 137), and a continuous mood – in addition to the imperative and optative moods. Nuer has a past, a present, and a future tense. Finally, there is in Nuer a rich collection of temporal adverbs, listed in Crazzolara, p. 183, allowing the construction of sentences such as "when it has become evening it will be cool and it will (be so) until tomorrow morning and it will remain till the sun has risen." See Crazzolara (1933) for a fuller discussion of the Nuer language.
[27] Hallpike (1979), p. 346.
[28] Hallpike (1979), pp. 340-348. See especially p. 343: "The primitive grasp of time (…) is confined to the awareness of duration and succession as these are embodied in natural and social processes." And, p. 345, "in the typical primitive society there is no more awareness of 'time' as distinct from 'process than there is of 'area' as distinct from sensorily perceived expanses of land…"

consequence that "the concept of time becomes (…) redundant and unnecessary: the only concepts that are used to describe and interpret the universe are change, activity, events, and process."[29]

I would question, however, whether the ideas of process and time can be divorced so entirely from each other as Stern wishes to do. Are we able to define the concepts of process and of time in a way which is both precise and exhaustive enough to separate them completely, even within the realm of process-thinking? I struggle to think of any processes which do not have a temporal feature. Furthermore, the Hebrew writers were clearly able mentally to coordinate processes *in time*. For instance, the simultaneity of "temporal points" in different, but complementary modes of measuring processes can be asserted. An example of this is the way in which the superscription of Amos (1:1) conveys the simultaneity of the reign of king Uzziah with the reign of king Jeroboam, and with the year preceding "the earthquake" by two years. One might also point to the synchronisms in the Books of Kings. Such examples seem to suggest strongly that the Hebrew language users were well aware of the specifically *temporal* aspect of process.

Stern attempts to steer clear of a potential pitfall related to his central argument, acknowledging that it is an argument from silence. Even if the ancient Jewish authors did not reflect explicitly on the concept of time, which is Stern's main claim, this absence does not necessarily imply their inability to think about time as a general concept. Could

[29] Stern (2003), p. 16.

other explanations be found, he admits, his argument would be weakened.[30] In seeking alternative explanations, I would emphasise especially genre expectations and literary conventions: as mentioned above, the Hebrew Bible does not in general contain much meta-reflection. Furthermore, in failing to engage with the book of Qohelet Stern has missed a piece of evidence: this is a Hebrew Bible book in which reflections on time figures prominently as a theme in its own right. It takes a different form than, for instance, Aristotle's reflections on time, being of a different genre and from a different cultural and literary tradition – but in the book of Qohelet one finds exactly that discussion of time and temporal ideas which Stern claims is nowhere to be seen in the Hebrew Bible or in ancient Judaism.

Another objection which Stern tries to preempt is that "process", much like "time", is an abstract concept which serves to systematize and bring together, for example, concrete instances of temporal movement. Stern states explicitly, however, that he does not use the term "process" in that way. He considers process to be real and observable while time is not. His use of the term "process" should therefore be understood simply as shorthand for this specific way of understanding that which we consider to be temporal movement.[31] Naturally, it would undermine Stern's argument, were he to agree that in describing ancient Jewish reflections on issues such as cosmology and calendar in terms of process he has simply substituted one abstract, systematizing category for another. It is, however, extremely difficult to defend Stern's argument that "process" is an unproblematic label

[30] Stern (2003), p. 5-6. And on p. 30 he states: "Whoever rejects the argument from silence and claims that the modern concept of 'time in general' existed in early rabbinic culture has the onus of explaining why this concept is never expressed in its language…" He also argues, p. 5, that one must have positive evidence if one wants to "impose a modern idea or concept on any ancient culture…"
[31] Stern (2003), p. 3.

for the concrete reality of sequential events while "time" is not.[32] Couldn't one equally well claim that "time" can be used as a short-hand for the descriptions that connect discrete temporal phenomena found in various books of the biblical corpus?

I suggest that one of the main weaknesses in Stern's work is his very narrow *definition* of the temporal concept. Ironically, his analysis ends up doing exactly what it aims to avoid, namely imposing modern categories upon the ancient material. Stern bases his central argument on one particular, and quite narrowly defined, modern understanding of what time is as a concept and he then imports this to the ancient texts, evaluating them on the basis of their failure to engage with temporal themes as one would understand them within this specific modern framework. He considers time as a general notion equivalent to a reification of the concept of time and states: "Time is only an *abstract* measurement of processes: it is, primarily, a way of expressing how long a process is. The modern concept of time as a general category, an autonomous flow, an empty extension, or a structure and dimension of the universe, is only a generalization and synthesis of all the discrete time-measurements that can be made of the individual processes which we empirically experience. (…) Inasmuch as we tend to treat it, in modern culture, as existing and real (…) time often becomes a *reified* abstraction."[33]

It is questionable, however, whether it is valid to conclude that there is no concept of time in the Hebrew Bible, or in ancient Judaism more generally, simply because time is not

[32] It is perhaps worth mentioning too that Hebrew possesses a wealth of terms related to time, while there is no Hebrew word for "process" – an absence which Stern (2003), p. 3, accepts, but does not attempt to explain further.
[33] Stern (2003), p. 18.

treated specifically as a "reified concept." Of course, if one reserves the term "time" solely for this particular way of conceptualizing temporal categories, it is unsurprising that that term ceases to work as a description of what is happening in the biblical texts when they discuss, in other ways, issues relating to history, chronology, temporal order in creation, human temporality and so on. It seems a less than ideal solution, however, to pick another abstract concept, that of "process", and apply that instead to biblical and ancient Judaic discussions of temporal themes.[34]

### 1.3. The Whorfian Hypothesis

Stern does not explicitly acknowledge using linguistic theory in the course of his argumentation.[35] Even so, some of his statements presuppose certain, quite problematic assumptions about the linguistic properties of ancient Hebrew and their consequences for the language speakers' conceptualization of time. For instance he claims, as did also Marsh and Wheeler Robinson, that: "The absence of a concept of time in ancient Judaism is manifest (…) in the absence of a word for time (as a whole) in ancient Hebrew…"[36] He

[34] This, I would argue, happens, for instance, when Stern aims to explain the apparent emphasis within ritual law of time-keeping. He acknowledges, p. 46, that the "thesis (…) that early rabbinic culture did not conceive of time as a category or entity in itself" seems to clash with this emphasis in the ritual law – one would assume such an interest to be accompanied, implicitly, by an emphasis on time itself. However, "early rabbinic sources conceive of timing only with reference to concrete processes, such as natural phenomena and human activity. Timing can thus be defined as the *co-ordination* of activities and events; this definition is functional and cogent without any notion of 'pure' time or of the dimension of time."

[35] However, his main ethnographic case-studies rely heavily on linguistic claims. Hallpike (1979) refers repeatedly to Whorf's work, see for instance p. 346 and p. 357. Evans-Pritchard (1978), p. 103, argues that the "Nuer have no expression equivalent to "time" in our language, and they cannot, therefore, as we can, speak of time as though it were something actual, which passes, can be wasted, can be saved, and so forth. (…) Events follow a logical order, but they are not controlled by an abstract system…" While arguing against what he calls a lexical determinism, Stern (2003), p. 13, finds that Evans-Prichard rather than relying simply on lexical considerations showed "that instead of time, the Nuer thought in terms of the succession and sequences of mainly human activities."

[36] Stern (2003), p. 3. It is difficult to see how he squares that notion with the admission that Jewish writers in Hellenistic time who wrote in Greek seem to have "no trouble assimilating the Greek notion of *chronos* in their works…" (P. 9.) Surely, this speaks strongly against Stern's attempt to establish a fundamental

further suggests in connection with biblical Hebrew that "preference for aspect and modality in the verb-system of a language (…) may suggest that aspect of event and modality of statement are *conceptually* more important, to the language-users, than time of event."[37]

Neither Stern, nor the proponents of the lexical approach build explicitly on the Whorfian hypothesis, known also as the principle of linguistic relativity, but large parts of their argument run along the same lines. Whorf supposed famously that a group's thinking is shaped by their language and its capacity for conceptualizing different categories.[38] One of Whorf's own examples, around which a significant amount of discussion has centred, is the expression of temporal concepts in the Amerindian language Hopi. Whorf argued that the peculiar character of Hopi depictions of time, especially the limited, temporal vocabulary, shaped and affected aversely the Hopi-speakers' ability to conceptualize time. Hopi language contains "no words, grammatical forms, constructions or expressions that refer directly to what we call 'time,' or to past, present, or future…"[39] This means that a Hopi language speaker will have "no general notion or intuition of TIME as a smooth flowing continuum in which everything in the universe proceeds at an equal rate..."[40] The argument is remarkably similar to the one established by Stern.

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contrast between the Greek treatment of time as a category on its own and Hebrew thinking which lacked entirely this abstract concept?

[37] Stern (2003), p. 24. And p. 25: "The fuzziness or absence of a tense system in many languages may thus serve to confirm that the concept of a temporal dimension is not necessary for a cogent experience and interpretation of lived reality."

[38] As summarized, somewhat derogatively, by Deutscher (2011), p. 141, Whorf would, in his analysis of a given language, "mention an outlandish grammatical feature and then (…) conclude that this feature must result in a very different way of thinking."

[39] Whorf (1956), p. 57.

[40] Whorf (1956), p. 57. Pinker (1994), p. 63, summarizes Whorf's claim that the Hopi language speakers "did not conceptualize events as being like points, or lengths of time like days as countable things. Rather,

Aside from the fact that Whorf's data on the Hopi language specifically were questioned fundamentally by Malotki, who on the basis of a careful linguistic analysis of temporal expressions in Hopi convincingly refuted Whorf's claims regarding Hopi time conception,[41] the theory of linguistic relativity has lost much support among linguists. As Deutscher writes, the Whorfian hypothesis has "sunk into deep disrepute among respectable linguists. But there are others – philosophers, theologians, literary critics – who carry the torch regardless. One idea has proved particularly resilient to the onslaught of fact or reason: the argument that the tense system of a language determines the speakers' understanding of time. Biblical Hebrew has offered particularly rich picking" due to its "allegedly tenseless verbal system…"[42]

There are good reasons, however, to be mindful also in theology and related disciplines of the debate in linguistics concerning the flaws of the theory of linguistic relativity. The oft-quoted statement of Jakobson is telling of the shift in opinion within linguistic research: "Languages differ essentially in what they must convey and not in what they

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they seemed to focus on change and process itself, and on psychological distinctions between presently known, mythical, and conjecturally distant."

[41] Malotki (1983), p. 632, states that: "the Hopi Indians lack neither an elaborate consciousness of time nor its reflection in their speech…" He shows this by going through "hundreds of time lexemes and locutions…" (p. 632), discussing units of time, the Hopi ceremonial calendar, temporal particles and so on. Malotki also emphasizes, however, that the Hopi "sense of time, or the role that time plays in their lives and culture, does not correspond to ours. Nor would one expect the two to be identical. (…) although we detect a great deal of overlap, the influence of historical, social, religious, environmental, and other factors has definitely shaped, and is still shaping, the individual temporal needs of each group." Malotki argues more generally, p. 630, that some domains of thinking "are experienced universally by all mankind (…) One such domain is time, a fundamental experience conceptualized by every human mind and processed linguistically by all languages to some degree or other." Pinker (1994), p. 63, agrees unreservedly with Malotki's linguistic evidence.

[42] Deutscher (2011), p. 144.

may convey."[43] An example illustrating this related directly to the sphere of temporal expression could take its cue from Steiner's claim that it is significant that Hebrew lacks the framework of threefold temporality (past, present, and future) which Indo-European languages possess. Regarding this linguistic difference he suggests that the lack of a future tense may result in a different and less developed understanding of the future.[44] However, Danish, too, lacks a proper future tense – as does also German and, for that matter, English. As Deutscher asks: "when you ask someone, in perfect English prose and in the present tense, something like 'are you coming tomorrow?' do you feel your grasp of the concept of futurity is slipping?"[45]

Although Stern would not like it, it is possible to use as a second example his own analysis of one of the words for "time" in Mishnaic and late, biblical Hebrew, namely זמן. Stern admits that זמן is not devoid of conceptual meaning, but emphasizes that this meaning is not the same as " 'time' in its modern, popular sense: *zeman* is not a self-standing or 'pure' entity, a universal dimension, a flow, or a continuum. The concept of *zeman*, embracing only points in time and finite periods, is that of the 'time of things' (…) *zeman* is the measurement of the occurrence and length of processes, natural events, and human activities…"[46] While Stern claims that this renders a concept of the universal

[43] Jakobson (1966), p. 236.
[44] Steiner (1975), p. 157-158.
[45] Deutscher (2011), p. 145-146. Deutscher himself gives the following example, p. 152: "If I want to tell you in English about a dinner with my neighbor, I may not have to mention the neighbor's sex, but I do have to tell you something about the timing of the event: I have to decide whether we *dined*, *have been dining*, *are dining*, *will be dining* and so on. Chinese, on the other hand, does not oblige its speakers to specify the exact time of the action in this way, because the same verb form can be used for past, present or future actions. Again, this does not mean that the Chinese are unable to express the time of the action if they think it is particularly relevant. But as opposed to English speakers, they are not obliged to do so every time."
[46] Stern (2003), p. 29.

time-dimension unnecessary, I would argue differently that he has here successfully demonstrated not only that a temporal concept is present in the textual material which he has surveyed, but also that the ancient Hebrew-speakers had terms with which to express this concept.

What he may also have demonstrated, however, is that the semantic scope of this Hebrew word for time is not entirely identical to our English word "time." As stated by Jakobson, "on the level of interlingual translation, there is ordinarily no full equivalence between code-units…" In Jakobson's own, more prosaic example, what is signified by the English word "cheese" does not correspond completely to the Russian word for cheese.[47] It is unsurprising that this would also be the case regarding the much more complex concept expressed through the Hebrew and English words for "time", respectively. Thus, some notions which are contained in the word "time" are also present in זמן. זמן may furthermore contain potential aspects of meaning not covered by our word "time". Similarly, however, some notions connected to the word "time" may be lacking in זמן and these must and can be expressed through other, sometimes more circuitous, strategies.

The point of this argument is not to claim that there can be no connections between language and cognition, or even that the former cannot influence the latter. I agree with Deutscher who states sensibly: "When a language forces its speakers to pay attention to certain aspects of the world each time they open their mouths (…) such habits of speech can eventually settle into habits of mind with consequences for memory, or perception, or

[47] Jakobson (1966), p. 233.

associations, or even practical skills."[48] This, I would argue, is also the context in which newer, experimental studies that aim to demonstrate connections between cognitive habits and native language ought to be placed, rather than within a Whorfian framework. Again, with Deutscher, "serious researchers have looked for the consequences of the habitual use from an early age of certain ways of expression. For example, does the need to pay constant attention to certain aspects of experience train speakers to be especially sensitive to certain details?"[49] One recent, cognitive study seems to present exactly this type of investigation of language-based thinking on time: in this study by Casananto it is explored how the predominant use of descriptions relating either to linearity or mass to express periods of time in English and modern Greek, respectively, may affect the language speakers' conception of time in a simple task of estimating lengths of time. Casananto argues that perhaps especially within the realm of temporal thinking the categories of one's language affect one's conceptualization.[50]

Similarly, Lakoff has noted that time, as one of the fundamental concepts across languages, and therefore one of the concepts around which discussion about possible linguistic relativity has taken place, tend "to be grammaticized, that is, to be part of the grammar of the language. As such they are used unconsciously, automatically, and constantly."[51] However, Lakoff very helpfully distinguishes between conceptual *systems* and conceptualizing *capacity*, using as an example the Cora for whom, living in the Mexican mountains, the "basic hill shape (…) is a highly structured and fundamental

[48] Deutscher (2011), p. 152.
[49] Deutscher (2011), p. 156.
[50] Casasanto (2008), pp. 63-79. It should be mentioned that Casasanto is quite eager to salvage what can be salvaged of the Whorfian hypothesis. Yet none of his claims are anywhere near as radical as Whorf's own.
[51] Lakoff (1987), p. 308.

aspect of their constant experience. It is not only conceptualized, but it has been conventionalized and has become part of the grammar of Cora…" So while it is true that "Cora speakers may have the same conceptualizing *capacity* as we do (…) they have a different *system*, which appears to arise from a different kind of fundamental *experience* with space."[52]

To sum up the implications of the above discussion for the present study, it may well be possible to examine the *habitual use of temporal language* as it appears in the various Hebrew Bible books. One may furthermore be able to investigate, on the level of syntax, which aspects of temporal experience must necessarily be conveyed in biblical Hebrew. What one cannot claim on the basis of a linguistic analysis, however, is the inability of the Hebrew Bible authors to conceptualize and discuss the notion of time. Their native language does not impose a cognitive deficiency upon these authors. On the contrary, discussing explorations of themes related to time as they occur in the Hebrew Bible is a valid, scholarly project.

**2. Thinking on Time in Qohelet**

Above I defended the claim that investigating the theme of time in a biblical book is a valid project. Furthermore, I suggested that the discussion of temporal themes specifically in the book of Qohelet has often been neglected or missed out entirely in scholarship on Hebrew Bible time conception. The book of Qohelet, however, provides excellent material for an investigation of Hebrew Bible engagement with temporal

[52] Lakoff (1987), p. 310.

themes, including how a discussion of such themes could be structured and phrased within this cultural and linguistic context, and what it may contain.

The scholarship surveyed in *this* section does not claim that the theme of time could not, theoretically, be discussed independently in Hebrew Bible literature generally or in Qohelet specifically. From our perspective the challenge is here another, namely that many of the scholars who have engaged to some extent with the theme of time in Qohelet have had as their main focus another of the book's themes and have therefore treated its time-discourse as part of this other thematic. In fact, some of the works mentioned below never mention *time* explicitly as a theme, yet contain reflections on related themes so pertinent that they must be included here because of their relevance to an investigation of the theme of time.

Three main strands of research will be considered in this section: firstly, the discussion which centres on the potential presence of determinism in the book of Qohelet. Is Qohelet propounding claims about humanity's limited ability to act in time, as some scholars maintain, or is he more concerned with the traditional wisdom notion of each activity having its proper moment? Secondly, research on the theme of creation in Qohelet will be surveyed. Thirdly, the section will discuss some research contributions which focus on the themes of mortality and ephemerality.

### 2.1. Abstract Time and Determinism

Wheeler Robinson states explicitly about Qohelet that the time-consciousness found in this work "is as un-Hebraic as we should expect to find in a book from which the sense of history is absent. (…) His time-consciousness (…) is useful as a check on that of the Old Testament in general, by its very unlikeness to it."[53] Barr, conversely, finds that the seemingly alien character of the book's views on time must, to a significant degree, be attributed to the *explicitness* of its reflections on temporal themes.[54] In fact, Barr refers to Ecclesiastes to show that the widespread rejection of the biblical writers' ability to conceive of abstract time is erroneous.[55] He argues that if the Hebrew word for time should appear in a context which reflects on time, this demonstrates that it can be used about time in general. According to Barr עת is used in such a way in Qoh. 9:11, the language of which one must suppose was intelligible for the contemporary, Hebrew reader.[56]

Machinist goes further than Barr in his interpretation of Qohelet's reflections on time as a concept, suggesting that in order to grapple with the problem of time Qohelet begins to develop a technical vocabulary, the key feature of which is the use of words such as מקרה,

[53] Wheeler Robinson (1946), p. 121.
[54] Barr (1962), pp. 98-99.
[55] However, since Barr does not develop this argument any further, it could conceivably be turned on its head and used against him as an example of the alien character of Qohelet within the Old Testament corpus.
[56] Barr (1962) p. 98-99. Barr's view on Qoh. 9:11 is rejected by Wilch (1969), p. 116, however, who understands עת as referring to a particular occasion – death – in this verse, rather than reflecting on time in general. Thus understood, עת as used in Qoh 9:11 fits well with Wilch's general interpretation of the word as referring to an occasion, often denoting the fact of the occasion itself to a higher degree than its temporal aspect. While he acknowledges that the usage of עת in Qoh. 9:11 has a "reflective syntactic context", Wilch stresses in support of his reading that the entire context of Ecclesiastes is reflective. Against this, one may argue that Wilch's objection is only valid if עת in this context *must* mean death and could not have been understood, initially, by the contemporary reader as meaning time, necessitating a decision on the part of the reader as to what *concrete* event the abstract, unspecified עת refers to in the verse. Wilch does not make a convincing case that this must indeed be so.

חשבון, מעשׂה, and עולם to describe both the product of reasoning and the reasoning process itself:[57] "the use of miqreh, hesbon, ma'aseh, and olam suggests the new intellectual groping in Qohelet – the systematic reflective character of the book's attack on the time problem, its disciplined meditation on the implications of death for the nature of the divine order and humanity's place in that order."[58] Importantly, Machinist argues that the point of Qohelet's intellectual tests is to show the limitations of the process; and thus the limitations of reason. He notes this specifically in connection with the problem of time: human beings do not know the predetermined pattern of their lives; they have no knowledge about what survives beyond death either physically or in terms of memory and influence, and are thus unable to rely on any such survival.[59]

It is a shame, however, that Machinist does not go further to discuss what implications this ambition of Qohelet's might have: what happens, for example, when Qohelet attempts to develop a language – as well as an intellectual strategy and workable methods for story telling – about a conceptual area which must remain inaccessible to human beings? This question becomes even more pressing when one realizes that Qohelet stresses not only the *unknowability* of time and divinity, and consequently the limitations of the human intellect, but suggests also the *deceptive* character of time: human beings actually believe that they knowledge, where they have none.[60]

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[57] Whybray (1989), p. 30, is more pessimistic than Machinist regarding the language-situation of Qohelet's author, but otherwise he reasons along similar lines, suggesting that Hebrew was not at a stage of development which allowed it to express complex, subtle ideas. He gives this as a possible reason for the obscurity of Qohelet's language: the author is establishing his discourse at the very edges of his language.

[58] Machinist (1995), p. 172. In a somewhat similar manner, Fox (1993), p. 120, notes that aside from in Qohelet חכמה "is never an instrument in open-ended exploration." Only in Qohelet is חכמה also the rather abstract idea of the intellect – it is the reflection process as well as the knowledge.

[59] Machinist (1995), p. 172.

[60] See for example 1:10-11 and 8:16-17.

It is in the course of his investigation of the notion of *fate* in Qohelet that Machinist emphasises the importance of time, not simply as an independent theme in the book of Qohelet, but as an area of reflection the vocabulary and content of which help create coherence in the work. Machinist argues that the individual sections of the book are brought together as a coherent whole through the recurrence of a group of key-terms throughout the book that discuss what he calls "patterned time". Machinist's understanding of Qohelet's time-discourse puts a strong emphasis on what he perceives as its deterministic aspects. The main subject of his analysis, the word מקרה, is a case in point: translating it "fate" he argues that although this word is used only to describe the death of the human being, dying is simply the final point in a pre-planned pattern of activity for each person. A person's pattern, his מעשׂה, is under the control of God, who has predetermined its course. Machinist argues that humans can neither know their own patterns, apart from its final point, nor the wider pattern of which they are part; namely the מעשׂה of God.[61]

Differently, I would argue that Qohelet does not favour a deterministic world-view – and certainly not to the extent that the human's life is seen as following a pre-planned pattern. Human beings are portrayed as having real ability to act, the main problem being, rather, their inability to understand the way in which the temporal order influences and limits their existence. There is no compelling reason to extrapolate a doctrine about minute pre-determinism of the human life from, for instance, Qohelet's statement in 9:11-12 that

[61] Machinist (1995), p. 166-167.

"time and chance happen to them all, for humanity too does not know their time" (a statement about human ignorance regarding time and timing) – or his claim in 3:19 that human and animal have the same מקרה (a statement about death and transience). God's dominion over time is expressed in general terms by Qohelet, mainly to emphasise that the divinity is not subject to the temporal limitations of human beings, but actually wills and enforces them.[62] The divinity is described as actively intruding in the human life in time mainly when hindering humanity's understanding of the problematic cosmic order.[63]

As an alternative to the view that Qohelet propounds determinism, other scholars have suggested that the book's author builds on the traditional wisdom notions about the proper moment – the idea being that every activity has its auspicious time, and that this timing can be discerned by the wise. Some researchers argue that Qohelet comments on this idea in a way which is, to a large extent, at peace with the wisdom tradition: for instance, Schultz finds that Qohelet affirms the doctrine about the proper moment and that – to the extent that human beings are able to discern them – the rhythms of life can be evaluated as good.[64]

Seeking to show that almost all of the occurrences of עת in the book develop or illustrate the doctrine of the proper moment, Schultz argues that the proper moment is presented as

[62] For example 3:14.15, 6:10-12, 7:13-14.
[63] In a similar vein, de Jong (1997), p. 162-163, argues that although pericopes in Qohelet which focus on God's judgement would seem to presuppose humanity's ability to determine their own destiny, even these texts remain pessimistic about humanity's capacities. Instead, they aim to limit the human tendency to transgress moral limits. Wallis (1995), p. 321, stresses humanity's inability to set the "jeweilige Zeit". Despite all human ability and planning, one must accept that only that which God decides will happen and that only God knows the time of any event. As a consequence, humanity does not hold their own time and destiny in their hands. The criticism of Machinist's argument affects the theses of these scholars too, as well as the argument of Rudman (2001) which will be discussed below in chapter 4.
[64] Schultz (2005), p. 260-262.

something humanity *can* recognize.[65] He does also note, however, that to some extent Qohelet portrays human beings as ignorant: we cannot always know the right time for a given activity and may have to act while still unaware of what it would be appropriate to do. Furthermore, humanity is ignorant regarding the future and unable to comprehend the work of God, since the divine work, contrary to human beings, is of lasting character. The consequent human reaction should be reverence; motivated by the recognition that God is sovereign over time and able to transgress its limitations completely.[66] While not understanding עת as denoting necessarily the proper moment for a specific human choice or action, Wilch promotes a related interpretation: in his view Qohelet describes עת as a God-given occasion with which humans should attempt to live in accordance, accepting the limits that such divinely ordered times impose on their existence.[67]

Conversely, other researchers argue that Qohelet sees the doctrine of the proper moment as both restrictive and problematic.[68] Fox, for instance, finds that if all events have a time in which they will occur, then this makes humanity unable to change the course of events – meaning that our toil and effort cannot be appropriately rewarded.[69] Along similar lines, scholars have often interpreted the poem in Qohelet 3:1-8 as reducing the significance of human actions to nothing, since every action will always be balanced by

[65] Schultz generally evaluates the human intellectual capacity positively, as does also Kronholm in his interpretation of Qohelet's use of the doctrine about the proper time: according to Kronholm (1999), p. 59-60, in every moment one single activity is laid before the human being so that he, if he seeks it, can find it and make good use of it. Although this reading fits well with the understanding of time in 3:1-8 it must ignore largely Qohelet's challenge of this understanding in 3:9ff.
[66] Schultz (2005), p. 264-266.
[67] Wilch (1969), pp. 117-128, see especially p. 128.
[68] Generally, these researchers also stress the divergence between the viewpoint in 3:9ff and that in 3:1-8.
[69] Fox (1989), p. 191. In this work Fox proposes a reading of the poem as highly deterministic. However, he suggests a more moderate interpretation in his later commentary (1999), a reading which will be discussed in chapter 4.

its counterpart. The consequence, noted for instance by Good, is that, ironically, human beings cannot come out ahead by acting responsibly and choosing the appropriate action.[70] The view of Zimmer is similar, but focuses more specifically on the temporal dimension of the order sketched in 3:2-8: stressing the impermanent character of human existence, he finds that the "Wechsel der Zeiten alles Bleibende verhindert."[71] It is the lack of permanence, then, Zimmer argues, that Qohelet finds so very problematic. Regarding the problem of the human non-understanding of time he states, however, that it "wird zusätzlich deutlich, daß der fehlenden Einsicht in die Zeiten keineswegs jenes überwältigende Gewicht zukommt, das ihr oft zugemessen wird."[72] Frydrych understands the poem in 3:1-8 as describing the divinely established equilibrium of the world order: "Within this equilibrium every single positive event has its corresponding negative counterpart and this pairing ensures that no substantial and lasting accomplishment is possible in the course of the human life."[73] To ensure that human beings do not become able to disrupt this equilibrium God has limited the human, intellectual capacities. [74] Thus, the world is not fully understandable.[75]

### 2.2. Creation and Time

Schubert's *"Schöpfungstheologie bei Kohelet"* touches repeatedly on the theme of time in the course of its discussion of Qohelet's creation theology. While the temporal

[70] Good (1965) p. 185.
[71] Zimmer (1999), p. 86. Although Schultz' evaluation of the human situation is much more positive than Zimmer's, he also suggests that Qohelet's main problem may well be the temporal character of human effort. Schultz, p. 266.
[72] Zimmer (1999), p. 6.
[73] Frydrych (2002), p. 44
[74] Fredericks (1993), p. 56, emphasizes God's intention to ensure the cyclicality of human events, as in the rest of the created order, but in Fredericks' reading this does not bring humankind and God into conflict with each other.
[75] Frydrych (2002), p. 48.

dimension of creation is emphasized several times in Schubert's work, it remains, however, secondary to and interpreted through the theme of creation. In addition, since time is only investigated in so far as it relates to Schubert's main theme of creation, some of the assertions made regarding the theme of time in Qohelet would benefit from being discussed more fully on their own terms.

Schubert accentuates the importance of the time thematic in Qohelet. This is in itself far from a given, even within discussions of creation in the book. His main achievement in relation to the book's time-discourse, however, is his convincing demonstration of the manner in which Qohelet considers humankind to be at the mercy of the world's temporal structure. Thus, Schubert notes that while Qohelet makes use of epistemological methods which come from traditional wisdom, his results do not correspond with tradition. This divergence, he argues, is caused by Qohelet's experience of the "unverfügbare Zeit", the uncontrollable or unavailable time. Schubert then perceptively notes that it is Qohelet's basic world view which creates his epistemological problems: Qohelet believes that everything which happens in the world moves in an eternal cycle of coming into being and dying away – there is, as Qohelet states early on, nothing new under the sun. According to Schubert this world-view leaves Qohelet in a situation in which he "nicht mehr über seine Zeit verfügt, sie deshalb auch nicht gestalten kann, ihr ausgeliefert ist und als ihr Gefangener seine eigenen Entwicklungsfähigkeiten radikal reduzieren muß auf den Augenblick, wo die Zeit Lebensgenuß bereithält."[76]

[76] Schubert (1989), p. 120.

To Qohelet, this awareness of the human ”Zeitgebundenheit” has a drastic effect. Time becomes significantly less accessible to the human mind.[77] Schubert states: “Die Dimension der ganzen Zeit, die in weiten Teilen der alttestamentlichen Weisheit den Menschen in eine sinnhalfe Beziehung zur Geschichte stellt und die im Kontext des Begriffes עולם (…) anzusehen ist, verdichtet sich bei Kohelet praktisch auf die Lebensdauer eines Menschen.”[78]

While this remains the actual, existential situation of humanity, however, the wise has nonetheless been filled with an awareness of time and history, creating a conflict between the vast, intellectual task set before him and his cognitive ability. The wise cannot understand anything beyond the eternal cyclicality which keeps imposing oblivion upon humankind. Qohelet consequently experiences a tension between his structural, communicative efforts to gain understanding and his experience of human finitude. Thus, there is in the book a “durchziehende Spannung von prinzipiellen Erkenntnissetzungen und kommunikativen Erkenntnisbemühungen, von Zeitverfallenheit und Zeitgebundenheit, von Sinnlosigkeit und Sinnsuche…”[79]

[77] Schubert (1989), p. 122.
[78] Schubert (1989), p. 121. And on p. 122 he notes: “Damit kritisiert Kohelet jene Geschichtvorstellung von einer Welt des Schalom und der Zedaqa, wie sie in weiten Teilen des Alten Testaments beschrieben wird. Seine Kritik richtet sich auch gegen die Geschichtsauffassung der funktionierenden Weisheit, deren Ansicht nach die Stabilität der menschlichen Ordnungsgefüge durch die Tradierung erprobter Verhaltensmuster gewährleistet ist, und setzt ihr seine Erfahrung vom gleichen Geschick aller entgegen.” On p. 123 he notes further that within the temporal framework of Qohelet it is impossible, when situated in the middle of history, to speak “von der Verklammerung von Anfang, Gegenwart und Zukunft” as is done, for instance, in the Priestly account. It is highly interesting that Schubert here sketches some points of conflict between Ecclesiastes and the implied understanding of temporal reality in other Hebrew Bible traditions and books.
[79] Schubert (1989), p. 124.

It is especially helpful that Schubert draws attention to the connection between time's rule over human beings and the limited cognitive powers allowed humanity by Qohelet. This dynamic movement in the book between the basic (temporal) conditions of humankind and their attempt to gain wisdom is an important key to Qohelet's presentation of time.[80]

I agree with Schubert that Qohelet's God is depicted to a significant degree in terms of creation. Yet I am wary of the notion that the book's time thematic can be seen simply as a corollary of its interest in creation. For instance, the sovereignty of God, in temporal as well as other matters, is explored also aside from creation. Time and humanity's temporal conditions are investigated across a wide range of themes in the book. Of at least equal importance as the creation theme is that of cognition.[81] The basic set-up of time is presented together with the every-day experience of time and in both cases it is the human (non-)understanding of time that is emphasized.

Differently than Schubert, Kamano does not focus on time specifically, but temporal conditions remain a necessary backdrop to his main theme of cosmology. Kamano stresses especially the clash between human life-expectations and the cosmic realities which Qohelet outlines in two of the book's poetic sections, 1:4-11 and 3:2-8. Kamano considers these texts the cosmological basis for Qohelet's pedagogical endeavour, suggesting that 1:4-11 and 3:2-8 form the book's cosmological ethos: every potential gain

[80] Schubert (1989), especially pp. 121-124.
[81] The themes of time and cognition occur together again and again, for instance 1:10-11, 2:18-19, 3:10-11, 3:18-21, 5:18-19, 6:10-12, 7:10, 7:13-14, 8:16-17, 9:11-12, and 11:5. Whereas very few of these passages invoke the idea of creation as a main theme, all of them knit together reflections upon the ongoing temporal reality, maintained by God, and humanity's attempt to engage cognitively with this reality.

of humanity must be measured against Qohelet's presentation of the world order in these two texts.[82] With this cosmological ethos as his backdrop, Qohelet repeatedly questions his "personal ethos" as he moves through his autobiographical account – and through this questioning he also draws into doubt the reader's immediate expectations to what constitutes worthwhile living.[83] Kamano argues that this de-construction of expectations is undertaken in order to advise the reader on better ways to live in the world as it is.[84]

Kamano's reading is helpful, in the first place, because he recognises that Qohelet's sketch of cosmic realities, as well as of universal human conditions, has an effect upon the book's further discussion of human life. In addition to this, Kamano's definition of the initial poem as "cosmology" helps draw out the importance of the time-thematic in this poem, even if this is not Kamano's primary focus. Seeing the initial poem as a cosmology furthermore allows Kamano to accord importance to the description of humanity's place in the cosmos and to use this as a key to Qohelet's further presentation. Thus, for instance, Kamano analyses the royal fiction as an elaborate deconstruction of the king's privileged position vis-à-vis wisdom, wealth and royalty based on the cosmological ethos discovered in 1:4-11.[85]

[82] Kamano (2002), p. 93, focuses on the text in 1:4-11 as presenting the basic cosmos within which human life is lived. However, he does not stress the theme of time specifically. Rather, the two main constraints on human life found in the book's cosmological ethos-texts are, according to Kamano, in 1:4-11 a negation of human expectations to gain everlasting surplus from royalty, wisdom and wealth, and in 3:2-8 a realization of humanity's limitations in terms of controlling what happens on earth. This point is made especially strongly in Kamano (2002), p. 105.
[83] Kamano (2002), p. 92. Interpreters often state that Qohelet in his examination of human life suggests a more realistic approach to humanity's life-conditions than, for instance, traditional wisdom. The innovative aspect in Kamano's work is therefore especially the focus on the poems in 1:4-11 and 3:2-8 as the cosmological basis for the rest of the book.
[84] Kamano (2002), p. 246.
[85] Kamano (1998), p. 421-424, and (2002), p. 56-69.

However, I would argue that Kamano does not acknowledge just how radically Qohelet reacts to his own statements on this topic of the created order. Although Kamano rightly appreciates that Ecclesiastes from 1:12 onwards explores human life as it is lived within the constraints of the cosmic order of 1:4-11 (and, I would add, 12:1-7), he underestimates how problematic the temporal order described in 1:4-11 is for Qohelet's further efforts: rather optimistically, he suggests that at opportune moments Qohelet shifts from a more deconstructive mode towards giving constructive advice on how to live in the world of 1:4-11 and 3:2-8. "Qoheleth repeats the following sequence (…): presentation of his personal ethos, deconstruction of his personal ethos, deconstruction of certain aspects of human activities, and presentation of a lifestyle that can cope with such a deconstruction either in forms of statements or exhortations."[86] This is the most problematic aspect of Kamano's reading: his assumption that Qohelet accepts without question the viewpoint of 1:4-11 (and 3:2-8), spending the rest of his book constructively aligning common, human expectations to the realities presented in these texts. But Qohelet does not simply accept that which is presented in 1:4-11. He struggles against the consequences of the temporal realities presented here throughout the text, as an acceptance of them would render large parts of his own project impossible and absurd.

Furthermore, Kamano is also keen to maintain that Qohelet does not deconstruct wisdom totally: according to him, Qohelet maintains the authority of wisdom as a means to understanding and reflecting upon human affairs, for instance in terms of cosmology.[87] I would argue differently that Qohelet destabilizes wisdom quite radically when he claims

[86] Kamano (2002), p. 242.
[87] Kamano (1998), p. 424.

that human beings cannot know their situation in time and that they have no real knowledge of God's organization of the structured world; as he suggests already in 1:9-11. His is not a simple strategy of applying a cosmology to various human expectations in order to modify these where necessary. Instead, Qohelet is hard at work trying to find modes of investigation and presentation that will allow him to overcome human limitations and uncover the hidden, temporal realities of his life.

While Kamano allows the book a repetitive style of argumentation, he nevertheless finds that the pedagogical goal of Qohelet is to identify for the reader a way of life which can cope with the world as presented in 1:4-11 and 3:2-8.[88] However, it is difficult to find any clear indications in the text that Qohelet, as the book progresses, gets closer to establishing a personal ethos that can withstand the world as presented in 1:4-11. From the viewpoint of pedagogy, which is Kamano's main focus, it must surely also be problematic that the constructive advice of Qohelet is not given the last word in the book. Qohelet does not simply conclude by formulating a constructive, joy-centred ethos. After exhorting the young man in 11:9-10 to joy, and to fear of God, he returns in 12:1ff to his initial exploration of the basic conditions of human life, and this time with a very strong emphasis on the death of the individual. The constructive exhortations stand, even here, side by side with a very dire depiction of the human situation in time. And it is the reflection on human mortality which is allowed to close the text.

[88] One might also ask why, if searching in Ecclesiastes for texts with a cosmological scope, Kamano has chosen to focus only on 1:4-11 and 3:2-8 as his basic ethos-texts. Why exclude 12:1-7? Why does Kamano not credit this text with equal importance as 1:4-11, choosing only 3:2-8 as the second expression of the book's cosmological ethos? This interpretative choice is made all the more curious because of the substantial parallels between 1:4-11 and 12:1-7. One might wonder whether Kamano's choice has, at least in part, to do with his keenness to demonstrate a pedagogical strategy in the text which is dependent on a (repeated) development towards constructive advice.

### 2.3. Mortality and Ephemerality

In the view of Qohelet, nothing remains after death. As Berger states it, in this book "all progress is negated by the unavoidable fact of human finitude."[89] It is often remarked that Qohelet rejects traditional ways of dealing with the issue of mortality – Schubert connects this directly with the author's use of the time thematic as he mentions, however briefly, that Qohelet is forced to reject any view of history which will place humankind unproblematically in the midst of passing time.[90]

In her work on the theme of death in Qohelet, Burkes argues regarding the conception of death found generally in the Hebrew Bible that: "The Israelites had practically no notion of an afterlife for the individual because of their finely honed sense of the people's survival in general under God's guidance; community continuity provided comfort in the face of death."[91] However, in Qohelet "death makes its entrance into the Hebrew traditions as a phenomenon to be reckoned with. (…) The symbolic immortalities offered elsewhere in the Bible, the memory and endurance of a good name, survival through one's children and people, even the qualitative good life that negates the 'death' of folly and unrighteousness, fail utterly in Qoheleth's opinion."[92] Burkes considers death the main theme of the book and argues that Qohelet in his reflections never strays very far from this theme.[93]

[89] Berger (2001), p. 146.
[90] Schubert (1989), p. 123.
[91] Burkes (1999), p. 31.
[92] Burkes (1999), p. 75.
[93] Burkes (1999), p. 59.

Regarding the possible objection that Qohelet does not question the appropriateness of death per se, Burkes argues sensibly that "he does not explicitly question the appropriateness of anything. (…) It does not even occur to him to rail against God or demand explanations, because his God would not answer."[94] Part of Burkes' thesis is that Qohelet's attitude to death is similar to other responses to mortality contemporary to his book, for instance in Egypt, and that their unease about mortality and its traditional, societal responses can be connected to changes in the general religious environment.[95] She notes that Qohelet's attitude responds to an "atmosphere of distress, confusion, and chaos" which was set off initially through the exilic experience.[96]

Regarding the failure of memory, Burkes suggests in a footnote that the statements regarding humanity's ignorance about what will come after them "really make every individual an isolated being: one is cut off from the past and from the future by the inability of human knowledge to extend in either direction."[97] I would argue that the problem of mortality must be considered also through the broader lens of the book's time-thematic in order for us to properly understand the implications of human death as a theme in Qohelet. Yet I agree with Burkes that death is consistently presented by Qohelet as highly problematic, and especially because of concomitant oblivion and the isolation of the individual in the present which is effected by this.

[94] Burkes (1999), p. 78.
[95] Burkes (1999), p. 118-119 and 240.
[96] Burkes (1999), p. 118.
[97] Burkes (1999), p. 52.

Differently, Fredericks argues that Qohelet does not actually view death as a penetrating threat. Rather, it is simply a basic condition which human beings must necessarily contemplate. Fredericks even suggests that death is presented as a form of consolation for the wise who does not have to devise ways of avoiding it. Connecting his argument to the notion of the proper moment Fredericks argues that death, just like any other event, has its appropriate timing from the perspective of God and he emphasizes that death is included among those events that God has made beautiful in their time.[98] In Fredericks' view, Qohelet deals with death by balancing it with the enjoyment of life, arguing that the value of life is to be found not in its length but in its joy.[99] While emphasizing transience as a universal condition, Fredericks also cautions the reader to keep the notion of הבל, which he translates "transience", separate from notions of futility, emptiness and meaninglessness.[100]

Fredericks' emphasis on transience is helpful, and many passages (such as, for instance 9:7-10 and 5:17-19) will support his understanding that Qohelet describes the human condition as limited in duration, yet does not empty life of true, though temporary, value. However, I would argue against Fredericks' reading that it can only poorly account for passages such as 2:18-23, 6:12, and 9:2-5 in which death is presented as immensely problematic. Here mortality and oblivion even affect and render impossible any present joy and life-fulfillment. I am also unable to agree with his claim that humanity's

[98] Fredericks (1993), p. 37, finds that the rhetorical function of 3:1-8 is to console. The poem is Qohelet's presentation of different activities as "measured events with only temporary appropriateness." I would emphasize, however, that there are tensions between 3:1-8 and its immediate context, and that, consequently, problems occur when 3:1-8 and 3:9ff are read as a unit with one, unified viewpoint.
[99] Fredericks (1993), p. 37-41.
[100] Fredericks (1993), p. 47.

temporality does not bring us into conflict with the divinity who occupies a different temporal reality.[101] The divinity who is not subject to the same temporal limitations as human beings are, but who has established and maintains these very limitations – including hindering a proper, human understanding of our life-conditions – is an intensely problematic figure in the book of Qohelet. The relationship between human and God has dwindled almost into nothingness in this biblical book (see for instance 5:2, 6:10, and 9:1-2).

This would also be my response to Wallis whose interpretative case is similar to that of Fredericks. Like Fredericks, Wallis admits the radical difference between the human and the divine temporal reality: "In diesem Sinne scheint sich das Bewusstsein Gottes von dem der Menschen zu unterscheiden. Der Mensch verfügt nicht über, beherrscht nicht die Ewigkeit, die Langzeit."[102] Yet, also like Fredericks, Wallis argues that this limitation does not pain Qohelet or persuade him to propose resignation. Rather, Qohelet suggests a "Sicheinfügen in den von Gott gesetzen Rahmen", acting and living joyfully in the time given us to do so.[103]

Above I have presented a brief literature review of the state of scholarship regarding themes related to time in the book of Qohelet. This has readied the ground for my own discussion of the theme of time in the book by suggesting, firstly, that this broad area of scholarship is very much alive and that the book of Qohelet provides fertile ground for

[101] Fredericks (1993), p. 38, finds that Qohelet is "committed to the unquestionable goodness, the impeccable virtue of God", offering this as a consolation in the grimmest face of humanity's temporal existence, death.
[102] Wallis (1995), p. 320.
[103] Wallis (1995), p. 323.

scholarship on the time-thematic. Secondly, it is striking that much of the scholarship which touches upon the theme of time in this book does not have this theme as its main focus – rather, such topics as determinism, creation, and mortality have attracted rather more scholarship. This corpus of academic work provides an excellent resource for further work on time in Qohelet, but also suggests that such further work is necessary and that an extended analysis of the theme of time in this book may fruitfully be undertaken.

# Chapter 2: Structure, Composition, and Date

*"Now a book lives as long as it is unfathomed. Once it is fathomed it dies at once. It is an amazing thing, how utterly different a book will be, if I read it again after five years. Some books gain immensely, they are a new thing. They are so astonishingly different, they make a man question his own identity."* (D. H. Lawrence, Apocalypse)

In this thesis Ecclesiastes is treated as one composition with only a few later additions.[104] It is assumed that the discourse on the theme of time can be analysed as a whole, albeit a whole in which tensions and contradictions are embedded. However, before attempting an exegetical analysis of the time-discourse, a brief discussion of the book's structure, compositional history, and date is essential. This is especially the case because, as is often emphasized, contradiction and inconsistency can be found at the very core of this book.

## 1. Contradiction and Broken Structure: Can Ecclesiastes be Read?

More than any other feature of this literary work, its contradictory, unresolved nature has irked its academic readers. Much ink has been spilled debating whether it is even conceivable that a third-century author would have been able to write a work so dominated by contradiction.[105] The most frequent judgement in the first half of the twentieth century was that this was unlikely. Seeking to explain the character of the book

[104] I agree with the vast majority of scholars that 1:1 and the epilogue in 12:9-14 have been added secondarily to the original book. The case for 7:27 being secondary is also strong, even if this assumption is not absolutely necessary: the switch to third-person narration sits uneasily in the context and must fulfill a specific function within the book's narrative strategy, be a mistake or indicate later redaction.
[105] A short discussion on the dating of the book of Qohelet will follow below in chapter 2, section 3.

as we now have it, researchers therefore argued that Ecclesiastes must have gone through a fairly extensive process of redaction. McNeile, for instance, suggested an elaborate compositional scheme.[106] Initially, he assumed, a representative for traditional wisdom added proverbial material to the original book. While some proverbs were supplied in order to correct problematic tenets of Qohelet's thought, others appear to have been inserted at random. This first redactor also authored the epilogue in 12:11ff.[107] A second redactor, a *hasid*, attempted to bring the book into line with mainstream religious views, adding material centred on the duty of fearing God, as well as on God's judgement upon those who fail to do so.[108] Finally, a third redactor added 1:1 and possibly the first part of the epilogue, 12:9-10.[109]

If this reconstruction is correct, however, one may well feel that the redactors have not been very successful. In many passages they have failed in creating a flawless whole – the book has quite manifestly not been transformed into an orthodox piece of work.[110] Instead irreconcilable tensions have been introduced in the material, threatening to consume the message of both author and redactor(s). Equally well, though, one could argue that occasionally the text fits together so effortlessly that, as Barton states about Qohelet 11:9-12:14, "it is hard to feel much confidence that one really is reconstructing

[106] This scheme is a simplification of C. Siegfried´s which operates with no less than six different layers of redaction. Barton (1996) p. 63-64.
[107] McNeile (1904) p. 22-23.
[108] McNeile (1904) p. 24.
[109] Barton (1996) p 64.
[110] A further, useful caution is given by Newsom (2003), p. 16, who argues convincingly that accounts of compositional history to some extent remain *heuristic fictions*, rather than unproblematic, historical reconstructions. More than anything else, they offer ways to read the book which, if successful, solve problems which plague other reading-models.

an earlier stage in the history of a text, when the finished product reads so smoothly."[111] It is a more unambiguous argument against McNeile's hypothesis that the sceptical evaluations of the presumed original author are often given the final word.[112] McNeile may have noticed this complication himself when he comments that the *hasid*-redactor has added his correctives directly to Qohelet's own remarks, at times even separating different clauses of an argument in the process.[113] One might also ask why the redactor would at all wish to preserve such problematic statements as, for instance, 8:9-10 and 14, or indeed the original book itself.[114]

The reader's evaluation of this kind of redaction-critical approach to the book of Qohelet will inevitably be connected to her or his understanding of its genre and what literary traits are expected and permissible within the genre boundaries. Barton writes that "we are confronted with the question how this work should be read, and hence with the question of genre (...) Scholars who take the work to be substantially unified do not see any great problem in a book that contains both radical questioning of traditional religious values and more or less unquestioning acceptance of them…"[115] Barton notes the presence of such contradiction, though to a lesser extent, in the book of Proverbs. One could add that the book of Job – though aided in its presentation of differing voices and opinions by its character as a dialogic text – demonstrates a similar tolerance of contradiction. A useful extra-biblical example of a text with an undeniably contradictory

[111] Thus Barton (1996), p. 73.
[112] Fox (1989), p. 24-25.
[113] McNeile (1904), p. 24.
[114] Fox (1989), p. 25.
[115] Barton (1996) p. 64-65.

character is the *Babylonian Dialogue of Pessimism*[116] which consistently presents opposite viewpoints only to affirm them both. The *Dialogue* too engages critically with traditional wisdom, albeit with different conclusions than Ecclesiastes.[117] Finally, while not dominated as explicitly by tensions as either Ecclesiastes or the *Dialogue of Pessimism*, it is worth noting that it appears unproblematic for the author of the *Standard Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh*[118] to bring together his frustrated reflections on death and ephemerality with an invitation to enjoy life as it has been given to human beings, as well as with exhortations to submit to the will of the gods.[119] On a more general level, Newsom notes in connection with her analysis of Job the limitations to our understanding of ancient texts and their exploitation of genre expectations, as well as their use of intertextuality. Knowing only part of the literary corpus and not sharing the same cultural background as the ancient reader we cannot fully "appreciate how a particular text may be commenting upon or inflecting the generic repertoire."[120]

If Ecclesiastes is to be read as a literary whole, one must consider how best to approach its contradictions. Newer readings often deem them integral to the book's composition.[121] One benefit of this approach is its recognition that the book's contradictions and inconsistencies are built deeply into its literary fabric. For example, individual pieces of imagery are used contrastingly in different sections (such as, for example, צל in 6:12 and

[116] See Lambert's translation and commentary (1960), pp. 139-149, and Foster's (2005), pp. 923-926.
[117] Greenstein (2007), pp. 55-65, compares the two works explicitly, focusing on their use of irony and humour.
[118] See George (2003) for translation and commentary.
[119] Brown (2000), p. 2-7.
[120] Newsom (2003), p. 15. See both pages 14-15 for her discussion of this.
[121] For instance Berger (2001) and Fox (1989).

7:12). Numerous pericopes are consistent when read on their own, but prove incompatible with other sections of the book.[122]

The strategy of some interpreters has been to suggest that the contradictions in Ecclesiastes are not as stark as would initially appear. For instance, Greenstein engages with Qohelet's contradictory statements about the value of wisdom by arguing that although Qohelet attacks wisdom harshly and demonstrates that its teachings form a corpus of largely contradictory advice, he still assigns it a relative, practical value.[123] Such an approach to the contradictions in the book would attempt to reconcile them through harmonization of the material.[124] Unfortunately, however, the textual evidence does not readily support this kind of systematizing effort. For instance, Greenstein's analysis is problematic because wisdom is presented as partially valid (9:18), universally valid (2:13, 8:12b-13) *and* as being without value at all (2:14b-15, 6:8). When Qohelet presents a viewpoint as true, only to affirm the opposite viewpoint as well, this does not reconcile the two views. Rather, it highlights the discrepancy between them.[125]

Nonetheless, Qohelet's readers often emerge from the reading experience with the impression that the book has a sense of unity to it – despite the contradictory style of the

[122] Such as 2:1 and 2:10, 8:5-6 and 9:1-2. The book also abounds in internally inconsistent passages like 8:10-14.
[123] Greenstein (2007), p. 64.
[124] Worth mentioning in this context is also Hertzberg (1932), p. 7, who argues that Qohelet structures his arguments in Zwar-aber Aussagen, presenting viewpoints which appear to be true and then modifying them in what we may mistake for contradictory statements. Loader's thesis (1979) that the book is ordered through a presentation of polar opposites is another example of this type of research.
[125] See in this connection the argument of Fox (1989), p. 21-22, regarding Hertzberg's harmonization of the text. Fox argues, p. 22, such an analysis is only helpful if Qohelet does not "fully accept both of the contradictory propositions." In many cases, however, Qohelet seems to accept equally both of the contradictory propositions.

author whose argument seems barely to progress during the book. Unquestionably, there is, for instance, a high degree of continuity in the language used throughout the book.[126] Furthermore, reflection on a key-group of themes and ideas recurs in different sections of the book which returns repeatedly to the same group of questions. Despite the presence of tensions and discontinuities in the work it is relatively easy to list its main concerns: the workings of the temporal order and the human understanding of this; the human cognitive capacity more broadly conceived; toil, enjoyment; mortality; history and oblivion; the character and value of wisdom; righteousness and its potential rewards.

Some scholars even argue that it is possible to identify a carefully worked-out structural scheme in the work. Examples of this kind of scholarship include, for instance, Wright's work "The Riddle of the Sphinx" and Rousseau's thesis that the book of Qohelet consists of seven cycles within a chiastic frame.[127] The underlying assumption here is that the book of Qohelet is not as unstructured and disordered as it initially seems. Rather, the careful scholar is able to navigate through the apparent chaos – as if it were a particularly tricky riddle to be solved – and recognise beneath it a meticulous structural scheme.[128] However, the book of Qohelet does not yield easily to such attempts at systematization. As Fox has aptly stated, the structural schemes proposed generally only seem to persuade

[126] In "Words Typical of Qohelet" (1998), p. 39, Schoors argues on the basis of frequency of certain words that "Qohelet seeks to attain to a critically sound vision (ראה) on everything that happens (היה), but always centred on human existence (אדם), i.e. everything that happens and is done is judged on its value for humanity and human beings individually (טוב). The fact that אלהים, "God", is the next most frequent words shows that this philosophical preoccupation has a strong component of theodicy."

[127] Wright, (1968), pp. 313-334. Rousseau (1981), pp. 200-217.

[128] Newsom (1995), p. 187, notes that "attempts to find overall structure are attempts to control meaning in the book by establishing a sort of thematic hierarchy. (…) This persistent effort to argue for a structure governing the production of meaning shows how anxious this book makes many modernist critics. Here, perhaps, is an issue to which literary critics schooled in postmodern thought might suggest some alternative ways of thinking about the heterogeneity of the book."

their respective authors.[129] It is also problematic that these structural schemes have to be fairly heavy-handed if they are to fit the fragmentary discourse into detailed models. Krüger – although proposing a structural model of his own – freely admits that "the structural signals in the text are too vague and ambiguous" for any one structural model to be designated "correct".[130]

While attempts to tease out a more or less well-camouflaged, detailed structural scheme have not been particularly successful, scholarly readers now discuss with increasing frequency the ordering of the material on a macro-level, suggesting that its elements of contradiction, repetition and lack of progression may in and of themselves form part of the message which the author is trying to convey to his readers. Thus, though the search for a detailed structural scheme has desisted, what remains is a heightened sensitivity to the function of whatever structural elements may be present in the book and what their function could be in relation to its message and content. As Fox states: "A literary or rhetorical structure should not merely 'be there'; it must *do* something. It should guide readers in recognizing and remembering the author's train of thought..."[131]

I favour this general approach which I expect to be helpful for the understanding of several, quite different, aspects of the book's compositional set-up. For instance, it is an important starting point for an interpretation of Ecclesiastes to recognise that it is a

[129] Fox (1999), p. 148. While he does not include Wright's proposal in this evaluation, he does, however, proceed to attack Wright's model as well.
[130] Krüger (2004), p. 6.
[131] Fox (1999), p. 148.

jumble of different genres – in this literary work poetry, proverbs and narrative[132] intermingle. As Newsom notes concerning the genre changes in the book of Job, a reader will have expectations of each genre he encounters, and such expectations allow the author to "create rhetorical effects by minimizing, exaggerating, or thwarting a generic feature."[133] When the author makes use of several genres, the reader is led from one set of genre expectations to another. While we cannot know with certainty whether Qohelet's author does indeed play around with his reader's expectations in this manner, it is a possibility which a reading that looks at the book's structure on a macro-level will be able to discuss. Conversely, as Newsom argues, such a use of genre is something which has rarely been picked up upon sufficiently in historical-critical reading which "had no theory of the whole, no way to account for the purpose or effect of the juxtaposition of genres and styles."[134]

It is also clearly true that the book of Qohelet is not structured stringently so as to present a well-ordered argument which, after the discussion of a number of issues, moves on to a conclusion. Rather, this book mixes statements of observation, reflection and conclusion throughout.[135] The issue is further exacerbated by the contradictory character of this work on its content-level, as it is difficult to ascertain towards which viewpoints or conclusions the author would want his reader to be sympathetic. Here too, a discussion of macro-

[132] In "A Time to Tell" (1998) Christianson argues comprehensively that Ecclesiastes contains the necessary narratological criteria to constitute a narrative text, an analysis of the book which will be discussed further in chapter 6.
[133] Newsom (2003) p. 12.
[134] Newsom (2003) p. 6.
[135] This compositional trait does not endanger the identification of a large part of the book as a narrative. As Christianson (1998), p. 30, has shown the basic narrative character of the text is established by the technique of prolepsis in which the narrator retrospectively states that he once intended to undertake a search (1:12ff). The last reflection 11:9-12:7 has the feel of a final conclusion. It is this two-part move that binds the narrative together, despite its lack of thoroughgoing structure.

elements in the book's set-up may allow the reader to engage with the task of searching out key-features in Qohelet's repetitive, circuitous, and contradictory line of argumentation. As Fox points out, if we postulate a final redactor of this book, *he* at least must have felt that the book of Qohelet in its finished form was a satisfactory work, worth copying and circulating.[136]

The very character of the book of Qohelet invites the reader to attempt an explanation of its contradictory claims – though of course there will always be a significant element of conjecture in our readings. To an even higher degree than is often the case when we read biblical texts, it is difficult to determine where a close reading of the text ends and reader response begins. Remaining aware of this challenge, however, I would argue that it makes sense to examine whether the book's broken, unsettling *form* rings true to some degree with what happens in the text on its *content-level*. It is plausible that the mixture of modes of narration mirrors to some extent the message of the book. This structural trait allows Qohelet to demonstrate even on a very basic, compositional level that different world views are on a collision course in this piece of work.

As an example of how this may work, we might observe Qohelet's choice of a repetitious, almost cyclical mode of presentation which examines ever again the same themes. Kawin states about this stylistic choice: "Koheleth is pictured as continually rediscovering them [his observations]. He returns – from not considering, or from an unacceptable conclusion, or from the end of the last instant of considering – and

[136] Fox (1999), p. 19. For a fuller discussion of the possible types of redactional activity in the book, see Fox (1977), pp. 85-90.

considers again."[137] In this manner, the repetitious style emphasizes pertinent points in Qohelet's discussion of, for instance, time and cognition. And although Qohelet turns again and again to face and question the character of human existence in the temporal framework, he never fully manages to achieve the desired knowledge and understanding. I have to disagree with Eliade, therefore, who argues that through eternal repetitions (as those found in Qohelet) "time is suspended, or at least its virulence is diminished." [138] Rather, the oppressiveness of time weighs heavy on Qohelet – and the repetitious style with its contradictions underlines this.

It is not possible to explore in depth in this section the problems encountered by Qohelet in his attempt to investigate that which cannot be investigated; to rely on senses and understanding that cannot be trusted. Yet it is worth considering whether this issue too may be a contributory factor for the author's compositional choice to introduce such stark contradictions and tensions into his discussion. If so, it is an elegant strategy – and one which is perhaps especially noticeable in Qohelet's time-discourse: Qohelet is describing the changeless structures and repetitious character of the temporal world, but he has to do so through the lens of human cognition. As the human mind is unable to properly understand the temporal realities conditioning our lives and invariably miscomprehends them, that which is in reality unchanging continually changes and moves about in Qohelet's presentation.

[137] Kawin (1972), p. 40. Yet Kawin would argue, p. 41, that: "These returnings never threaten to become repetitions, because each rediscovery is preceded by a conclusion that, closing the matter for us, frees us to experience each repetition as something new." Fredericks (1993), p. 118-119, has also noted the cyclical mode of presentation, arguing that Qohelet structures his argument in a repetitious, cyclical way which mirrors his belief that the unity of reality is to be found in its repetition.
[138] Eliade (1954), p. 90.

Fredericks too has emphasised that Qohelet's argument, such as it is, is cyclically structured and that the same themes are perused over and over. He connects this to the הבל-metaphor: just as the breath of the human body is rhythmically drawn in and out, so too Qohelet's argument is developed through constant repetition.[139] Fredericks credibly suggests interdependence between style and content, arguing that Ecclesiastes' cyclical style of consideration mirrors the cyclicality of reality.[140] Jarick goes further still: noting that the author refers to the cycles of nature in 6:10, the verse which the Masoretes considered to be the book's centre, he argues that on a structural level "the notion of the inevitability and repetitiveness of change lies at the very heart of Ecclesiastes."[141] The main exegetical analysis will return to this point later, yet it is worth emphasizing already now that the "inevitable change" which Qohelet repeatedly refers to is, significantly, a change from same to same. The author of Qohelet may emphasise the notion of change, but he also accentuates the notion of repetition: cyclical world time is continuous time, exemplified best in the movement of the changeless, natural phenomena, and only when observed from the human perspective does this temporal reality appear one of change, difference, and newness. Every example listed by Jarick of changes with which Qohelet engages[142] is shown by the author to be built into the fabric of reality. They are changes insofar as they effect a change from one situation to another, but they are equally part of

[139] Fredericks (1993), p. 28.
[140] Fredericks (1993), p. 26. Frederick's understanding which fixates only on the cyclical elements of structure and content is not able to accommodate very well the more linear elements of the text – the instances of plot-like structure found both in the royal fiction and in later passages, and believed by other interpreters to form the basic structure of the text.
[141] Jarick (2000), p. 86.
[142] Jarick (2000), p. 86: that "what one person has built up can pass to another (2.18-21, 26; 6.1-2) and that everything can be lost in a bad venture (5.14) and that there are 'days of adversity' to match 'days of prosperity' (7.14) and that everyone can be caught 'at a time of calamity, when it suddenly falls upon them' (9.12)."

the unchangeable temporal order of the world, which human beings can neither change nor grasp.

Taking a slightly different tack, but also connecting elements of form and content in the literary work, Koosed argues that the structure of Qohelet, rather than being entirely absent, can best be comprehended through the metaphor "decay": linking the structural strategy of the author to the theme of mortality she suggests that the textual body mimics the process of a human body in decay. She notes that though there is in Ecclesiastes "a certain uniformity of tone, this does not overshadow the incoherence of structure – both are present in Qohelet; they exist in an uneasy tension, and the book cannot be tamed by highlighting one over the other." She concludes that "it is death that intervenes to subvert any coherence in the body and the book alike."[143] As she explains her reading, "Death is enacted in the overall structure of the book, a structure that decays and disintegrates like the dying body. (…) The text approaches coherency only to pull away again…"[144]

On a certain level, this approach is promising. While Koosed does not engage with the structural elements of the work in a traditional manner, she offers something like a metaphorical lens through which the reader can understand the set-up of Ecclesiastes. Koosed's reading may fall mainly within the realm of reader-response, but nevertheless the notion of decay in the text still presents the reader with a narrative idea that can tie together disparate elements of the text even on a structural level, while still allowing their relative difference and unconnectedness.

[143] Koosed (2006b), p. 93.
[144] Koosed (2006b), p. 94.

Unfortunately, Koosed does not develop in much depth her understanding of Ecclesiastes' structure, arguing on the basis of two short texts only. As her "test cases" she has, surprisingly, chosen 3:2-8 and 12:1-7, two of the most finely structured units of the book. Regarding 3:2:8, her main focus is the initial pair of opposites: "A time to be born and a time to die". She picks up on the possibility that ללדת (3:2) may more naturally mean "to beget" rather than "to be born",[145] arguing that death is the only event in the poem outside of human control and that it "literally upsets the structure of the text (…) The text decomposes."[146] It is questionable, however, how much this says about the structure of the text, as the argument operates mainly on the level of content. Furthermore, many commentators find it unproblematic to translate ללדת with "to be born",[147] an equally strong reading which – again on the content-level of the text – would emphasise both birth and death as outside of human control.

Regarding 12:1-7 Koosed emphasises that "Qohelet describes and enacts the uncreating of the world experienced at one level as decay in the body, at another level as the dissolution of the social world and the cosmos, at another level in the decomposing of the book."[148] While it is undeniable that the imagery in 12:1-7 is not only highly potent, but remarkably multivalent as well, it is difficult to see how this would constitute an argument about *structure* and *text* in decay. Apart from that, however, the well-ordered,

[145] See also Blenkinsopp (1995) for a discussion of ללדת in this context. Blenkinsopp's reading will be discussed further in chapter 4.
[146] Koosed (2006b), p. 96.
[147] See chapter 4 for a further discussion of this translation, as well as an overview of different scholarly opinions.
[148] Koosed (2006b), p. 99.

poetic beauty of 12:1-7 seems to be much more at the forefront of this short text than do elements of disorder and decay. Part of the haunting effect of the poem, I would argue, is exactly this juxtaposition between the panicky sense on the content-level of life slipping away and the poem's meticulous, carefully crafted structural scheme.

Also emphasising connections between the form of the text and its content, Ingram has suggested that the ambiguous nature of the text is integral to both its shape and its message.[149] Similarly, Salyer notes: "Metaphors, incongruities, ironies, paradoxes and opacities abound throughout the discourse. The implied author was quite fluent in the language of ambiguity, and utilized it in an assiduously shameless manner."[150] The ambiguous nature of the text ought to be an important aspect of our interpretative engagement with Qohelet: "Ambiguous texts beg for a both-and, rather than an either-or paradigm when dealing with their meaning and interpretation. (…) Closure is not a part of the reading experience."[151] Thus, along similar lines as Ingram, Salyer argues that the book of Qohelet "is not about giving answers that can be precisely stated. (…) Instead, the reader is set free to enjoy and experience the life of ambiguity…"[152]

A final trajectory should be mentioned among the newer scholarly approaches to reading the structure of the book, namely readings which suggest that a degree of dialogue is

[149] Ingram (2006), especially pp. 54-55 and the whole chapter 44-74 for an overview of his reading. Ingram argues, p. 54, that "studied ambiguity is a primary feature of the book…" And on p. 55 he suggests that the book lends itself to a wide variety of readings "because of the ambiguity of many key words, phrases and passages – and indeed of the book as a whole…"
[150] Salyer (2001), p. 130.
[151] Salyer (2001), p. 128.
[152] Salyer (2001), p. 131. Yet, Salyer also argues, p. 166, that: "The effects of the ambiguous structure of the text and its linguistic properties pale in comparison to the significance which the specific ethos-related qualities of the narrator as a rhetorical persona hold for the reader." This aspect of Salyer's reading will be discussed in chapter 6.

happening in the text through its structural set-up, either between different characters or between the author persona and the protagonist. These readings share some traits with the more traditional suggestion in Ecclesiastes-scholarship that the text might contain quotations with which the narrator/author dialogues.[153] A few examples of readings which emphasise such an inner-textual dialogue will suffice: Sharp argues that the frame narrator enters into dialogue with the persona of the Qohelet in the bulk of the book and subverts his message.[154] Fox too has suggested that the whole of the book may be read as a literary unity in which the main protagonist, Qohelet, and the frame narrator have both been created by the same author whose perspective is not to be identified with either of theirs.[155] However, as noted by Newsom "Fox underplays the significance of the fact that the epilogist, Fox's "implied author" of the book of Ecclesiastes, provides us with the first *mis*-reading of Qohelet."[156]

**2. Elements of Cohesion and Disparity**

Readers respond strongly to the book of Qohelet. Whether they find it a document of unrelenting pessimism or discover in it a realistic recipe for enjoying life in the midst of its limitations, readers of this book experience it speaking strongly to them. This is true

[153] See especially Gordis (1968) and pp. 95-108, Whybray (1981), pp. 455-461. However, it is worth noting with Fox (1999), p. 20, that no scholars: "have succeeded in finding non-arbitrary and replicable criteria for identifying quotations." And he notes elsewhere (1998), p. 226: "I am not saying that there are no quotations in Qohelet, but that they don't matter. For, quoted or not, words an author speaks in his own voice are an expression of his own ideas, unless he shows us otherwise."
[154] Sharp (2004), p. 37-68.
[155] Fox (1989), p. 315. In Fox (1977), pp. 91-92, he presents the different "layers" of narration which he argues that the author makes use of, and in the same article, p. 100, he states that the main function of the frame-narrator "…is implicitly to testify to the reality of Qohelet, simply by talking about him as having lived (…) What the author seeks is (…) *suspension of disbelief* for the purposes of the fiction."
[156] Newsom (1995), p. 189.

for scholarly readers too.[157] Two elements especially in the structural set-up of Ecclesiastes are worth mentioning as instrumental in providing readers with this sense of cohesion, despite those contradictions and structural problems which were discussed above.

Firstly, many readers emphasise the strong sense of the presence of an author or a narrator in the book. Perhaps more than any other literary or structural feature of the work, it seems that the "brooding consciousness"[158] of the narrator gives the reader the impression that this is a book with personality – a book which demands eye-to-eye engagement between reader and author. Stone imagines that we meet in the book "old man Qohelet", as does also Dulin.[159] Building on the narrator presence allows Christianson to develop a narratological reading of the book, investigating how Qohelet might function as a character-driven narrative.[160]

It is no surprise, then, that many scholars have been tempted to invent more or less complicated back stories, explaining the character or personal history of the author.[161] Even when it comes to an evaluation of the book's contradictory style, scholars turn to their impression of what the *author* might or might not have intended to an extent which is unusual in biblical scholarship today. Too often, questions asked about Qohelet's

[157] For instance, Crenshaw (1987), p. 53: "I have been fascinated with Qohelet, perhaps because he makes my own scepticism appear solidly biblical."
[158] Thus Fox (1989), p. 159.
[159] E. Stone (1942), pp. 98-102 and Dulin (2001), pp. 260-270.
[160] Christianson (1998). While this is an important notion for Christianson's entire argument, see perhaps especially pp. 33-42.
[161] This is nowhere more the case than in Zimmermann's monograph on the book of Qohelet (1973), in which he undertakes an in-depth psychoanalytic study of the author's personality and life development.

intellectual and emotional message distinguish only poorly between the unknown author of the book and the almost all-pervasive presence of the first person narrator.[162]

Secondly, as emphasized by Bartholomew, it is a characteristic feature of the book of Qohelet that it allows its reader an unusual degree of interpretative wiggle-room: the constant presence of contradiction and structural discontinuity results in "gaps" or blank spaces which the reader is invited to fill out.[163] A creative reading of the text is *necessary* if the book is to appear as a unified, well-connected whole to the reader.[164] Simultaneously with forming an impression of *the person* in the text through an engagement with the narrator,[165] the reader will have to foreground certain of the text's ideas in order to get a sense of his argument and its message. Unsurprisingly, then, there are numerous examples of critical, close readings of Ecclesiastes which contradict each other fundamentally in terms of the tenor of Qohelet's argument and the purpose of his book.

[162] While considering it possible that the whole book was written by one author, Fox (1999), pp. 363-377, helpfully distinguishes between the different voices or levels of narration in the work.
[163] Bartholomew (1998), p. 268. Similarly, Salyer (2001), p. 147: "What the implied reader encounters is a series of blanks and gaps which prove upon further reflection to be a succession of participatory prods. (…) Their effect is to draw the reader into the text, creating a sense of participation with the narrator…"
[164] One of the main purposes in Bartholomew's work is to demonstrate that historical criticism is, itself, historically situated and an interpretative choice. He suggests that more confessional readings which fell into disrepute during the hegemony of the historical criticism could be re-discovered. While he is right to point out the limitations of historical critical methods, doubt could be raised regarding his endorsement of confessional readings. Within an academic framework a reading must be defensible also outside the perimeters of one's chosen interpretative lens. Here confessional readings may struggle when attempting to engage with non-confessional, exegetical work, as well as with the academic fields of, for instance, history, sociology, and literature.
[165] See also Salyer (2001), p. 122: "Once a narrator becomes embodied or fleshed out, the incarnation of the narrator's function into a human personality results in predictable strengths and weaknesses. Because the narrator has become one of us, readers tend to identify more with the first-person narrator, giving the speaking 'I' a huge initial rhetorical advantage. However, the cost of this initial advantage is that the narrator must lose the aura of omniscience…"

Being aware that the book of Qohelet invites this kind of creative reading effort may make the critical reader doubt whether the text in itself actually contains prominent elements of cohesion, or whether we simply read them into the material ourselves.[166] Faced with the presence in Ecclesiastes of contradiction and rapid changes in genre and perspective, one must allow the possibility that at heart this book has no strategy, no coherent perspective. We must even consider uncomfortable possibilities such as: are the structural signals, or the instances of plot, at all clear or pervasive enough to create unity and coherence in the text? To what extent is it meaningful to talk about the book being one coherent piece of literature – is it for example enough to assert that it demonstrates an ongoing interest in a group of themes and makes use of certain words and expressions throughout? Is it enough that many readers experience the consciousness of the narrator pervading the discourse throughout?

All of the attempts discussed above to identify compositional strategy in Ecclesiastes are dependent on the proposition that one can expect a certain level of consistency in the book. This assumption may be questionable, however. Possibly, our expectations of structure and strategy in an ancient piece of literature such as this are erroneous. Could we not imagine a book in which the author sketches different approaches to basic problems of life, trying out various solutions without choosing decisively between them

[166] An additional question would be if it is really a problem at all, especially from a more post-modern, reader-focused perspective, that we do supply a good deal of the meaning and cohesion of the text through our reading of it? Mills (2003), p. 4, advocates a "biblical imagination approach" in the engagement with the biblical texts, arguing that "these works are meant for reading, and that readers make a contribution to textual meanings." The meaning supplied by the reader is shaped both by her or his "own personal creativity in theological thought" (p. 6), and by her social and cultural context. As an example, Mills mentions Blake's use of the Bible – for instance the book of Job, his interpretation of which "fits with Blake's own social context in Britain (…) The example of Blake provides a picture of 'biblical imagination', an indication of the role of biblical books in creating and contextualizing meanings (…) There is a symbiosis here between the reader and the text." (p. 7)

and without attempting to fit them into a coherent and logical whole?[167] In the case of Ecclesiastes the very nature of the subject-matter may invite inconsistency and contradiction. The text represents a struggle to understand the unfathomable, an existential thrust into the dark, and this may have influenced the form of the book.

It must therefore be considered whether our attempts to identify schemes within Ecclesiastes do justice to the book – regardless of whether such attempts take the shape of harmonization or suggestions that a complex, authorial strategy is at play. The book may simply be inconsistent, fragmentary, confused – and our attempts to reconstruct the authorial scheme would then be better termed as reading strategies; constructions of a satisfying and coherent whole that does not exist independently from the reader's expectations of the book.

Such an evaluation would not be too far from the reading of Ecclesiastes by Galling, whose approach to the overriding sense of contradiction and disorder in the text is to characterise the book as entirely fragmented, consisting of a number of independent pericopes which have been randomly arranged. Neither is the book ordered in terms of unifying thematic or biographical concerns, nor has it got a structure in terms of a logical organization of its material. Instead, Galling would characterize it as 37 relatively

[167] This suggestion has much in common with the thesis that Ecclesiastes is the result of the author's reflections over a long period of time, only loosely, thematically connected, cf. Whybray (1989), p. 44-45 – a thesis which does not allow for the possibility that the book has deliberately been composed so as to be contradictory in character.

unconnected groups of sayings, "Sentenzen".[168] This view has not convinced widely, however.

In the present work I assume that it is possible to discuss Qohelet as a unified piece of work, at least to the extent required for it to make sense to investigate the viewpoint of the implied author or narrator on a given subject area, such as time and temporality. It should be acknowledged, however, that his presentation remains contradictory and, in places, extremely loosely structured. Furthermore, one may want to remember the somewhat dialogic nature of the work, as well as the polyphonic character lent to the book by its many, rapid genre changes.

### 3. The Question of Date

This thesis supports the majority view that Ecclesiastes is most likely to have been written in the third century BC.[169] The *terminus ad quem* can be established with a high degree of certainty as Ben Sira quotes Ecclesiastes and fragments of the book have been discovered at Qumran.[170] It is somewhat more difficult to pinpoint the earliest possible date of composition.

The strongest arguments marshalled in support of a third century dating are linguistic in nature.[171] It is generally accepted that Qohelet's Hebrew contains features of syntax as

[168] Galling (1932), p. 281.
[169] Among the many scholars supporting this dating are Krüger (2004), p. 19, Perdue (1994), p. 193, Fox (1989), p. 151, Whybray (1989b), p. 20, Spieckermann (1998), p. 311, and Gordis (1968), p. 67.
[170] See for instance Krüger (2004), p. 19.
[171] In addition to the linguistic arguments, more theological-philosophical reasons for a third century date have been suggested. These have focused in particular on the potential Greek influence on the book of Qohelet, occasionally stressing the book's form, but mainly its content. It is difficult to prove the presence

well as form which are primarily known from late biblical Hebrew. The work also displays forms known from Mishnaic Hebrew. Furthermore, scholars appeal to the presence in the book's language of both Aramaisms and Persian words.[172]

Yet, as Newsom points out, there is nothing which "challenges scholarly ingenuity as the existence of a prevailing consensus…"[173] A few scholars have argued against the mainstream consensus, prominently Fredericks whose arguments should be briefly summarized. Seeking to date Ecclesiastes to the exilic period or earlier still,[174] Fredericks argues against the common, scholarly interpretation of its language features, claiming that they are insufficient as criteria to establish a third century date for the book. He maintains that since the book of Qohelet is the only book of its kind in terms of genre, one must expect to find in its language "a certain degree of singularity." This, he argues, may explain some features which are usually considered indicative of late biblical Hebrew – for example, the sparseness in the book of the *waw consecutive*.[175] Given the unique character of the book, Fredericks also finds it unsurprising that the author of

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of such influence and it is telling that there is no agreement as to which Greek sources provided the inspiration for Qohelet's author. Even if no direct influence from specific Greek sources can be detected, however, it remains valid to argue that the author of Qohelet was to some extent influenced by the general, intellectual climate of his day. He may have dialogued, more or less explicitly, with popular, contemporary notions. However, we are then, once again, dependent on the linguistic arguments in order to identify correctly the period in which the book was written – and the intellectual climate of which it may have engaged with.

[172] Burkes (1999) presents a useful overview of these different features, p. 36. Fredericks (1988) discusses the linguistic features of Qohelet in great detail, albeit interpreting the linguistic data quite differently than most biblical scholars.

[173] Newsom (1995), p. 184.

[174] Fredericks (1988), pp. 262-263. He suggests a late pre-exilic date on the basis of three words which occur only in late, biblical Hebrew and in Imperial Aramaic, namely: כאהד, חקף and חזין מן.

[175] Fredericks (1988), pp. 29-30, argues that since this is a quasi-philosophical book, rather than a standard Hebrew Bible narrative, the *waw consecutive*'s absence is not all that surprising. However, even if one does not want to read Qohelet as a narrative text, it still contains narrative sections – prominently the royal fiction in 1:12ff – and here too the *waw consecutive* is lacking.

Qohelet frequently uses the participle for the present tense, and that he often makes use of nouns with *-ôn* and *-ûth*-terminations.

In connection with other peculiar features in Qohelet's language, Fredericks draws attention to Hebrew language elements which scholars have considered to be dialect features of earlier North Israelite language, arguing that most of these can be found in the book of Qohelet.[176] This is not a peripheral point, he argues: "These grammatical and lexical parallels with North Israelite take on even greater relevance (…) since all but one of them (…) have been associated with LBH or MH in previous studies…"[177] Finally, Fredericks suggests that the book of Qohelet contains a vernacular element. Some features which he considers North Israelite occur outside of North Israelite texts as well and "might better be explained as vernacular Hebrew…"[178] In this connection, Fredericks argues in favour of the hypothesis that *Mishnaic Hebrew* may have been used as a vernacular alongside or in some contexts instead of Aramaic. Should this be the case, he suggests, it would be expected that this vernacular would "resemble a vernacular of an earlier age rather than the literary form of BH."[179] Thus, what appears to be features of Mishnaic Hebrew in Ecclesiastes may actually indicate, rather, that the author makes use of the vernacular of his time – a vernacular some features of which were later retained in spoken and written Mishnaic Hebrew.[180]

[176] Fredericks (1988), pp. 32-33, lists these features, and on pp. 34-35 he demonstrates their occurrence in Qohelet.
[177] Fredericks (1988), p. 35.
[178] Fredericks (1988), p. 42.
[179] Fredericks (1988), p. 44.
[180] Somewhat similarly, Alter (2004), p. xxx, argues in the preface to his Pentateuch-translation that "rabbinic Hebrew was built upon an ancient vernacular that for the most part had been excluded from the literary language used for the canonical texts." However, he notes on the same page that there is "no way of plotting a clear chronology of the evolution of rabbinic Hebrew from an older vernacular, no way of

While this is a possible hypothesis, appealing to an earlier, somewhat conjectural language phase does not strike me as the most obvious solution when encountering language use that appears to contain Mishnaic elements.[181] Furthermore, dating the book of Qohelet on the basis of a vernacular to which we have extremely limited access is problematic. Without sufficient, extant sources it is almost impossible to disprove the presence of such vernacular elements in Ecclesiastes. Equally, however, until an exhaustive socio-linguistics of biblical Hebrew has been written, Fredericks' assumptions regarding the Hebrew vernacular and Qohelet's possible use of it remain unproven.[182]

It is a further weakness of Fredericks' argument that it fails to engage with the *cumulative* evidence of Qohelet's language usage in a convincing manner.[183] He thoroughly investigates all instances of supposedly late language in Qohelet individually, initially making a grammatical comparison, then a lexical, between Qohelet's language usage and different phases of Hebrew.[184] Upon the basis of this investigation, he reaches the conclusion that each of these instances can be interpreted as evidence of earlier language

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determining how far back in the biblical period various elements of rabbinic language may go." And he states further, though here focused on the literary style of the written language rather than the vernacular of Hebrew, p. xxviii: "Whatever conclusions we may draw about the stylistic level of biblical Hebrew are a little precarious because we of course have no record of the ancient spoken language…"

[181] One may argue, too, that spoken language tends to be more, not less, innovative than contemporary, written language. Thus, while spoken language may contain archaisms, this does not tend to be the feature distinguishing it from written language.

[182] A convincing apology for the need of a sociolinguistics for Biblical Hebrew is presented by Schniedewind (2004), paragraphs 1-7.

[183] Similarly, Schoors (1992), p. 15, states: "When one isolated linguistic feature does not allow us to ascribe a later date to Qoh's language, because that would be begging the question, such a feature can have some importance, when taken together with other ones in a general picture." Schoors also notes, however, that Fredericks' analysis "has been carried out with great accuracy" and he admits that "the situation of those defending a post-exilic date of Qoh's language has now become more complicated."

[184] Fredericks (1988), p. 28. He maintains that a "linguistic comparison of literature should entail primarily the grammar and syntax of a text, its lexical character only secondarily."

use. However, even if individual words and instances of syntax can be connected to earlier stages of Hebrew, an earlier date remains less likely if it requires a number of different explanations to account for the many examples of what appear to be features of late biblical Hebrew.

Seow too has argued in favour of an earlier date for the book of Qohelet. In addition to linguistic arguments, he appeals to elements of the book's content.[185] He finds it significant that the book demonstrates "a curious preoccupation with economic matters, which suggests that Qoheleth was addressing a particular environment…"[186] Specifically, he finds that there are "terminological and thematic links between Ecclesiastes and Aramaic documents of the Persian period..."[187] and the monetary revolution in the late Achaemenid period. Seow cites a series of verses which fit this historical situation.[188] However, the examples of societal and political situations cited by Seow remain so general in character that they may equally well seek to address the situation of other periods. For instance, 5:11 would not sound very out of place in a pre-exilic, prophetic indictment against Israel – or in a New Testament, first century A.D. context. Yet, it does not follow that either of these provide the correct date for Ecclesiastes.

To sum up this section, I maintain a third century dating in accordance with the current scholarly majority. The careful, linguistic analysis undertaken by Fredericks does present

[185] For Seow's linguistic argument see Seow (1996), pp. 643-666. For more on the social situation of the author as Seow understands it, see Seow (2008b).
[186] Seow (2001), p. 239.
[187] Seow (2001), p. 240.
[188] For instance 5:11, 5:13-14, 10:5-7, and 10:19. See Seow (2001), for instance pp. 241-243.

a challenge for the majority opinion, but the linguistic arguments in favour of a post-exilic dating remain stronger than those against. I also note that appealing to the content of the book in order to match it up with a particular, historical situation is a less than persuasive route to dating Qohelet, given the very general character of Qohelet's "case studies", as well as his lack of any direct references to specific political or societal events.

# Chapter 3: World Time and Human Time in the Framing Poems

*"Time goes, you say? Ah no!*

*Alas, Time stays, we go."* (Henry Austin Dobson, The Paradox of Time.)

The foregrounding of the time thematic in the poems of 1:4-11 and 12:1-7 is remarkable. In itself, the presence of sustained temporal reflection in these passages is noteworthy. This is the case not least because these two poems make up the larger part of the book's original frame – the inclusio, or chiastic frame, in 1:2 + 1:(3)4-11 and 12:1-7 + 12:8 being one element of structure in the book, the existence of which most interpreters agree upon. Thus, before he turns to any other subject area the author of Qohelet describes and discusses in detail the temporal structure of the world and the conditions of humankind within it. It is furthermore within this frame that Qohelet asks his basic question about the value of human life (1:3) – a question which is, therefore, immediately tied to the time-thematic. It is also in relation to this poetic frame that the primary Leitmotif of the book – הבל – is first, and most emphatically, presented (1:2).

The *content* of what is expounded on time and temporality in these two poems is, however, even more astounding: the poems embedded within this frame describe the set-up of the world, as well as the life of the individual human being, in temporal terms. Furthermore, despite their apparent equation of world time with human time, these poems work hard to demonstrate tension and conflict between humankind's temporal conditions – including and perhaps especially their *understanding* of these – and the temporal set-up of the world. One way in which the poems allude to this tension is by depicting the time

of the cosmos in terms of continuity and cyclicality and the time of human beings in a more linear fashion. In addition, imagery taken from the realm of nature is used both as a model for and to establish a contrast to human life. The dual usage of this imagery helps Qohelet highlight basic cognitive and existential problems which the world's temporal structure creates for humankind. This chapter offers a close reading of the temporal imagery in both poems, suggesting some ways in which Qohelet here illustrates points of conflict in our relationship to our temporal conditions. It is argued that the poems have a shared project in their depiction of the time-thematic, both exploring the problematic tenets of human, temporal experience. In addition, the book's further discussion of themes relating to time builds on and develops ideas which were expounded first in the frame. Because of this, too, a detailed, exegetical analysis of both poems will be useful.

### 1. 1:4-11: The Introductory Poem

The beginning of Qohelet's book evidences an acute interest in the world order, and immediately seeks to integrate the existence of humankind with this order. The initial poem on the world's temporal structure and humanity's place within it functions as a first response to the thematic question[189] that introduces the book proper in 1:3.[190]

[189] The introductory question itself places the temporal dimension of human life centre-stage, using the expression תחת השמש , unique within the OT to Ecclesiastes – occurring here some 29 times (Janzen (2008), p. 465.) This expression is almost synonymous with תחת השמים "under the heavens", used only three times in Qohelet, but 16 times elsewhere (Janzen (2008), p. 465). Both describe human experience in universal terms, but while תחת השמים has spatial connotations, תחת השמש refers much more to the temporal universe of human beings, as argued by Seow (2008a), p. 104-106. Janzen (2008), p. 465-466, suggests that תחת השמש be connected to the inevitability of death, noting that other Semitic texts contrast the expression "under the sun", used about the realm of the living, with "a resting place in the shades."

[190] There is still substantial scholarly disagreement about where the book proper begins. While few include the frame in 1:1 and 12:9-14 in the original work (see however Fox (1977), p. 83-106, and Sharp (2004), p. 37-68), discussion continues regarding 1:2 and 12:8, as well as the poems in (1:3)1:4-11 and 12:1-7. Scholars such as Kamano (2002) and Frydrych (2002) consider the initial poem to be an integral part of the book, while Longman (1998), p. 21, delineates the original composition to 1:12-12:7, arguing that the introductory poem has been secondarily inserted into the text. Loretz (1969), p. 144, similarly argues that

### 1.1. The Cosmic Time Structure

*1:4: A generation goes and a generation comes, but the earth stands forever.*
*1:5: The sun rises[191] and the sun sets, and to its place it pants,[192] whence it rises.*
*1:6: It goes to the south and turns to the north; it turns, it turns continually, the wind, and to its turnings the wind returns.*
*1:7: All the rivers run into the sea, but the sea is not filled. To the place where the rivers run, there they return to run (anew).*

The first verse of the poem juxtaposes temporariness and permanence. As he introduces humanity and world, the author sketches two types of temporal existence in a contrasting fashion: each generation[193] passes away, replaced always by another, but the world remains – unmoving and constant.[194] Several interpreters have perceptively noted that

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the original book must have begun with Qohelet's self-presentation in 1:12, and Koh (2006) also limits her analysis to 1:12-11:6. At a glance, this would seem to be the strongest argument against including the initial poem: why would the self-presentation, mirroring perhaps the introductory self-presentation of Ancient Near Eastern kings in inscriptions, be delayed to make room for a poem on cosmology? However, the argument is weakened when one remembers that the author of Qohelet does not make use of just one genre. Mixing of genres and styles is the norm in this literary work. Furthermore, the ideas propounded in the poem on, for instance, world order and the human relationship to the temporal process prepare the ground for what is expounded in the bulk of the book. It is also difficult to defend bracketing only one of the framing poems (as, for instance, Longmann does): the two poems have a structural function together as a frame, and persuasive lines of connection can be drawn between these two poems in terms of language and content. Against excluding 1:3 from the main body of the text speaks the verse's use of several favourite words and expressions of the book's author (עמל, יתרון and תחת השמש), as well as the similarly phrased restatements of the basic subject of the narrator's search in verses 3:9 and 6:11, both of which are well integrated in their immediate contexts. There are no equally strong arguments to defend the originality of 1:2, but no pressing reasons to reject it either. Anderson (1998) p. 210, argues in favour of 1:2 being original., finding that the poems in chapters 1 and 12 would be unfinished without 1:2 and 12:8.

[191] Probably read a participle with the textual apparatus, rather than the Masoretic text's perfect. See for example Krüger (2004), p. 47. I agree with Goldman that the conjunction should be maintained with the Masoretic text and G (the Old Greek). Goldman (2004), p. 65, notes that the conjunction "introduces circularity in the thought and fits the poetic expression of vv. 5-6…"

[192] There is no need to emend with to שׁב אף as Horst suggests in the apparatus of the Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia (editio quinta emendata). All witnesses support the Masoretic text, see also Goldman (2004), pp. 65-66.

[193] The generations could be human generations, Anderson (1998) p. 209, Burkes (1999), p. 51-52, Fox (1999), p. 166, Rudman (2001), p. 75, or natural phenomena, Ogden (1986), p. 91-92. As noted by Crenshaw (1987), p. 62, the word דור can designate both, and it is likely that Qohelet plays upon both of these dimensions of meaning, as he wedges this verse in between a depiction of the natural world (1:5-7) and his question about human meaning in 1:3.

[194] Jarick (2000), p. 81, notes the complex pattern in the parallelism here, namely that "'a generation goes' and 'a generation comes' are antithetically parallel with each other, but also when taken together as a synthesis are then in antithesis to 'the earth remains forever'."

there may be a deliberate ambiguity at play in the poem of 1:4-11. Most relevant in the present context is Good's exploration of the poem in which he notes that one stylistic technique used in 1:3-11 is the "delay of an expected consequent."[195] This poem, he argues, demands strongly to be read linearly: only after finishing her or his reading may the reader have accrued enough information to determine the poem's mood and message. The ambiguity makes its appearance already in the poem's first verse. Read on its own, 1:4 could suggest the complementary reality of two types of temporal existence; a harmonious relationship between the brief life of individual human beings and the wider-embracing human continuity which persists as one generation is replaced by another. Alternatively, 1:4 may imply that the way in which human beings are conditioned by the temporal order is problematic on a basic, structural level. This latter option is perhaps more likely as a first, terse response to 1:3; a question to which Qohelet repeatedly responds negatively. However, one must consider the rest of the poem before making any such judgement. A further ambiguity can be observed in the description of the generations following each other ceaselessly: this movement could indicate both the cyclicality and the linearity of their movement in time.

Verses 1:5-7 turn to the natural elements and connect the notion of permanence to more dynamic ideas of continuity and repetition. While the issue in 1:4 could simply be one of continuity versus brevity, 1:5-7 introduce the idea of a cyclical movement which can be

[195] Good (1978), p. 72, the article pp. 59-73. Ingram (2006), p. 70-72, identifies three levels of ambiguity in the poem: firstly, that דור and הארצ in v. 4 and לאהרנים in v.11 can refer to nature as well as people. Secondly, that the second half of the poem either responds with praise to the predictability of nature described in 1:4-7 or views humanity as "caught up in one of a series of endless, monotonous cycles from which there is no escape". Thirdly, that it is unclear whether the poem is meant to be part of Qohelet's own words or the words of the frame narrator. Wilson (1998), p. 364, considers the ambiguity of the poem a strategy "reminding the reader that wisdom observations usually reflect part, not all, of the truth."

tied closely to the permanence explored in the second half of 1:4. The elements are neither transitory, nor immobile. Their movement is one of repetition, and thus of cyclicality.[196] Sun, wind and water are all excellent metaphors for time, and in these verses their immediate function is to exemplify the repetitious movements of nature through time. They are part of a pattern which neither changes substantially nor ends.

The depiction of the sun's movement over the sky in 1:5 provides an elegant transition from the contrast in 1:4 between the temporary and the permanent: the sun's travel from daybreak to nightfall has a seeming linearity, and functions well as an image for the human's travel from cradle to grave. At the same time the repetitious character of the sun's movement recalls the continuous movement of generations onto and away from an earth which ever remains. 1:6 continues the depiction of a well-ordered universe in which every element performs in a predictable manner, in accordance with the world's temporal structure. Even the wind which roams unpredictably to and fro does so according to a certain design. Sun and wind will become key-motifs in the book: they are used to describe the human existence in its totality; they denote the limits of this existence, as

[196] Ellul (1990), p. 66, has discussed whether the poem in chapter one presents *a cyclical world order*, or whether the image is one of *linear continuity*. He argues that Qohelet envisages the time of world and humankind as a line, punctuated by events that all have the same, repetitive character. While the distinction between the two seems of limited importance for understanding Qohelet's argument in this and other passages, the crux for deciding this issue would seem to be the difficult verse 1:7. Here the rivers are either depicted as describing a circular movement; returning to their point of origin to run towards the sea once again; or as continually emptying water into the sea and thus engaged in a constant, yet linear movement. However, help can also be found in 1:5 which depicts the undeniably cyclical movement of the sun – note the repeated use of סבב to underscore the point. Similarly, the focus in 1:6 is on the wind blowing endlessly around in circles. Read in this context, it is likely that 1:4 describes what seems like a linear, limited movement – that of a generation – as actually being part of a circular movement of repetition.

well as sketching through their metaphorical use basic conditions and characteristics of the human life.[197]

In 1:7 the sea is presented as a limitless reservoir for the waters from the rivers. The rivers' constant streams of running water are a helpful metaphor for time passing, and allow, perhaps, the poem to return once more to the contrast established in v. 1:4 between the immovable cosmos and the constantly changing generations. A dimension of impotence which may have lurked in the poem throughout[198] becomes apparent in the rivers' inability to fill up the sea.

Cyclical time is forcefully underlined in 1:5-7. Even Qohelet's language presses this point, making extensive use of participles from verbs of movement – which are repeated far beyond what would be necessary.[199] For instance, the language of 1:5 facilitates the depiction of cyclical time by presenting סבב with the verb הלך. The poet's fondness for linguistic repetition becomes even more apparent in 1:6 which reuses the verb הלך and repeats its key word, סבב, three times.[200] In 1:7 הלך in the first part of the verse underlines the cyclical character of the world's time together with שוב in the last.

[197] The image of wind is present both in the references to הבל and רוח, see the excursus after this chapter.
[198] Especially, perhaps, in 1:5, using the verb שאף which can connote also frustrated effort.
[199] Christianson (1998), p. 221-223, emphasizes Qohelet's use of verbs of movement throughout the book.
[200] Crenshaw (1987), p. 64. Apart from its basic meaning "to turn around" it can also mean "to change" which seems highly ironic in this context.

### 1.2. The Natural Phenomena and the Human Perspective

Zimmerli has rightly noted that the human perspective governs the presentation of the cosmos in 1:4-7.[201] These verses should not be divorced from the reflections in 1:8-11 about the conditions of humanity's existence and their powers of cognition: Qohelet's interest is in the world as it meets and affects the human being. It would be to go too far, however, if one were to claim on that basis that 1:4-7 cannot be understood as an expression of Qohelet's world view. Rather, the world as presented in these verses sits well with Qohelet's later, more fragmented reflections on the world order.[202] Insofar as humankind is at all able to understand the set-up of the world, these verses do describe the cosmos.

It is therefore problematic, even if it is tempting, to focus only on the metaphors as they describe humanity[203] – so that, for instance, the powerlessness of the rivers to fill up the sea is really *only* about humanity's inability to effect any change through their activity. 1:4-7 contains a depiction which can and should be extended to, read with and held up against the depiction of the human situation in 1:8-11. However, a reading which fails to appreciate that the depiction of cosmos is significant in its own right as well is likely to overlook important parts of Qohelet's argument in 1:4-11. As he replies to the question in 1:3, Qohelet appeals *both* to the temporal structure of the world *and* to the human experience of it. The author establishes in this poem from the very outset a connection between the search for human meaning and the structure of world-time. By pointing to

[201] Zimmerli (1962), p. 146.
[202] The structured world is discussed explicitly in 12:1-7, but it is also worth noting here the description of the order governing nature and humankind in 3:1-15.
[203] Cf. for example the generalising statement of Rudman (2001), p. 71, that it is generally accepted that the depiction in 1:4-7 function as a metaphor for human activity, (2001) p.71.

the contrast between the passing generations and the permanent earth as his very first reaction to the question posed in 1:3, Qohelet suggests the possibility of conflict or tension between humanity's search for meaning and the order of the world. And by describing the structures which govern the world in 1:4-7 Qohelet gives important information about conditions which regulate human life as well.

It would initially seem that Qohelet carries on his depiction of cyclicality and repetition into the human realm: as the rivers flow and flow, so the human sees and hears – endlessly and without satiation. Certainly, this is how the poem is generally read. The main point of 1:4-11, then, would be that there is no gain to be had despite the overwhelming continuity, permanence, and repetition observed in the world and in the human life. Instead of being meaningful and progressive, the repetitious movement of humans and phenomena is entirely without purpose – an endless striving without any goal. As the order of things is always the same, neither humanity's, nor nature's efforts accomplish anything.

Fox is a prominent proponent of this reading. He finds that 1:4-7 demonstrates the impotence of the mighty natural phenomena, Qohelet's argument being that if nature itself is unable to achieve anything new, humanity must be so too: their hard work cannot bring about anything that would not have happened anyway.[204] Accordingly, Fox reads

[204] Fox (1999), p. 164. Crenshaw's reading is related to that presented by Fox. However, instead of focusing on human inability to effect change, he emphasizes the fundamentally unfulfilled character of human life. This is a more persuasive approach. In essence, Crenshaw (1987), p. 62, states that in this poem the earth remains unchanging, despite "the relentless striving of heavenly and earthly bodies…" Human beings live lives that cannot achieve fulfilment, p. 67. Another related reading is that of Brown (2000), p. 25, who suggests that the depiction of cosmos reflects the crisis of the human condition: humanity too is a series of bodies in purposeless motion.

1:4-7 as a demonstration that the world is always the same. Even 1:4 does not, in his view, aim to establish a contrast between that which is transitory and that which is permanent. Understanding "the world" as designating the whole of humanity rather than the earth, he argues that the message of the verse is that the changing generations do not affect the face of humanity – an idea which is consistent with the images of repetition and permanence in 1:5-7.[205] It is true that Qohelet several times later in the book emphasises the inability of humankind to change the world-order which God has created.[206] This in itself is not surprising – one may ask whether any biblical writer would believe such a feat to be possible. Qohelet is unusual, however, in considering this state of affairs exceedingly problematic;[207] a conclusion he reaches for the first time on the basis of his exploration of humanity's place within and relationship with the world order in 1:8-11. Yet, 1:8-11 indicates strongly that Qohelet is not simply lamenting humanity's inability to change the world-order. Rather, his endeavour in these verses, as in the poem as a whole, is much more to explore *why* the temporal order, as it is, is so highly problematic for humankind.

*1:8: All the words[208] are weary.[209] One cannot speak. The eye is not sated from seeing and the ear is not filled from hearing.*

[205] Fox (1999), p. 166. I agree with Burkes (1999), p. 51-52, however, that this reading of 1:4 is not the most persuasive.
[206] Note, however, that this point is often made when the author discusses the human attempt to understand the temporal order. As in 1:8-11 the cognitive dimension is central and it is particularly within this sphere of human experience in particular that Qohelet agonizes about human impotence, for example 3:14 (in the same context as 3:11), 6:10-12, 8:6-8, and 8:16-9:3.
[207] While unusual this viewpoint is not necessarily unique. For instance, it may also be present in the book of Job, in which the human complaint is met, in the beginning of the divine speeches, Job 38, by an assertion of the sovereign power of the creator God. Whether or not this response satisfies the author – or the protagonist – of that book is left unclear in the work and is still a matter of scholarly debate.
[208] Both translations "words" and "things" are possible. Crenshaw (1987), p. 66, prefers the translation "things", rather than "words".
[209] Alternatively "are wearisome" or "are exhausted".

*1:9: What was is what will be and what was done is what will be done. And there is nothing new at all*[210] *under the sun.*

In 1:8 the poem's sphere of interest shifts, as Qohelet turns to address the human situation. A parallel is established in this verse between the natural phenomena and humanity, both of whom move through the same space of cyclical, temporal movement. Yet the depiction does not carry on seamlessly. The most noticeable change is that the time-order of the world is now judged explicitly. Whereas the previous verses may have hinted at imbalance through the presence of tensions and ambiguities, 1:8 claims directly that in consequence of the character of time הדברים are weary and unable to achieve anything. Qohelet judges the world order partly by extending the presentation of it to the human life. As is often noted Qohelet establishes a structural parallel with the three natural phenomena explored in 1:5-7 by emphasizing three human ways of sensing – speaking, hearing, and seeing. Human life experience, too, remains unfulfilled and in constant motion. However, another part of Qohelet's strategy in 1:8-11 is to demonstrate that the temporal situation of the phenomena cannot simply be transferred to the human realm. Through tensions and contradictions, Qohelet shows that there is only a seeming equivalence between the temporal realm of natural phenomena and that of human life.

It is significant in this context that the parallel which the author establishes between the constant movement of the phenomena and human sensing is far from perfect. He does not paint a picture of unbroken, free-flowing sensing. While this is a possible understanding of the description of humanity's seeing and hearing – that human beings are limitless reservoirs; never satiated no matter how much input they get – such a reading does not

[210] An alternative translation would be "there is nothing entirely new."

capture Qohelet's judgment on human speech. Humanity's lack of fulfilment here does not simply stem from a continuity that produces no result and cannot be broken. Rather, Qohelet depicts in terse hyperbole the human being as unable to speak at all. As well as being insufficient, our sensing and communication are characterized by breaks and silences. The reader might also feel some unease upon a close reading of 1:8b which is constructed in such a way that human hearing forms a parallel with the unfilled sea from 1:7. A construction with מלא is even used about both the sea and the ear of the human being, suggesting strongly that the parallel is consciously established – which is somewhat surprising, given 1:4 where the changing generations were contrasted to the permanent earth. Would it not have been more natural to place the individual parallel with the ever-moving, impotent streams? Are human beings now to be part of that which is permanent, their words constantly streaming, never reaching completion – never filling, or fulfilling them? A possible tension has been introduced between the description of the human situation in 1:4 and 1:8.

Humanity's unfulfilled existence cannot be explained simply by extending the depiction of cosmic time into the human realm. Elements of transience and brevity are strongly present in this and in the following three verses to emphasise, also, that there is a conflict between human existence and the cosmic, temporal set-up. Because of humanity's brief lifespan which limits their cognitive abilities and isolates them in the present, the things which confront them are neither sufficient, nor credible. The set-up of the metaphors in 1:7 and 1:8 offer a particularly clear demonstration of the way that Qohelet uses the enduring phenomena and their repetitious existence to describe human life which is

differently governed by time. Thus the metaphors in 1:5-7 address the human situation not only by extension, but also by establishing a contrast between the continuous motions of sun, water and wind and the individual human being.[211] This double function of the metaphors demonstrates well the situation of humankind: humanity is caught up in the cycles of movement as are they, but unlike them human beings do not endure.

The character of the world order, Qohelet suggests indirectly in 1:8, has profound consequences for human life: our expectations are not met and our life is laborious. הדברים in 1:8 are words, according to Fox, and they are Qohelet's: he is wearied by the routine of the world and his thirst for understanding is never quenched by that which he sees and hears.[212] However much the human hears or sees it never results in satisfaction. It will never be enough – or, worse, one's impressions may be fundamentally deceptive.

A new dimension is introduced in this and the following verses to complement the poem's depiction of time: that of *cognition*. Not only do human beings have too little time for their eyes and ears to be filled. The continuation of Qohelet's argument in verses 1:9-11 shows that our inability to recognize and understand that which meets our eyes and ears is at stake here as well. In 1:8 it is simply stated that one's understanding can never be complete, but 1:10 goes further and claims that the human perception of that which happens under the sun may be fundamentally wrong.

[211] In "*Coping with Transience*" (1993), pp. 25-26 and p. 56, Fredericks' reading of the poem places the phenomena of the world in much greater harmony with the human mode of existence. He argues that cyclicality governs the reality of both humankind and world. Although the natural phenomena are more long-lived than individual human beings, the potential longevity of both has the character of repetition.
[212] Fox (1999), p. 167. Note that Fox claims that this is not bad, although it certainly is absurd. However, 1:13 describes humanity's intellectual endeavour as exactly this: a bad or an evil business.

The inability of humanity to speak enough, hear enough, see enough *is* a lament about the order of things; the situation of humankind is judged and found to be wanting in terms of the span of time that they are given and what can be accomplished within it. However, what is questioned in 1:8-11 is the intellectual ability of humanity – not, for instance, their ability to act freely.[213] The sphere of human life that is compromised the most by the temporal order is, in these verses, that of cognition – the ability to understand and to communicate. Accordingly, the stress in 1:8-11 is on the human's intellectual capacity; that is, on our failing to recognise the sameness of events in time. It is highly illuminating to note that the only direct reference in 1:8-11 to what humanity can or cannot do occurs in 1:8a in the context of speaking.[214]

Having *already* established tensions between humanity's temporal conditions and those of the wider world, Qohelet draws the first conclusion of the poem in 1:9: the world-order is unchangeable. Verse 1:9 addresses the problem of a cyclical time-order directly. The order of the world consists of endless repetitions and it is therefore impossible to point towards any change or anything that is really new. This is problematic not simply because it means a regular repetition of events, but because of the consequences that Qohelet, on the basis of the temporal order explored in 1:4-7, envisions this state of repetition to have for human existence. It is especially 1:10-11 that explore the consequences of the repetitious character of world time.

[213] Pace Rudman's interpretation of the poem in (2001), pp. 83-98.
[214] That *"nobody can speak…"* is to be connected to human cognitive abilities and communicative skills is emphasized by the fact that 1:8b also questions the value of two other modes of experiencing the world. In addition, 1:10 also refers to observation and communication (using דבר, שׁיאמר, ראה).

*1:10: If it is said:[215] See this, it is new – that which is before us existed already ages ago.*
*1:11: There is no remembrance of the former and there will be no remembrance either of the later, who are to be, among those who come after them.*

Fox refers to these verses as a prose addendum.[216] He finds that 1:10-11 in a rather scholastic form anticipate a possible objection to Qohelet's observation in the previous verse: people *do* find various events to be genuinely new and unprecedented. Blaming the inadequacy of collective memory Qohelet is able to dismiss any such protest. Similarly, Whybray considers verses 1:10-11 a response to a potential objection to the conclusion drawn previously.[217] Such devaluation of 1:10-11, however, vastly underestimates the importance of the argument made here.[218] Qohelet reveals in these two verses the conclusions that he is forced to draw on the basis of what has been explored above. He concludes that the structure of world-time is set up so as to render human continuity impossible, as well as threatening humanity's understanding of the world.

Once again, it is the field of human cognition that Qohelet explores: verse 1:10 connects the theme of time's unchanging nature as a basic condition for human existence directly with our erroneous understanding of time: we believe that change *does* take place, even

[215] Literally: "There is a case when it is said/when someone says…" As noted by Goldman (2004), p. 66, even though "the vocalization of דבר as a participle cannot be ruled out (…) there is no clear evidence of such a variant reading, which would be bad Hebrew, in any case." He notes too that the Masoretic text preserves a double meaning of דבר as thing/case and word "on which Qoheleth seems to build his device (see v. 8)."
[216] Fox (1999), p. 164. Differently, Kamano (2002), p. 50, argues that verses 1:10-11 are part of the poem. Against Fox's definition of the verses as a less important prose commentary, one might argue that a change in rhythm within the poem may equally well indicate importance as unimportance.
[217] Whybray (1988), p. 111.
[218] The importance of the argument in 1:10-11 is also indicated by Qohelet's many returns to the theme of humanity's inability to remember and forge links between past/present/future. In several cases such returns to the thought of 1:10-11 even reuse language from these two verses. This happens, for instance, in 2:16, 3:21-22, 8:6-8 and 9:5.10.12.

though it does not. This mistaken impression is explained as being caused by a lack of memory. Qohelet here throws into doubt humanity's ability to understand the present – it really is not the land of newness that we believe it to be – as well as our ability to understand the past and its relation to the present. The consequences of this viewpoint prove immensely problematic for Qohelet's own exploration of human life lived in time.

Verses 1:10-11 undermine more directly than 1:8-9 the idea that world time and human time are unproblematically coherent: the human continuity, introduced in the poem's first verse, is challenged. It is described as a feat of self-deception. A strong focus persists on humankind's (lack of) intellectual prowess. What they experience and attempt to communicate has an untrustworthy character. They are strikingly unable to forge links between what should be their past, present and future.

In stark contrast with the images in 1:5-7 of continuity and unbroken repetition, 1:11 describes human beings as unable to transcend the present in which they live. This basic condition of life creates several problems for humankind. Bentzen focuses completely on Qohelet's resultant rejection of remembrance: one will never be remembered by one's successors. According to Bentzen this statement essentially constitutes Qohelet's (wholly negative) answer to the question in 1:3.[219] It certainly vexes Qohelet that the dead are forgotten regardless of their merits, and he returns to this problem several times.[220]

[219] Bentzen (1942), p. 14. Bentzen even translates "man husker ikke de gamle", thus underlining that in his view the issue is that of people not being remembered. See also p. 10: "Verden er et evigt Kredsløb. End ikke i mindet lever man videre. Hermed er også det Gammelisraelittiske Haab gjort til intet." (My translation of these two quotes: "even the old ones/the ancient are not remembered" and "The world is an eternal cycle. Not even in the memory does one live on. Thus, even the classical, Israelite hope has been negated.")

[220] For example 2:14b-16, 3:19-21, 4:16, and 6:12.

However, 1:10-11 also renders problematic the situation of human beings *during* the days of their lives.

Due to the way that time is set up, humanity is cut off from the past and the future. On a very basic level this makes human continuity impossible. As Berger notes, the process of forgetting, which is shown to be built into the very fabric of time, subverts all human meaning as it erases history and gain. Since humans are historical beings the constant moving of time – with its constant production of forgetfulness – casts the meaning of their existence into doubt.[221] Furthermore, if the same type of events and occurrences recur continually there will always be a new present to replace the current one – and there will never be space to remember the time past which dies away with the individuals. Thus, the time of the world is in direct collision with individual, human existence *and* with collective efforts to establish historical continuity.

### 1.3. Linearity and Repetition: The Human Situation within Cosmic Time

As noted above, Qohelet 1:4-11 is a poem which thrives on ambiguity throughout. This holds true in particular for the central presentation of humankind's temporal situation within the larger framework of the cosmic time-order. Several competing views on humanity's place in time are presented: initially, Qohelet suggests that their temporal situation fits snugly within the structured time that is evidenced in the continuous movement of phenomena (1:4 in relation to 1:5-7 alone). However, as he turns to a more

[221] Berger (2001), p. 148-149. Frydrych (2002) does not consider the limitations of memory as problematic as does Berger. However, he notes, p. 119: "The individual generational cycles of human existence lack any tangible and persistent link; they are connected by human memory alone. This has only got a limited reach…" As a persistent link between the generations is lacking, all human achievement is bound to disappear from human memory at some point.

detailed exploration of human time and cognition in 1:8-11, the author places in the foreground a different view on the human situation. According to this second viewpoint humanity's limited temporal existence, linearly shaped, is in a tense relationship with the cosmic time order. Qohelet connects this second understanding of our temporal conditions very closely to human cognition and argues that the reality of time limits and hinders human cognition. The human being remains unfulfilled. Despite the sameness of repetitive events in time we are unable to relate to the past, as we cannot remember it. In fact, even unwillingness to accept this view on time can be blamed on those very limitations for human understanding that the temporal order effects, 1:10-11.

Not only are human beings unable to recognize the true order of time. Based on their *experience* of the time order as it manifests itself in their lives, they come to establish and rely on their own erroneous conception of time. This lends an aspect of deception to ordered time; and it could be one of the reasons why the author has chosen such an ambiguous presentation in this poem. He demonstrates that humanity is not able to grasp their temporal situation, and that their perception of it remains untrustworthy exactly because of the way that time is set up.

In the understanding of the human situation in time in 1:8-11, a strong dichotomy is established between the elements' repetitious, cyclical movement through time – embodying the cosmic, temporal structure – and the linear, ephemeral life of human beings. The human being is not able to participate in the continuous repetition which

characterises the temporal movement of the elements – he is cut off entirely from both the past and future of humankind.

It is interesting that although several researchers mention the use of both cyclical and linear perceptions of time in 1:4-11, they almost univocally consider humanity to be in harmony with the world, whether understanding its time as cyclical or linear. Thus Fredericks emphasises the relationship between humanity and cosmos as harmonious in terms of their temporal existence. If there is longevity in anything in the cosmos or in the human world, he argues, it is to be found in repetition, not in the individual duration.[222]

Frydrych notes in connection with 1:4-11 that the things which are true of any particular generation are also true of another, so that in a certain sense the temporal movement of the generations is cyclic. "However, this cyclic temporal movement is accompanied by an additional linear element that accounts for the displacement of one generation by another, and yet a wider, supra-generational cyclicality, one which accounts for things that have the appearance of being new, but in reality are merely a repetition of something that took place outwith the reach of the present human memory."[223] Yet, even though Frydrych notes that human beings are unable to comprehend the wider, supra-generational cyclicity, he does not offer further reflections on the tension between the cyclical and linear modes of temporal existence in the book. Instead, he simply suggests that because

[222] Fredericks (1993), p. 24-28.
[223] Frydrych (2002), p. 118.

of the inaccessibility of the supra-generational cyclicity Qohelet focuses his investigation of human meaning on what can be achieved in the life-span of a single individual.[224]

Rather than discussing the tensions in the temporal world presented in the book, Frydrych argues that the world of Qohelet is a coherent cosmos; the human and the natural fully integrated with each other. This makes it possible "to study larger phenomenal patterns, such as the movement of the sun, apply them to humanity, and to draw from them conclusions about the nature of human existence."[225] Further, Qohelet sees existence as cyclic, yet constant. According to Frydrych these two characteristics of his world view mean that Qohelet's "personal observations have an objective value, that they can be generalized and applied universally."[226] However, this viewpoint forces too far into the background the elements of tension between cosmic time and human, temporal experience. Even more, it fails to take into account the questioning of the human, cognitive capacity which the second half of the poem underlines quite forcefully. As we examine Qohelet's further use of the theme of cognition in connection with the time-discourse we will see that the tension established between the temporal order and the human, cognitive engagement with this order remains a prominent theme.

[224] Frydrych (2002), p. 119. Frydrych (2002), p. 46, suggests that Qohelet in reality undertakes *two* searches within the book, the one introduced in 1:3 being the more comprehensive of the two. Here Qohelet searches for an absolute gain, the possibility of which he repeatedly denies later on. Therefore the "original programme is transformed to a less ambitious one, captured by the question *who knows what is good for a human being while he is alive, during the limited number of days of his absurd living* [Qoh. 6:11]." However, even though Qohelet emphasizes the briefness of life in 6:11 as opposed to in 1:3, the verse does in effect restate the question of 1:3; also shown by the repetition in the following verse, 6:12, of "under the sun".
[225] Frydrych (2002), p. 69.
[226] Frydrych (2002), p. 69.

## 2: 12:1-7: The Final Poem

While the ambiguous character of 1:4-11 to some extent obscures the tensions between cyclical, repetitive time and linear, ephemeral time-experience, the final poem with which the initial poem forms an inclusio, or a chiastic frame, demonstrates more unambiguously the distinctions made by Qohelet between world time and human time. 12:1-7 underlines that the perception of the world as a coherent, temporal whole – characterized by repetitions, continuity and cyclicity – does not correspond to the temporal reality as experienced by humanity. Furthermore, this poem shows that human perception governs our understanding of the temporal order. It is made clear that this perception is always limited, and potentially entirely mistaken.

### 2.1. Connections between the Framing Poems

In many ways 1:4-11 and 12:1-7 can be read as mirror-texts, reflecting the same themes and concerns. The final poem once again juxtaposes a depiction of cosmic elements with a depiction of the human sphere. Both texts place humanity's situation within the time-order centre-stage. However, whereas 1:4-11 focus mainly on the human relationship to past (and present), the focus in 12:1-7 is on (present and) future.

As suggested above, some of the ambiguities which dominate 1:4-11 are elucidated in the final poem. However, new difficulties are introduced as well, mainly because of the poem's difficult metaphorical language.[227] 12:1-7 is a poem so closely packed with multivalent symbols that researchers have been unable even to agree on the semantic

[227] As Fox (1999), p. 333 puts it: "This is a powerful poem, even if we don't quite know what it means. Actually, we do know what it means: enjoy life before you grow old and die. What we don't know is *how* it means it."

field(s) from which the overall metaphorical depiction draws its images. For instance, Sawyer suggests that the poem makes use of a well-known figure in wisdom literature, namely the house, "representing human achievements or success in terms of domestic security and contentment, and failure in terms of the collapse of the house."[228] Loretz argues that the poem describes a winter's day, contrasting nature which is revitalised come spring-time and the human who is not.[229] Dulin sticks to a more traditional allegorical interpretation of the poem, arguing that old age and not death is the main focus.[230] Other interpretations identify the tenor of the metaphors as the death of the individual human being[231] or the eschatological ending of the entire (human) world.[232] Disagreement also subsists regarding the degree to which the poem should be understood literally, as well as regarding the genres and literary conventions governing this passage.[233]

Despite their many similarities the two poems are rarely read together. Usually it is simply acknowledged in a cursory statement that these two poetic texts act as an inclusio

[228] Sawyer (1975), p. 520. Interestingly, Sawyer (p. 522) draws attention to the way Qohelet uses imagery connected to human beings building things (which are then ruined) and the problematic of time in the book, for instance Qoh. 2:4-8 and 10:8, although he understands the problem of time mainly as one of pre-determinism. Sawyer's reading demands many textual emendations, producing a drastically different text – I agree with Fox (1989), p. 283, that several of the emendations seem to be "proposed for the sake of the presumed parable, not for independent textual-philological reasons."
[229] Loretz (1964), p. 192.
[230] Dulin (2001), p. 268. Zimmermann (1973), p. 20, also focuses on the ageing and the (especially sexual) impotence of the individual man.
[231] Burkes (1999), p. 54-59.
[232] Seow (2008a), p. 376-380. I agree with interpreters such as Fox (1989), p. 285-298, Brown (2000), p. 108, and Ellul (1990), p. 285, that the depiction functions on several levels, drawing its images from different semantic fields.
[233] A useful overview of the approaches to the poem can be found in Fox (1988), especially pp. 56-58 and p. 60. An example of a more literal interpretation of the poem is the reading of Taylor (1874) who suggests that the poem is a dirge – or dirge-like, an interpretation towards which Fox (1999), p. 335, is sympathetic, although he emphasises to a higher degree than Taylor the poem's use of symbolic language. A very different suggestion in terms of the poem's genre and therefore genre conventions is that of Seow (2008a), p. 364, who emphasizes the use of eschatological language.

or as part of the chiastic framing of the book. This curious gap in the otherwise extensive scholarship on the book of Qohelet is remarked upon by Zimmer who notes that to his knowledge there is no dedicated study of the inner connections between these two texts.[234] Zimmer demonstrates that to a great extent 12:1-7 reuses images and language from the poem in chapter one. Significantly, the depiction of the natural elements and temporal realities account for much of the shared language. [235] All in all, Zimmer lists 11 lexical points of contact,[236] and suggests further that the poems are connected both in terms of content and in terms of their imagery which combines the sphere of humanity with that of nature.[237]

Addressing initially the linguistic overlap between 1:4-11 and 12:1-7, I wish to establish that there are indeed significant lexical connections between these two texts. It is important to examine whether the shared language of the two texts, including their similarities in wording as well as their imagery, encompasses central words, images, and ideas of the texts. Should one find this type of linguistic overlap, it would render it unlikely that the similarities observed between 1:4-11 and 12:1-7 are merely coincidental. And there *are* several such substantial overlaps. Firstly, the three natural phenomena from 1:5-7 recur in the final poem. Initially in 12:2 where the sun (along with other sources of light) is mentioned, while the wind and the waters are present in the storm and the rain, respectively. The word רוח occurs prominently in 12:7. The words used for the

[234] Zimmer (1999), p. 138.
[235] Zimmer (1999), p. 138.
[236] If one includes the immediate context of the poems, so that the passages compared are 1:3-11 and 11:7-12:7, 17 points of contact can be listed.
[237] The use of imagery that brings together humankind and nature perplexes Zimmer as he considers the connection between nature and human, as well as the world as a whole (including God's activity within and towards this whole), as having only little importance in the book. Thus he asks, p. 138: "Berührt Kohelet hier bewusst die Verbindung Mesch – Natur, die sonst nur eine sehr untergeordnete Rolle spielt?"

waters in the first poem, נחלים and ים, do not recur, but in addition to the reference to the rain in 12:2, sources of water are mentioned in 12:6: “and the jar is broken at the fountain and the wheel collapses into the well.”

Secondly, both poems use the same verbs of movement to describe temporal existence (הלך, שוב, סבב, בוא), either in terms of continuation and cyclicality or in terms of transience and linearity. An interesting shift in the use of these verbs – leading to a significant modification in their connotations – can be observed in the final poem, however. For instance, שוב (12:7) and סבב (12:5) are used now about human existence instead of referring to the movement of the elements. Transferred to the realm of humanity, the verbs connote in the last poem finality and death, rather than describing continuous existence.

Thirdly, key words describing time and its effects occur in both poems (עולם and זכר and היה). Again, a tension is established between their use in the first and the final poem: whereas the generations were ephemeral, interchangeable, in 1:4, while the earth remained לעולם, individual human being now get *their* עולם. For the human, however, עולם does not consist of any kind of permanent existence. Rather, it is their non-being in death which bears comparison with the temporal reality of earth and phenomena.

Finally, a degree of symmetry may be seen in the distribution of the shared terms and content of the two poems, although it has not been carried through rigorously and as such it is more difficult to establish the intentionality in this particular element of composition.

For instance, the natural phenomena are introduced first in both poems, and are then followed by a depiction of the human relationship to the temporal reality which they exemplify.[238]

### 2.2. Temporal Reality and Individual Perception

*12:1: But remember your creator[239] in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years arrive about which you will say: I do not take pleasure in them.*
*12: 2: Before the sun grows dark, and the light and the moon and the stars, and the clouds return after the rain.*

Whereas God was conspicuous by his absence in 1:4-11, the final poem begins with an exhortation to remember the creator. Then follows a brief depiction of the individual's death, practically presented in eschatological terms as the extinction of an entire universe, 12:2.[240] Seow goes further than most researchers here, suggesting that the final poem presents an actual eschatological vision in which neither humankind nor nature is

[238] The final poem then returns to and embellishes the contrast between the temporal realities of world (and God) on the one hand and humankind on the other, 12:5-7.
[239] The *yod* has been perceived as a textual problem, and lent support to the inner-Masoretic variant reading boreka, "your well". However, as argued by Fox (1999), p. 321, the yod is not a mistake, but "a fuller representation of the segol."
[240] Fox (1989), p. 293.

spared.[241] Zimmer has raised sensible objections against this reading, however, and noted, along with Fox, that what dies here is the micro-cosmos of the individual.[242]

Interestingly, Qohelet's application of eschatological imagery to individual death once again positions the impression of individual human beings – *their* understanding of world time and its relation to human time – at the forefront of the poetic presentation. Once again, too, the contrast between human time and world time is stressed – as well as between perceived time-structures and real time-structures.

When the images of sun and water come into play in this verse, they do so as part of the depiction of the human experience of time. No longer metaphors for the time-order of the world, the phenomena appear in a vision of doom wherein they perish with the individual. The complete extinguishing of the phenomena of the world in the individual's death provides a stark contrast to their real cyclicality. Thus, 12:2 strongly underlines the contrast between time as it functions in the world and as it is perceived to affect human life. The sun may continue to pant towards evening, again and again. But at the same

[241] Seow (2008a), p. 53: "it is not merely the end of the human life span of which the author speaks, but the end of human life in general." and 363-364. Perdue (1994), p. 236, argues in a similar fashion that "Qoheleth portrays a dramatic reversal of cosmic creation that is occasioned by the death of the human creature. The end of civilization, of light and life, and the onset of eternal oblivion is occasioned by the death of human beings. Death issues a resounding no to all traditional theologies of cosmic creation, providential guidance, and divine redemption." Finally, Kruger (1998), p. 399-411, presents an allegorical reading of the poem which focuses on an impending apocaplyptic disaster, hinted at in the metaphorical language which, Kruger suggests, reflects mythological ideas. Kruger's reading is very dependent on these specific mythological ideas – for instance, the slowing mill must function as a code for threatening cosmic disaster and the well be an image for a mythological idea about a whirlpool created by the millwheel falling into the ocean. I see no compelling reasons to assume that Qohelet would have been influenced by, and made use of, this specific set of mythical images. The poem in 12:1-8 stands in Kruger's interpretation completely isolated from the rest of the book and its concerns.

[242] Zimmer (1999), p. 134-135, and Fox (1989), p. 293. One might also note Brown (2000), p. 109: "the cosmic purview featured in the sage's final words – even if they are eschatological in scope – serves to underscore the harsh reality of the individual's death, in which the very modes of perceiving the world, including consciousness itself, are extinguished."

time, the sun in the individual's world darkens and dies when one's perception of, and participation in, the world are over.[243]

Sherwood's reading is perceptive: "I suspect him [Qohelet] of taking the grandiose vision of the breaking of cosmos and contracting it to the dimensions of the local – the village, the house, the body of just one man."[244] Sherwood suggests Qohelet stages a collision between a description of the breaking of cosmos and man at "a fast track" through verbs and nouns describing this breaking in terms of "smashing" and "breaking", and a "slow track" describing it as a dimming and reduction. The genre of eschatology is, Sherwood argues, hollowed out deliberately: "the world does not reach an end when we stiffen in our rented houses (and rented bodies)…"[245]

The difference between human perception of the time order and its reality in the world is underlined here: in the initial poem the reader might be fooled into believing that phenomena and human beings share the same temporal space in an unproblematic manner. In 12:2, however, it is much more difficult to perform such a misreading. The sun does not actually die with the individual human being, and the reader knows it.

Against this reading one could argue that the phenomena appear in 12:2 simply in order figuratively to emphasise the magnitude of the individual's death – and that no conscious comment is being made either on the human perception of time or on the time order as it

[243] Fox (1988), p. 67, persuasively argues that Qohelet "audaciously invokes images of general disaster to symbolize every death; more precisely – the death of you, the reader, to whom Qohelet is speaking…"
[244] Sherwood (2002), p. 113.
[245] Sherwood (2002), p. 113.

actually is. While such a criticism would be right in emphasising the importance of the problem of death in 12:1-7, as well as in Qohelet as a whole, I would argue that the depiction of the time order and humanity's situation within remains a main subject of the passage – and it is the subject within which the problem of mortality is here tackled. Indications that the discussion of time remains a central concern in this poem include, as mentioned, the use of similar language and imagery as in 1:4-11. Furthermore, it is significant to note that later verses of the poem contrast the death of the human with the rejuvenation of nature (12:3-6). The climactic depiction of the individual's death in 12:7 even makes use of language from Qohelet's exploration of the cyclical, and the divinely controlled, time to describe the human's death as a return of רוח.[246]

*12:3: On the day when the keepers of the house shake and the strong men are bent low[247] and the grinders cease because they are (too) few, and those looking through the windows darken.*
*12:4: And the doors are closed to the street. When the sound of the mill grows low, and one rises at the sound of the bird,[248] and all the daughters of song grow quiet.*
*12:5: And they also fear[249] the height and the dangers of the road. And the almond tree blossoms[250] and the grasshopper grows fat[251] and the caper berry bursts.[252] When man goes to his eternal home and the mourners turn about in the street.*

[246] Note the twice repeated שוב, which separates the human being from the רוח, and which recalls how the wind, רוח, in 1:5 continually returned in its unbroken circuits.
[247] Fox (1999), p. 323, notes that derivations of עוה "indicate twisting or distortion, always – except in the present verse – connoting moral deviance." One may note the use of the same root in 1:15.
[248] The text is difficult, but the Masoretic text is supported by all the versions. There is no pressing need for emendation either. Krüger (2004), p. 191, offers the alternative translation "When the sound of the mill becomes soft and high like the chirping of the birds…" Fox (1999), p. 319, suggests an attractive alternative which is, however, slightly awkward because of lacking agreement in gender between his verb and subject: "and the bird begins to sing." Goldman (2004), 110, may have a similar translation in mind when stating that the MT "produces a nice antithesis with v. 4b between "stand up" and "bow down" as well as between the sound from the outside and the lowering of human capacity to sing…"
[249] From the verb ירא, here defectively written, and not from ראה as is sometimes suggested. Gordis (1968), p. 344, suggests the waw indicating plural deleted as a dittography and the form thus emended to singular. This does not seem necessary.
[250] Goldman (2004), p. 110: "With the exception of σ all the versions support the reading recommended by the Masorah: the *hifil* of נצץ 'to blossom'…"
[251] Differently, Goldman (2004), p. 110, understands the hithpa'el of the MT – which he maintains – to mean "becomes a burden to himself".

Often understood allegorically, verses 12:3-4 describe a slowing down or hindrance of activity for groups of people. The characters are reduced, dimmed, and brought low, by old age and their approaching death. I am not convinced that a point-by-point allegory is intended in 12:1-7, or even in verses 12:3-4,[253] but I agree that one of several semantic fields from which these two verses draw their imagery is that of the (failing) human body. In 12:3-4 the uncertainty of human sensing which was underlined in 1:8 is supplemented by a dimension of cessation. The sensing now slows down, becomes laborious. And whereas a seeming correspondence was established between continuously moving phenomena and human sensing in 1:5-7 and 1:8, the contrast between nature's cyclical renewal and humanity's linearly limited existence is now emphasised – especially in 12:5.

12:5 initially depicts the fear of a group of people. The subject is either "the daughters of song" from the previous verse[254], or all of the groups mentioned in 12:3-4. If the latter is the case, those afraid are the old or dying whose loss of strength and vigour was thematized in the previous verses. 12:5 presents the result of this weakening upon their minds. Often interpreters understand מגבה יראו וחתחתם בדרך as a literal description. Old people are scared of heights because they find it difficult to walk up hills. Zimmermann states about the old man whose bodily ruin he understands to be the subject of 12:1-7: "He is likewise afraid of an uphill climb because he becomes short of breath and his heart

[252] An emendation to hophal may be preferable as the hiphil is transitive. See Goldman (2004), p. 111
[253] See the later discussion of the allegorical reading.
[254] So Fox (1989), p. 305.

pounds, and a declivity in the road gives him apprehension."[255] Such a switch to a literal statement within a figurative depiction is deeply awkward, however.[256] Furthermore, this interpretation does not do justice to the comprehensiveness of the fear described or to the contrast between humanity and nature which is established in 12:5. It is more likely – though the verse remains obscure – that those afraid are described as fearing the world in its totality: they fear that which is above and below them. One possibility one could consider is that the dangers of the road signify the dangers of the world in general, while the dangers from above are that which God sends.

As the human being is reduced to a quivering heap of fear, however, nature celebrates its renewal. The contrast is presented most strongly through three images in 1:5 from the sphere of nature, each of which potentially has a double meaning. Firstly, the blossoming tree is mentioned. This is an image of spring, but can also be used about human ageing. Secondly, the grasshopper or locust, loaded with food, drags himself onto the stage. In this context the locust may simply represent the abundance of spring.[257] However, again this is potentially a highly negative image: this animal is a looter who brings scarcity wherever he comes. Lastly, the bursting caper berry reflects a vitality of nature that cannot be contained: it bursts with ripeness. Yet again, however, the image also has destructive connotations. Because the bursting berry perishes it may also be an image of youthful vitality cut short. The possibility of understanding the images as metaphors of

[255] Zimmermann (1973), p. 20-21.
[256] Fox (1989), p. 305.
[257] Fox (1989), p. 306, argues that החגב should probably be understood as a plant as all three images would then deal with plant life. He therefore suggests emending to חצב, "sea onion". This would make for a neater parallelism and would remove the problem of an animal here taking part in the renewal of nature – in the rest of the text, animals are placed alongside humankind as finite beings and often function metaphorically to describe the human helplessness and insignificance when faced by death.

plenty as well as of scarcity and death make it credible that they are used in a similar way to the natural metaphors in the first of Qohelet's poems. As in 1:5-7 images from the realm of nature are used to explore the human situation. They depict the temporal situation of humanity by extension, but they also form a contrast to it.

The final move of verse 12:5 is to underline once again the conflict between the temporal conditions of humanity and world. It explicitly sets up the individual's going to his grave as happening simultaneously as the rejuvenation of nature.[258] Ironically, 12:5 is the only place in the book where the human being is given part in something permanent and lasting. While the earth and the world-order created by God last, and the natural elements within the world have a continuous, repetitive mode of existence, there is no permanence for humanity under the sun. They are only included in the עולם when dying.

As the mourners move through the street – turning, as the wind did unceasingly in 1:6 – the poem brings back the images from the sphere of house and village (12:4) to the metaphorical depiction of the death. Whereas the activity halted in 12:3-4, it now restarts, but with a bitter irony: being a mourning procession the activity and movement described is designed to mark the final termination of activity.

*12:6: Before the silver cord is snapped,[259] and the bowl of gold is crushed[260], and the jar is broken at the fountain and the wheel collapses into the well.*

[258] Thus also Fox (1988), p. 62: "this rebirth is without cheer, because it mocks the finality of *our* end. For man there is the snapping of a cord, the plunge into the pit…"

[259] I agree with Crenshaw (1987), p. 188, that the MT (a form of "to be distant") hardly makes sense, and that it is preferable "to read yinnātēq (is torn) with the help of the Septuagint (overthrow), Peshitta, Symmachus (cut), and Vulgate (break)." Fox (1999), p. 329, emends the qere to this verbal form. Gordis (1968) suggests that the Qere reading (ירתק) could be a privative niphal with the meaning "severed" which would work in the context too.

*12:7: And the dust returns*[261] *to*[262] *the ground from where it came and the spirit returns to God who gave it.*

A series of haunting images of destruction make up the climactic presentation of the human being's death in 12:6-7. Cyclical language is used at the peak of the poem's depiction to describe the רוח's return to God. The human is separated finally and irrevocably from that which has the capacity to return to the divine and thereby have a part in a continuing existence.[263] *He himself* returns to the ground.

Qohelet's final comment describes God as the one who gave the spirit. I suspect that we see here the final sarcastic sting of the author: depicting God as giver at the point where life is finally taken from the human is at best a thinly veiled accusation.[264] The definition of God as giver stresses at the very end of the book the divine responsibility for that very order which causes human death, and which creates conflict between humanity and world.[265] Perhaps the reader remembers as well that God was initially introduced, in 1:13, as a giver – specifically as the giver of humankind's evil business.

The final poem as a whole forms an impressive climax to the book's time-discourse. Not only does it reach back to 1:4-11, emphasizing again the problematic tensions between

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[260] With Fox (1999), p. 330, it is the best option to point as a niphal from the root רצצ with the meaning "smashed" or "crushed." See also Goldman (2004), p. 111.
[261] Gordis (1968), p. 349, notes that the jussive (rather than the imperfect) is anomalous. It is perfectly understandable, however.
[262] Emend to אל with the textual apparatus in Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia (editio quinta emendata) .
[263] I would disagree with the mood that Brown (2000), p. 108, senses in this final verse of the poem: "Qoheleth's discourse ends on a remarkably cathartic note with the person's life-breath returning to God (12:7). The eternal sleep of death serves as a wake-up call to live and welcome the serendipities of the present."
[264] A possible contrast to the sentiment here is Psalm 104:29-30 which in hymnic language, without complaint, describes the coming and going of generations, including their spirit's return to God.
[265] See also 3:14-15 and 7:13-14.

the temporal structure of the world and human life as it is lived within time. It also underlines the dichotomy between cyclical and linear time which was established in the initial poem. This is done especially by making the impression of individual human beings and their experience of time the focal point of the poem's depiction. 12:1-7 shows that from the individual's viewpoint the continuity of the world is merely a mirage – as illusory as the idea of a human continuity (1:9-11).

### 2.3. A Few Remarks on the Allegorical Reading

12:1-7 has often been understood as an allegory, in which each image represents one part of the ageing body.[266] For example, the women looking through the window are decoded as representing weakening eyesight, the men of valour as an old person's shaky legs or arms.[267] One such reading is that of Brenner who suggests a connection in genre between this poem and that of 3:2-8, arguing that both may be "literary offshoots of the Hebrew tradition of love lyrics." If understood thus, the allegory of the failing body would mimic the so-called *wasf* genre of love poetry which catalogues "bodily parts, typically in descending or ascending order…"[268] Some interpreters limit the allegorical interpretation to part of the poem. For example, Dulin presents an allegorical reading of 12:1-5, claiming that these verses deal solely with old age.[269] She argues that the sadness evident

[266] Dulin (2001) p. 267. Even more specialised is the reading of Zimmermann who argues, p. 21, that in addition to describing old age the allegorical images "represent disguised sexual symbols" to the extent that he paraphrases 12:1 as: "Be mindful of your health while you are young before the days of weakness come when you shall say: "I have no [sexual] pleasure in them.", p. 24.
[267] Dulin (2001) p. 268.
[268] Brenner (1993), p. 156. As examples of the genre she mentions Song of Songs 4:1-7, 5:10-16, and 7:1-7.
[269] Loader (1986), p. 131, also finds that 12:3-4 are allegorical; here an "entire household serves as a picture of the human body." 12:5 is considered along similar lines, although employing a new set of images to depict old age, such as their fear of the outside.

in the depiction is not caused by the author's awareness of coming death. Rather he laments that "aging [sic] causes deterioration of body and mind."[270]

Some of the images especially in 12:3-4a lend themselves well to an allegorical reading.[271] They all belong to the same general setting of domestic life. The image of a house is well-suited as a metaphor for the human body. The gradual failing of it and its inhabitants could be used metaphorically so as to correspond to various parts of the body. Furthermore, it would not be wholly unexpected to find a depiction of old age at this point, acting as a contrast to and a check on youth as it is described in chapter 11.

However, the allegorical reading is far from unproblematic. One warning sign is that the connections which interpreters claim to identify between the various images and the ageing body, in many cases, are strained.[272] Is it, for instance, the most likely understanding of the image of the slowing mill (12:4) that it represents (only) dysfunctional digestion?[273] Similarly, does Qohelet exclusively wish to refer to the physical effects of ageing in the image of a darkening sun and moon (12:2)? It is also concerning that in several cases the correspondence between the images and their de-coded meaning is so uncertain that differing allegorical meanings can equally well be suggested. Thus, Dulin understands the guards of the house as representing ribs *or* shaky

[270] Dulin (2001) p. 268.
[271] Fox (1989), p. 296, points out in particular the images of the grinding maids and the female "lookers". He also notes that the Hebrew word for "grinders" and "lookers" do not necessarily designate humans.
[272] Sawyer (1975), p. 519, notes that "a grotesque list of geriatric symptoms that have been identified in the passage can readily be compiled: e.g., deafness, constipation, ischuria, acrophobia, and agoraphobia in vs. 4; anorexia, impotence, and white hair in vs. 5."
[273] Dulin (2001) p. 268, who works on the basis of a Midrashic allegorical reading.

knees *or* legs.[274] Another, serious objection is the one made by Fox; that the allegorical approach "has commonly treated the imagery as if it were a disguise covering the 'true' meaning of the poem. The interpreter's task then becomes to strip off the disguise (…) Once removed, the guise itself ceases to be of interest."[275] However, the poem in 12:1-7 is resplendent with multivalent images which cannot simply be stripped away. And as a poem, 12:2-7 communicates its message exactly through the broad semantic potential of its imagery.[276] Standing on its own, an allegorical reading recognises only a very limited part of this imagery's potential scope of meaning.

### 3. Concluding Remarks on the Framing Poems and Their Presentation of Time

In both the initial and the final poem, time, understood broadly, is singled out as *the* basic condition for human life. The natural world is sketched in temporal terms, as is also the human existence, both when viewed from the perspective of the individual and when discussed under the broader heading of collective humanity.

Several claims about the character of time are made: Firstly, a dichotomy is suggested between that which is continuous and repetitive and that which is brief and limited in time. Chiefly, this dichotomy takes the form of a conflict between time as experienced and lived by the human being and world time. This tension between modes of time is accentuated strongly in both poems, and one may describe it as a clash between a cyclical

[274] Dulin (2001) p. 268.
[275] Fox (1988), p. 57.
[276] Again, I agree with Fox (1988), p. 71, who states that "the poem's purpose is not to convey information; it is to create an attitude towards aging and, more importantly, death." I would add to this observation that 12:1-7, working together with 1:4-11, also labour to integrate the existential experience of the individual human being into the larger, temporal scheme of the cosmos and highlight those points where such an integration becomes difficult or even impossible.

mode of temporal existence – which is characteristic of the cosmos and its structures – and a finite, more linear motion through time – which is the reality of individual, human existence. Elegantly, the author uses the structures and behaviours of nature both as contrast and as model for human life. To a certain extent the individual is presented as a micro-cosmos – but a micro-cosmos which dies, however, after its (linear) completion, while nature endures.

Qohelet investigates the cyclical elements of temporal existence through ideas of repetition and returning. The final poem offers as the only human return – the only human cyclicality, as it were – the death of the individual. This creates an elegant connection with the first poem which in its opening line described the movement of the generations across the face of the constant earth. As Qohelet undermines the expectation of human continuity, the final return of the dust to the earth and the spirit to God marks complete separation from the world's ongoing existence and the final failing of Qohelet's quest for permanent gain.

The final poem expresses compellingly the narrator's sense of impending death and oblivion intruding upon the present. The poem sets off as a response to the final exhortation to joy and appears initially to be a warning perspective, meant to focus the mind even more fully on the present. But the poem will not relent: repeating and repeating with variations its depiction of death and decay, it forces the present off stage. Blind, non-existent future intrudes here so forcefully upon the present that it takes over entirely – the future death seems to happen *now*. The threat of non-existence creeps up on

the reader and here at the close of the book the joy-exhortation which immediately preceded the poem is forced into the background as the virulence of temporal life is hammered home.

Secondly, several assertions have been made about the individual's relationship to the temporal reality and Qohelet will return to these claims repeatedly elsewhere in the book. The human being is presented as fenced in by an invisible past and future. Qohelet claims that the sensory experiences of the individual are not enough to secure points of orientation in this temporal situation. Rather, the (temporal) set-up of the world renders human impressions insufficient. They may even also be misleading.

Humanity's inability to understand the character of time, even as it affects their lives directly, is underlined repeatedly. This in particular will create problems for the author during the course of the book: he is attempting a cognitive ordering and a meaningful evaluation of human life under the sun – a life that he understands primarily in those very temporal terms which he here considers outside of our cognitive reach. How will the author engage with the temporal conditions of humanity after having singled them out both as all-important to his quest for meaning and content in human life *and* as fundamentally inaccessible to the human mind?

In the analysis of the bulk of the book attention will be paid to the way in which Qohelet builds upon that which he has established regarding the temporal conditions of human and world in the framing poems. Tensions between the depiction in these poems and

discussion of temporal themes elsewhere – as well as contradictory notions in the temporal discourse in general – will be considered especially. It will be considered whether some of these contradictions make sense in the light of the passages where Qohelet discusses time explicitly. Furthermore, it is possible that tensions in the text may also illuminate some of Qohelet's *strategies* for investigating this basic dimension of human existence which he has claimed – and will continue to claim – is inaccessible to the human mind.

## Excursus: Like a Shadow under the Sun

Much has been written about הבל, Qohelet's dominant Leit-Motif and his principal metaphor from the realm of nature.[277] The judgement that numerous, individual life experiences, or human life as a whole, are הבל is a habitual, concluding statement of Qohelet's, presented in a formulaic manner, usually with little or no further explanation.[278] Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the understanding and translation of הבל has become an interpretative crux: inescapably, the choices made here will influence one's overall impression of the tenor in Qohelet's argumentative endeavour. A further complicating factor is the suggestion that הבל in Qohelet's usage may differ somewhat in meaning from the other Hebrew Bible attestations of the word.[279]

As a metaphor, הבל has prominent temporal connotations.[280] Therefore, it makes sense within the remit of this project to sum up briefly a few of the most pertinent, scholarly contributions to an understanding of Qohelet's use of הבל. In addition, this excursus will

[277] See the following research contributions for an extensive discussion of the issue: Miller (1998), pp. 437-454, Fox (1989), especially pp. 29-48 and (1999), especially pp. 27-42, Seow (2008a), pp. 101-102, Fredericks (1993), pp. 11-32, and Schoors (2004), pp. 119-129.

[278] The only explicit elaboration is the coupling of הבל with another word presenting a value judgement. The words used by Qohelet in this context are רעות רוח which occurs in 1:14, 2:11, 2:17, 2:26, 4:4, 4:16, and 6:9, רעה רבה in 2:21, ענין רע in 4:8, and finally חלי רע in 6:2. See also Fredericks (1993), pp. 29-31.

[279] For instance by Fox (1989), p. 46, who notes that although "absurd", in his opinion, would work well as a translation in many of the attestations of the word outside Qohelet, "the use of *hebel* in Qohelet is distinctive; nowhere else is *hebel* predicated of an event." Investigating the attestations of הבל in other biblical books than Qohelet, Seow (2008a), p. 101, notes that in the Hebrew Bible the word is often used about something ephemeral or insubstantial, or it might describe something unreliable (for instance idols), Seow notes: "The point is that these things give the impression of substantiality, but they are only illusory."

[280] These connotations are exacerbated further through Qohelet's use of a small, but central cluster of words from the same semantic field as הבל to depict aspects of human temporality. Especially prominent is רוח which, aside from being coupled with הבל, is used about the divinely given breath of life (for instance 3:21 and 12:7), human attempts to retain this breath or to engage with their temporal conditions in a more general manner (8:8), and about the actual wind (1:6). However, also worth noting is צל, especially as it is used in 6:12, which will be considered briefly below.

consider Qohelet's use of the image of *the sun* – and more broadly images relating to light – as a temporal metaphor. The sun is Qohelet's other main metaphor from the realm of nature, but while this image is given high prominence by the author, it has mostly been ignored in scholarship.[281] It is suggested in this excursus that the images of הבל and שמש may be more closely connected than generally assumed, and that they both build upon assertions made in the framing poems about the times of the natural phenomena and of humankind.

**1. הבל**

Most interpreters agree that הבל connotes something basically unsatisfactory which is the cause of severe frustration.[282] While several non-metaphorical translations have been suggested, some of which capture well part of the meaning with which Qohelet has invested הבל,[283] none of them has the necessary multi-valence to encapsulate the full semantic range of the word.[284] For instance, Fox experiences problems in 3:19, 6:4, and 11:8 where "absurd" hardly makes sense as a translation, and it is difficult to make "transitory" work when Qohelet describes societal evils and problems embedded in the

[281] Possibly it has been overlooked because it does not have as privileged a structural position as does for example הבל. However, while not used as a concluding statement in itself the expression "under the sun" occurs often in statements which sum up or initiate an area of exploration (see for instance the introductory question to the introductory poem and the whole book, 1:3, the conclusion to the royal fiction, verses 2:17-20, each of which repeats the expression תחת שמש, the passage 4:1-3 which is framed by the expression, and 9:9 concluding an emphatic joy exhortation).

[282] For example Whybray (1989), p.64. Brown (2000), p. 22, argues that הבל connotes something empty and worthless. Ogden (1987), p. 22, however, takes the more positive view that הבל simply connotes something mysterious.

[283] Good examples are the translations of Fox (1989), p. 37, who translates "absurd", Fredericks (1993), especially pp. 23-32, who translates "transitory", and Good (1965), p. 182, who suggests "incongruous" or "ironic."

[284] Cf. Zimmer (1999), p. 28.

world's structural design as הבל, such as in 2:19, 2:26, 4:16, and 8:14. In addition, some would question the appropriateness of transience in 6:11.[285]

In Ecclesiastes, הבל is first and foremost used metaphorically[286] – and as such its meaning is partially lost if one insists on translating it into a literal expression or renders its meaning with an abstract concept. I would therefore be hesitant about accepting Fox's suggestion that the exegete ought to search for *one* concept that can adequately capture the meaning of all Qohelet's הבל-predications.[287] It may not be possible.[288] Although all the book's הבל-predications make use of the same metaphor they exploit different aspects of that metaphor – just as one הבל-statement may make use of several aspects of the possible, semantic field of הבל. Thus, it is unsurprising that several of the differing translations which substitute הבל with an abstract concept reproduce well part of the meaning of the metaphor. There is, then, a lot of sense in Perdue's plea that "we should return to the original metaphorical character of hebel…"[289]

[285] As does Fox (1989), arguing that "many words" can hardly increase transience. Here, though, the point might be that all words are transient – something which increasing them does not change. Rather, it draws attention to the problem.
[286] Miller (1998), p. 443, also understands הבל metaphorically, and argues that it is to be seen as a symbol for human existence with three main referents: insubstantiality, transience and foulness. Fredericks (1993), p. 15, also emphasizes the metaphorical use of הבל, despite choosing "transitory" as his main translation.
[287] Fox (1989), p. 37.
[288] The best solutions seem to be *either* to retain the metaphorical character of הבל and translate with, for instance "breath" or "vapour" – or, as I have chosen in this thesis, to retain הבל untranslated in order to preserve its multivalence.
[289] Perdue (1994), p. 206. He argues, p. 207, that the root meaning of הבל as a metaphor is "ephemerality": "Human existence and the accomplishments of mortals are ephemeral – that is, they are quickly passing. Yet humans still have the innate desire for life's vital spirit, the life-giving breath that comes from the creator…" And later on the same page: "Instead of essentially regarding all of life and its activities as meaningless and absurd, Qoheleth primarily laments the fact that life so quickly passes." Here Perdue is in agreement with Fredericks (1993).

Fox argues differently that most of Qohelet's הבל-predications are not live metaphors. His main criterion for metaphorical usage is that a live metaphor demands a two-level interpretation where the initial, literal understanding must be rejected in favour of a metaphorical reading. In Qohelet's use of הבל, he argues, this is generally not the case.[290] It is questionable, however, how strong this argument is. הבל in Ecclesiastes does not at all behave like a dead metaphor. Perhaps most significantly, הבל maintains strong connotations of "vapour" and "breath" in Qohelet's usage of the word. For instance, it is noteworthy that when הבל first appears within the narrative context (1:14) it does so accompanied by a parallel term from the same semantic field: רעות רוח, chasing of wind. The two motifs occur repeatedly together, suggesting that they should be understood in light of each other and that Qohelet refers consciously to the semantic field of "wind", "vapour" and "breath". In fact, Qohelet shows great interest in this particular semantic field: רוח is an important catchword in its own right.[291] It occurs 24 times,[292] both to describe the patterns of the actual wind and in connection with the central themes of death and divine judgement. Furthermore, the originality of Qohelet's use of הבל suggests metaphorical usage. One may also refer to 3:19 which may play directly upon the literal meaning of הבל in the context of creaturely mortality, as it describes specifically the effects of the shared רוח of human and animal as הבל.

Another of Fox's reasons for rejecting a metaphorical understanding of הבל is that it is not, to his mind, a very useful image: "vapour can represent many things."[293] This is a

[290] Fox (1989), p. 30.
[291] Miller (1998), p. 447, stresses the importance of רוח and רעות רוח as a synonym terms for הבל.
[292] Zimmer (1999) pp. 13-14, and Schoors (2004), pp. 161-165.
[293] Fox (1989), p. 30.

puzzling argument, however. Why does the fact that "vapour", "breath" or "breeze" has a wide semantic reach render a metaphorical reading useless? Salyer is on the mark when stating: "The basic problem is that tensive-symbols, which hold a variety of meanings, are poor vehicles for expressing unitary meanings, which is what most readers expect from a summarizing statement. Readers do not understand which of the various nuances of 'breath' is supposed to express the viewpoint of the narrator…"[294] הבל may indeed represent a great many things, but this only validates a discussion of the word's range as a metaphor, and therefore of its semantic field.

Literally הבל means something like "breath", "breeze", or "vapour".[295] The temporal aspect is readily apparent. Several of the suggested translations also carry temporal connotations, such as "transitory"[296] and "insubstantial".[297] Breath or vapour is something of brief duration. When applied metaphorically to human life, this quality of הבל forcefully evokes life's brevity and frailty.[298] The flow of time cannot be halted: human beings are transitory, their life brief as a breath, its ending inevitable (8:8).

Vapour cannot be seized; any attempt to hold onto it is doomed. הבל is, significantly, outside human control. The image of vapour is also connected to the theme of our unsuccessful search for knowledge within this world: wind is intangible. Mist dissolves if one tries to grasp it, but at the same time it makes it impossible to see one's surroundings

[294] Salyer (2001), p. 256.
[295] Fox (1989), p. 29, notes that this sense of הבל is only attested in the Hebrew Bible in Isaiah 57:13.
[296] Fredericks (1993), p. 31.
[297] Burkes (1999), p. 47-48, understands הבל as signifying that which is insubstantial and ephemeral, the transience of life being the overriding theme.
[298] Fredericks (1993), p. 23.

properly; they remain hidden in a dream-like guise which can neither be gripped nor removed. Furthermore, to an extent there is something self-defeating in the attempt to describe הבל and to describe things as הבל. One may note with Salyer: "To describe the experience of futility or absurdity is nearly as absurd or futile as the primal experience itself…."[299]

Qohelet uses רוח with similar temporal connotations as הבל: the wind which turns around endlessly is part of the ever-continuing world order that the human being is subject to and cannot affect (1:6). Even the God-given breath within the individual is beyond his control. Not knowing when it will leave them and what will happen to it after their death, human beings are as helpless as dumb animals (3:18-21, 9:12).

It is worth considering whether, in connection with Qohelet's metaphorical use of הבל, one might build upon the suggestion of Forman, Verheij and others that the opening chapters of Genesis could be a source of theological inspiration for the author of Ecclesiastes.[300] Specifically, the author may have been intrigued by the popular etymology in Genesis 4 which establishes a connection between the name Abel and הבל, invoking even in the name of this primeval man the notion that his life was an uncertain, fleeting business.[301] In comparison, Qohelet goes further still: הבל is considered a fitting way of characterising every human life as well as the entire order of the world as it is

[299] Salyer (2001), p. 255. This is, he argues, "one of the reasons that Qoheleth's use of hebel is so difficult to understand…" Similarly, Ellul (1990), p. 57, notes also that when one declares all vanity then this declaration in itself can be seen as yet another vanity.
[300] Verheij (1991), pp. 113-115, and Forman (1960), pp 256-263. Fredericks (1993), p. 36, notes that the author of Ecclesiastes must have been aware of the creation account in Gen 2, and that he uses language reminiscent of Gen 3 as well. Crenshaw (1987), p. 38, suggests familiarity with the priestly creation-myth. Sharp (2004), p. 56-57, finds connections between Ecclesiastes and the story of the fall.
[301] Forman (1960) p. 257-58.

experienced by humanity. If Genesis 4 were a source of inspiration for the author of Ecclesiastes[302] Qohelet may have wished to present the fate of Abel as paradigmatic for the situation of humanity. Abel is not only the first man to die unjustly, the victim of fratricide – he is also the first man who dies at all. Furthermore, Abel's untimely death appears all the more unjust because it happens in spite of God's special preference for him. The narrative is unsettling at this point also because of the randomness of God's favour which contributes to the dramatic climax in Gen 4:8. The theme of God's inexplicable preference – or displeasure – is thematized at length in Ecclesiastes,[303] as are also the ways in which God's stance towards human beings conditions their fate and life conditions. הבל is repeatedly used by Qohelet to sum up such reflections.[304]

Miller's research contribution to the understanding of הבל, which was mentioned above, provides a particularly appealing approach to this motif in Qohelet. Building on the argument of Seow, Miller presents a detailed study of הבל's semantic reach.[305] He considers הבל a multivalent symbol, one of the main connotations of which is the temporal idea of transience.[306] The other two important referents, he argues, are insubstantiality and foulness.[307] Allowing this referent to stand alongside the image's

[302] Conversely, one could argue that Abel is merely one out of many Hebrew Bible names whose metaphorical connotations were not noted to any great extent by reader or author. Against this view I would emphasise that the author of the J-narrative appears to have spent considerable energy on providing his characters with symbolic names. Examples include Adam, Eve and even Abel's brother, Cain.
[303] Brown (2000), p. 22, briefly compares Abel's fate – that he was killed even though he was the favourite of God – with the lament in Qohelet that all gain in life is fragile and uncertain.
[304] For instance 2:24-26, 3:18-19, 6:2-9.
[305] See Seow (2008a), pp. 101-102.
[306] See Miller (1998), pp. 448. Miller, p. 444, argues that Qohelet is precise in his use of הבל, clarifying in each instance of its use which referent is in play. Part of Qohelet's strategy is to "guard" his metaphor and assist interpretation through his use of synonym words and expressions.
[307] It may be a similar aspect of the הבל-metaphor's meaning which Tamez (1997), pp. 53-54, has in mind, when translating it as "a bunch of crap", "filth" or, with deliberate coarseness on p. 61, "excrement."

other referents, rather than choosing only one, is an attractive solution. It remains a matter of interpretative preference, however, which of the referents the reader wishes to foreground, given that several notions from the semantic field of הבל compete in Qohelet.[308]

**2. The Sun**

Commonly, modern scholarship more or less ignores the imagery connected to the sun in the book of Qohelet. Sometimes it is stated that it is simply a clichéd feature of Qohelet's language.[309] To a certain extent, this judgement makes sense: the construction "under the sun" is certainly used in a highly formulaic manner,[310] and it is especially in this particular construction that the reader encounters sun-imagery in the book.[311]

As in the case of הבל, the question should be asked initially whether שמש as used in Qohelet can be perceived as a living metaphor in any meaningful way. At a glance, it seems that there is no great need for שמש to be understood metaphorically. In his favourite construction, "under the sun", Qohelet could easily be referring to the sun on a literal level only. As seen by Seow and Janzen, this formulaic expression sums up human existence in its totality, but, again, שמש does not need to be a living metaphor for the fixed expression to have that meaning. Looking more broadly at Qohelet's use of words from the semantic field related to light and sun, however, one finds that it is far from

[308] Therefore the solution of Salyer (2001), p. 254 seems sensible too: "Perhaps a better way to handle the semantic opacity of hebel is to allow it to have a dominant meaning ('absurd') with a variety of other nuances ('fleetingness', 'meaningless', 'transitory', 'futile')."
[309] For instance, Schoors (2004), p. 137, notes that the expression תחת שמש is a stereotyped formula.
[310] In that sense, however, the use of sun imagery is quite similar to the way that הבל is utilized in the text.
[311] This expression accounts for 29 of the 35 occurrences of the word שמש in Qohelet, see Schoors (2004), p. 137.

constrained to this one formulaic expression. Rather, other contexts in which this language is employed make creative use of the semantic potential of sun and light and approach the words very much on a metaphorical level.

The straightforward and unproblematic application of the light-imagery occurs most frequently. As Qohelet equates living with being under the sun and seeing the sun, light comes to signify the whole of human existence, not just in terms of its temporal framework, but in a highly experiential way too.[312] At times Qohelet states unequivocally that it is good to see the sun, such as in 11:7. However, other passages sit uneasily with this claim. Especially when existence is summed up in the formulaic expression of life under the sun, it would seem that living is perceived as both problematic and painful.[313]

This negative application of an inherently positive image allows Qohelet to use the imagery of light and sun in a wholly unexpected manner. A striking example of this is the description in 6:12 of the human being living under the sun as a shadow. The image surprises: how can the human being, walking about in the sun, possibly look like a shadow to the author of the book? The temporal connotations of life "under the sun" provide the key to understanding the image: a life under the sun is always a life limited in time. This feature of human existence makes the shadow suitable as an image for human existence. A shadow is insubstantial and impossible to touch. It is transitory. One may even wonder whether the image of the shadow, evoked in this manner only in 6:12, bears

[312] So also Schoors (2004), pp. 59-60. One may also note in this context that when the sun darkens (12:2) Qohelet is depicting cessation of life.
[313] So for instance 1:3, 1:14, 2:11, 2:17-20, 3:16, 4:1 and 4:3, 5:12, 6:1, 6:12, 8:9, 9:3 and 10:5. An exceptions is the occasional use of the expression תחת שמש in the context of a joy exhortation, see 5:17, 8:15, and 9:9.

some relation to the image of הבל whose semantic scope includes also the insubstantial, the transitory, and that which cannot be grasped.

Sun and wind imagery are employed in the depiction of nature, as well as in relation to human life. When they are used specifically about the realm of nature they take on connotations of continuous movement and endurance (especially in 1:5-6). They come to exemplify the very cosmic fabric which defines and moderates human existence. However, when applied to the human existence, these two images illustrate some of the most problematic tenets of our life-experience. They suggest that even basic life-conditions, experiences and expectations are not what they seem. Though one would expect imagery connected to the sun to evoke something of much more permanent character than images which draw upon notions of breath, mist and wind, Qohelet actually uses both semantic realms to depict human transience and disorientation.

# Chapter 4: The Present in the Book of Qohelet

*Our time is a very shadow that passeth away*. (Wisdom of Solomon, 2:5)

True to the focus established in the framing poems, the bulk of Ecclesiastes frequently returns to and explores the temporal set-up and its effects on human life. The presentation of the temporal realities, as well as the human perception of these, is rarely laid out as extensively or given as explicit priority as in the poetic frame. Yet the theme of time remains a central part of Qohelet's thinking throughout the entire work. As argued in the introduction, only a limited number of pericopes can be found which do not touch upon this theme in some form or other.

The exploration of the framing poems showed that Qohelet the narrator early on betrays an interest in temporal phenomena and realities which *last*: he examines that which regularly repeats itself to consider what these enduring structures may say about the cosmos which humankind inhabits. He is, however, also interested in types of existence in time which are brief, ephemeral in character, and in how they fit with the larger framework of ongoing temporal movement. The cosmos stays in view and the wider continuity of the world remains the constant, necessary backdrop to the narrator's investigation of the possibility of a human continuity to match it. Yet, the wider non-human world is never again as explicitly placed in the foreground as in the framing poems. It is warranted, therefore, to focus in this chapter, as Qohelet does in the bulk of the book, on human history, our lived life and its potentiality, as the lens through which the temporal reality is viewed.

The conceptual categories of past, present and future are apt to characterize Qohelet's interest in time.[314] When the narrator engages with the reality of time, he does so either by stressing the temporal dimension of our life *now* or the larger temporal continuity. Often he aims to connect in various ways these two realms of time. Looking to the past, Qohelet speaks specifically about what may or may not characterize the former days. The book makes use of narrators and characters who all, to some extent, belong to the past. Looking to the future, Qohelet repeatedly questions whether one can establish a relationship between the present moment and the future, and identify potential connections between these two temporal realms. Accordingly, this and the next chapter will consider what Qohelet establishes regarding both the temporal reality of the present (chapter 4) and the relationship between present and the wider horizons of past and future (chapter 5).

Within the book's discourse on time *the present* stands centre-stage.[315] The present is suggested in several passages as a potentially meaningful aspect of an otherwise problematic human existence. This is the dimension of the present in the book of Qohelet that scholarly readings have tended to focus on: the present moment is often interpreted in close connection with Qohelet's discussion of joy, the main question being whether or not the present moment can provide sufficient meaning for the individual human being.

[314] Regarding the Hebrew vocabulary for past and future it is worth referring to Brin (2001) p. 177, who notes that one of the most widely used terms for the past is רִאשׁון or רִאשׁונים, used for instance in Qohelet 1:11 and 7:10. On p. 187-188 he states that words designating the future are few, among them constructions with דור (for instance דור האחרון and דור הלך ודור בא, the latter of which occurs in Qohelet 1:4). Qohelet uses other constructions with the root אחר to refer to the future, see for instance 1:11.

[315] As Isaksson (1987), p 82, states: "The whole emphasis in the book lies on the actual life under the sun…"

In essence, the question asked is whether the present moment is put forward in Ecclesiastes relatively unambiguously as a life-embracing *carpe diem*[316] – or whether, alternatively, one should conceive of the attention to the "now" of human existence more as a *memento mori* in which the present and its value serve chiefly to remind Qohelet's reader about death to come?[317]

Characteristically, the book contains statements to support views which foreground the present as an encouraging counterpoint to Qohelet's lament about human transience, *as well as* views which emphasize instead the pessimistic utterances, considering calls to present enjoyment a naïve notion of joy here and now. Thus, in several prominent passages Qohelet is remarkably unequivocal in his praise of the life-possibilities afforded in the present. This is especially the case when he develops his ideas about the character of the present in the book's exhortations to joy.[318] These passages focus univocally on the present, the future disappearing almost entirely from view. Yet, other passages radically draw the value of the "now" of human existence into doubt.[319]

[316] As in the readings of Lee (2005) and Whybray (1982), pp. 87-98. Fredericks (1993), p. 63, argues that "pleasure and enjoyment are good and commendable pursuits to counterbalance one's exhaustive efforts. (…) Qohelet does nor expect to enjoy life endlessly, any more than he expects to despair of life endlessly."
[317] As is much more the case in the reading of Crenshaw (1987), see for instance p. 23 and p. 183. Zimmer (1999), p. 156, notes that "Die Antwort auf die Frage nach dem Verhältnis von carpe diem and memento mori scheint offensichtlich sehr vom Leser selbst abzuhangen. Man darf vermuten, dass diese Offenheit durchaus im Sinne Kohelets ist."
[318] Schoors (2000) notes seven: 2:24-25, 3:12-13, 3:22, 5:17-19, 8:15, 9:7-9, 11:8. Lee (2005) counts eight, including the unusual 7:14 (2:24-26, 3:12-13, 3:22, 5:17-19, 7:14, 8:15, 9:7-10, 11:7-12:1) and states, p. 125, that "Qohelet's theology of enjoyment addresses the most basic and most urgent questions regarding human existence (…) it is in the regular practice of joy that a person experiences the authentic and complete life intended by God for humanity."
[319] For example 2:14b-20, 4:1-3, and 7:1-4, and, more generally, the dire evaluation of human society here and now.

However, only part of Qohelet's thought about the present moment is encapsulated if one focuses exclusively on determining the hierarchy between Qohelet's affirmations of joy and his pessimistic utterances about the human condition. Rather, the presentation of the present moment must be evaluated also in relation to the book's discourse on time. Focusing on the present moment in relation to Qohelet's time-discourse may also help us avoid the overly simple dichotomy sometimes established in scholarly works between the positively regarded, at least somewhat meaningful "now" and a problematic and uncertain future whose only reliable point of reference is the inevitability of death. Rather, Qohelet's ideas about how time is structured to govern human life in the present – and how the rule of time is experienced from the human perspective – entail an understanding of the "now" full of contradiction, both affirming human activity now and drawing attention to the problematic relationship that human beings have with the temporal realities in the present.

**1. General Overview of Qohelet's Conception of the Present**

The author of the book of Qohelet discusses the present as human life-opportunities here and now.[320] He does not describe it as a single, snap-shot moment – as one would the here-and-now dot on a time-line. Instead, he is interested in a present with duration. Howard-Brook and Gwyther suggest that an understanding of the present as something durative is a basic characteristic of "biblical" conceptions of time. Rather than being the dividing line between past and future, the present is invested with a high significance and

[320] It should be noted that the author's reflections are not systematized – he does not define his concepts carefully as one would in a philosophical treatise, leaving instead the notions and themes of his discourse flexible and consequently somewhat vague.

envisaged as an enduring reality.[321] In a similar sense, Qohelet's is an extended present; a time of activity and feeling. A notion of a present which is not large enough to encompass cognitive or physical activity, which bears no relation to past or future, is absent from the book of Qohelet.

Most frequently the present is presented as the life-opportunities afforded *here and now* – in the form of our experiences of oppression, joy, or the various other situations facing us in time. In this sense, the present is the lived time of the individual. 3:2-8, for instance, presents the present broadly as the everyday practice of our daily life and activity. On an even larger scale, however, the present is also our experience of and response to those larger contexts into which we are embedded. One example of this is Qohelet's depiction of our present life through reflections on the socio-political reality. His depiction of injustices in the human realm implies that they are built into reality and unchangeable, and as such they ring true with general, human experience.[322] Yet the narrator's eye remains fixed on the extended present and it is this temporal dimension – that which he sees and experiences – he is describing.[323]

[321] Howard-Brook and Gwyther (2005), p. 125. These observations are connected to reflections on the type of society in which certain conceptions of time can be found, and they would argue that the society in which the biblical texts are created is a "present-oriented" society. Given the discussion in chapter 1, it must be emphasized that this notion is problematic if Howard-Brook and Gwyther assume that biblical thinking can really only be present-orientated, due to the writers' lacking capacity to conceive of time differently. However, insofar as the scope of their claim is more modest, their suggestion is helpful: in Qohelet, like in other biblical books, we may find that attention is paid towards the present moment which is invested with high significance and depicted as a temporal sphere of activity and thinking.

[322] See for instance 3:16-17, 4:1-3 and 8:19.

[323] Referring to the same passages as above, one may note that they all address the present situation as experienced, and observed, by the narrator. Verbs such as ראה (3:16, 4:1) which stress the dimension of sensing, and thus of experience, and verbs which describe reflection – אמר (3:17) and שׁבח (4:2) – have a similar effect.

The present appears at its most engorged when Qohelet occasionally views the entire current generation of humanity under the heading of a form of present. This is the case when he contrasts the present generation with the past and the future in 1:11 and in other similar reflections. For instance, 4:2-3 view the present very much as the reality of humanity currently alive in the world: "And I praised the dead who have already died above the living who are still alive, but better than both of them is he who has not yet been, who has not seen the evil work which is done under the sun." Characteristically, humanity's *experience* of their temporal existence is an important aspect of Qohelet's indictment on life in the present in these two verses. In an even more pronounced manner than in 4:2-3, Qohelet uses in 7:10 the experience of human beings living in the present to define and delineate the present time and contrast it with the past: "Do not say: 'how is it that the former days were better than these?' for it is not from wisdom that you ask about it." The present is, more or less successfully, fenced off from and distinguished from past and future through our cognitive effort.

The extendedness of the present moment does not, however, render Qohelet's discussion of it concrete only. It is not devoid of abstract reflection on this dimension of time and its relationship to a wider, temporal framework.[324] Qohelet's discussion of the present, as of other aspects of the temporal reality in this world, grapples keenly with fairly general, abstract notions of time. As noted in chapter 1, Machinist persuasively suggests that Qohelet is in the process of moving towards a higher degree of abstract conceptualization, and that a significant part of this development happens through his

[324] Cf. the discussion in chapter 1 of the scholarly view that Old Testament time conception as something eminently concrete.

reflections on time. Noting the use of terms from the semantic fields of time and knowledge, such as חשבון, מעשׂה and עולם, to describe both a concept and reflection on that concept, Machinist states that in the book of Qohelet "we witness the beginnings of a technical vocabulary created or adapted to deal with the problem of time in human existence."[325] It is in the present that our reflection on the now as well as on the wider temporal framework takes place. In the framework of the book of Qohelet any temporal dimension has a strong cognitive component – and it is through the human experience of and reflection on the temporal conditions that these are delineated and defined.

Finally, I am intrigued that Qohelet's presentation of life in the present appears intimately connected with movement. Qohelet turns again and again to observe what happens in the present, as if adjusting himself continually to the present which faces him now – and now – and now…[326] The author uses an abundance of verbs of movement not only to describe human activity in the present, but also to depict the continuous, repetitious movement within the temporal order which conditions the human life as it is lived here and now.[327] Simultaneously, however, he underlines that this flux of movement which makes up the temporal framework of human existence and experience takes place within fixed world structures. One example of this is the juxtaposition of depictions of temporal movement with the word עולם in 1:4, in 3:2-8.11 versus 3:14-15, and in 12:5-7.

[325] Machinist (1995), p. 171.
[326] Christianson (1998), p. 222, helpfully lists the words relating to movement in Ecclesiastes. *His* purpose is to demonstrate the physical aspect of (the language) of Qohelet's narrative journey: "As if to say 'I set out, yet I return to where I began and am unable to complete my journey (…)' Qoheleth is traveling." (P. 224)
[327] For instance, the cosmic order is depicted through verbs such as הלך, בוא, סבב and שׁב in the initial poem. As mentioned in chapter 3, section 2.1, several of these recur in the final poem, here describing the human, transient existence.

## 2. 3:1-15: Thinking about the Present in the Present

The famous poem on time in chapter 3:2-8 and its immediate context in 3:1 and 3:9-15 engage especially with the extended present of human life, questioning its value given the temporal conditions of human beings. Of all the passages in the book of Qohelet to thematize time explicitly, the poem in 3:2-8 and Qohelet's subsequent discussion of it are the most firmly anchored to the temporal realm of the present. The poem conjures up an image of a present filled with activity and life experience – a depiction which is also connected to a more abstract understanding of the present, however: the deceptively simple poem on the rhythms of humanity's daily life is overlaid with abstract reflection on the character and value of the present in human existence. As the poem is tied to the wider temporal framework in 3:1 and 3:9-15, the present is invested with existential significance and its value must therefore be evaluated.

In the discussion in chapter 1 on scholarly understandings of Hebrew Bible time conception, I rejected the view of Wheeler Robinson and others that the authors of the Hebrew Bible conceived of time exclusively as something concrete. According to this line of research, the Hebrew mindset conceived time as various times filled with a particular content, with more abstract aspects present only to a very limited degree. The objections which were made on linguistic, as well as on textual grounds, to this understanding of the Hebrew Bible conception of time should be retained. Even so, one may consider whether there is in Wheeler Robinson's reading a helpful sensitivity to the connection *sometimes* found in Hebrew Bible depictions of time between ideas relating to

the theme of time and the content of concrete moments and periods in time.[328] Granted, Wheeler Robinson considers the book of Qohelet an odd one out within the Hebrew Bible corpus specifically because of its explicit discussion of temporal themes. However, something in his emphasis on *content* rings true with what the author of Qohelet is attempting to do, especially in this particular passage. Reading 3:2-8 one is given the impression that Qohelet cares greatly about *that which we do* in the present moment: it is through the potential and actual content of such moments that Qohelet investigates and evaluates the value of our present life. This emphasis on the concrete does not, however, exclude a concomitant attention to something more abstract. In fact, one may even underpin the other as Qohelet uses his description of specific events, time filled with real and expected content, as a basis upon which to build a much more abstract evaluation of the value of temporal existence. This is not dissimilar to the authorial strategy in the initial poem where 1:9-11 suggested existential implications of temporal phenomena and events in time on a more general level than the depiction of the previous verses.

### 2.1. 3:1-8: A Time to Live and a Time to Die

*3:1: Everything has its moment[329] and every event[330] its time under the heavens. 3:2: A time to be born[331] and a time to die. A time to plant and a time to uproot what has been planted.*

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[328] Fox (1999), p. 195, comments levelheadedly in his excursus on the "catalogue of times" that time as expressed in both the words עת and זמן "is *sometimes* defined by its content, whether this content is an event (…) or a structure of circumstances. In this regard, ancient Israel's concept of time is the same as ours."

[329] Alternatively "season". As is also clear from the context, here זמן indicates a specific moment or point in time rather than a temporal continuity.

[330] As noted by Crenshaw (1987), p. 92, חפץ is found in Qohelet both with its earlier meaning of "pleasure", in 5:3, 12:1 and in (the secondary) 12:10, and with its later meaning of "business" as is the case in this verse (and in 3:17, 5:7, 8:6).

[331] With most interpreters ללדת is here translated "to be born." See for instance Longman (1998), p. 111 and Fox (1989), p. 190. Blenkinsopp (1995), pp. 56-57, argues in favour of translating with an active meaning, i.e. "to give birth", because the verb is in the qal. As seen in chapter 2 Koosed too favours this translation. Crenshaw (1987), p. 93, prefers the active meaning too, because of the improved parallel that this

*3:3: A time to kill*[332] *and a time to heal. A time to tear down and a time to build.*
*3:4: A time to cry and a time to laugh. A time of mourning and a time of dancing.*[333]
*3:5: A time to scatter stones and a time to gather stones. A time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing.*
*3:6: A time to seek and a time to lose. A time to keep and a time to scatter.*
*3:7: A time to tear and a time to sew. A time to be silent and a time to speak.*
*3:8: A time to love and a time to hate. A time for war and a time for peace.*

It is probably no coincidence that the first couplet in 3:2a refers to the beginning and end of life: the two borderland events of human existence, between which every other activity of our lives takes place.[334] The centrality of this the first pair of events is obvious and is underscored further by the couplet in 3:2b figuratively restating 3:2a.[335] Hereafter, 3:3-8 thematize human existence as a movement back and forth between contrasting poles of life and death, happiness and sorrow, building and destruction, and so on. The aspects of human existence depicted in 3:3-8 are all connected to 3:2 in that they too deal with some of life's basic conditions; its outer limits or its most basic activities.

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establishes with "to plant" in 3:2b, although he acknowledges that "to be born" is a possible translation. I agree with Fox (1989), p. 193, and (1999), p. 207, who translates ללדת with an intransitive sense and argues that the infinitive, expressing here an abstract noun, may be indifferent to voice.

[332] In the apparatus to the Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia (editio quinta emendata), Horst suggests an emendation either to חרס ("to tear to pieces") or חדף ("hit/strike"), presumably to improve the parallel with רפא ("to heal"). The proposed emendation finds no support in Hebrew manuscripts or in any of the versions, however. It is unnecessary, too, for reasons of content – the reader can hardly berate the author of Qohelet for choosing "to heal" as the most appropriate contrast-term for "to kill", given that we cannot bring the dead back to life.

[333] Note the lack of the inseparable preposition ל with the pairs in 3:4b. Whitley (1979), p. 31, and Longman (1998), p. 115, argue that the infinitives here have gerundial meaning.

[334] See also Wilch (1969), p. 120: "the pairs of 3:2-8 present radically opposed events that mean to include every shade and degree of related occurrence that may be placed between their poles. It is therefore of major significance that the list begins with birth and death. (…) These already imply that every human experience and existential condition is meant to be included."

[335] A further way in which 3:2-8 may be emphasising the poles of life and death is suggested by Crenshaw (1987), p. 96, who notes that that activity one and three fit together in all the poem's antitheses apart from those in 3:8. By reversing the order in this verse the author creates a chiastic frame for the poem which begins with the contrast between life/death and end with that between war/peace.

However, despite their general *thematic* coherence, the images in 3:2-8 do not come together as an easily identifiable, systematized whole. The author does not produce an exhaustive list of human life events, and is apparently not even concerned to limit the activities listed to one particular area of experience.[336] This could be a conscious, authorial choice in that the images are powerful exactly because of their breadth. Embracing as they do a wide range of activity and experience, they invoke in one, long sweep the whole of human existence. The poem depicts essential emotional and existential aspects of human life, but does this by describing in a terse manner elements of our day-to-day life and the rhythm of our everyday actions.[337]

It is worth considering too whether, perhaps, there is a purpose to the lack of "completeness" or plan in a poem which is, on the structural level, so carefully ordered and well-composed. 3:2-8 describes our life as it unfolds, unfinished and incomplete in the present. Maybe the reader *should* search and search for a plan – asking *why* the author has elected to list precisely these activities – but not find one. Along similar lines, Spieckermann singles out amongst the features of the poem specifically the pairing of seeking with losing in 3:6a, commenting on the author's choice *not* to pair seeking with finding.[338] That searching does not result in finding is an oft repeated trope of Qohelet's,

[336] With Brown (2000), p. 41, one may comment that interpreters "have laboured hard to discern some kind of systematic structure, but to no avail."
[337] Fox (1989), p. 193, believes that the images in 3:2-8 have no deeper metaphorical meaning. They are simply different types of recurring events.
[338] Spieckermann (1998), p. 314: "Danach gibt es zwar die Zeit des Suchens, nicht aber die Zeit des Findens. Vielmehr ist der Zeit des Suchens die Zeit des Verlierens zugesellt." One may also note with Goldman (2004), p. 75, that the Syrian Bible has changed the order of "seeking" and "losing" – one only searches for something which is lost. However, such a lack of logic might highlight further the unexpected coupling of these two activities.

and one which stands centre-stage in the book's judgement on the human cognitive capacity.[339]

As indicated above, another detail which scholars often single out as particularly important is the poem's use of the qal infinitive form ללדת paired with למות. If one chooses an active understanding and translation of the word, it has been argued, למות stands isolated as the only event in the whole poem which is entirely outside human control.[340] Of course, this may have been the point the author was trying to make, as argued by Koosed who suggests that dying could have been underlined deliberately as the one event which stands separate from every other example of human activity.[341] This is an attractive idea, even if it is not necessary. It would allow Qohelet indirectly to accentuate, as he does so often, the unique and problematical character of death.[342] If ללדת carries the meaning "to give birth", this *might* reflect the intention of the author to hint, already within the poem, at the possibility that death is an event which breaks with the apparent harmonic whole presented in 3:2-8. Wilch points out, however, that a passive translation of ללדת is demanded if all the events in the poem are meant to pertain to the same person.[343] It is also worth noting, as does Crenshaw, that other of the poem's activities than birth and death are somewhat beyond human control too – though perhaps

[339] See for instance 7:23-25 and 8:16-17. Fox (1999), p. 208, finds "a time to lose" puzzling too and asks: "When is there ever a good time for that?" Maybe Fox's expectation that every event and activity in the poem must be unambiguously good at the right time does not correspond all that well with what the text is trying to do, however, rendering Spieckermann's reading more persuasive.
[340] This for instance Blenkinsopp (1995) p. 57.
[341] Koosed (2006b), p. 96.
[342] For instance in the reflections on the separated generations in 1:10-11 and 7:10, in the short narratives in 4:13-16 and 9:13-15, and in the laments about handing one's possessions over to an unknown successor (as in 2:18-23) or losing them entirely (as in 5:14-16). Qohelet also engages much more directly with mortality and the problems of death, of course, for instance in 2:14b+20, 3:18-21, 9:3-6, and 12:1-7.
[343] Wilch (1969), p. 120. Wilch himself is not impressed by this argument, noting that Qohelet only speaks about a specific man when he speaks about himself.

less drastically so than the event of death. For instance Crenshaw notes in relation to 3:4 that: "Like life and history, emotions are uncontrollable."[344]

As his subsequent interpretation of the poem in 3:9ff will show Qohelet is not at all sold on the idea that the harmonious temporal scheme of 3:2-8 is one which corresponds well to the human experience of life in time. Introducing tensions into the poem in relation to the most basic events in time (birth and death), as well as within the cognitive realm (seeking and losing), may prepare this subsequent judgement.

The poem in 3:2-8 is meticulously composed on a structural level. It is therefore hardly surprising that several scholarly readings have approached these verses by foregrounding their structural scheme and examining its contributions to the message of the poem. One such reading is that of Jarick who observes that in each verse "there is a repetition of reversals. Each activity that is immediately transformed into its counter-activity is just as immediately reflected in an analogous activity that is also changed in an instant." Furthermore, "each set of activities and counter-activities is straightaway reversed in the next verse."[345] Jarick also emphasizes the compact style of expression in the poem's antithetical pairing of events, suggesting that "surely the feeling of rapidly changing times is deliberately evoked by the poet."[346] This reading of the poem's structural scheme is persuasive. Furthermore, it offers a rich intra-textual perspective on the various

[344] Crenshaw (1987), p. 94. In addition, one may wonder whether even giving birth – should one choose an active translation of ללדת – is entirely within human control.
[345] So that the birthing-dying-planting-plucking sequence is followed by a sequence which reverses the order, namely killing-healing-wrecking-building. Jarick (2000), p. 93. On p. 92 and 94 Jarick offers helpful, schematic representations of these reversals.
[346] Jarick (2000), p. 81.

activities on Qohelet's list – birthing, for instance, can and should be compared to planting, but also to building.

Finally, Jarick suggests something akin to a chiastic reading of the poem.[347] In this final step, however, he has to include verse 3:1 for the parallels between the verses to work out properly (3:1 corresponding to 3:8, 3:2 to 3:7 and so on).[348] The sudden inclusion of this verse which is not exactly part of the poem proper makes this last part of Jarick's structural analysis less persuasive than the previous steps.

At the forefront of Jarick's structural reading is the notion of perpetual *change*.[349] However, as noted in chapter 2 every changing circumstance or event depicted by Qohelet is simultaneously presented as part of the fabric of reality which never changes.[350] As demonstrated in the framing poems, the temporal reality of the world is characterized by repetition, sameness, continuity and cyclical movement. Only when

[347] Though an axis is missing so that "everything turns upon an empty midpoint." Jarick (2000), p. 98. Differently, Brenner (1993), pp. 139-140, argues that the loose, chiastic structure of the poem "obliges us to expect that verse 5 will contain the key to, or express the essence of, the meaning of the poem." Engaging with the obscure half-verse 3:5a Brenner explores possible links elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible tradition between the image of stones and female sexuality (pp. 143-145) and male sexuality (pp. 145-146). She concludes, p. 146, that "verse 5 advances the following message. There is a (correct? proper? set? opportune?) time for indulging in the sexual act, or for getting rid of a woman…"

[348] Jarick (2000), p. 96.

[349] When offering his schematic rendering of the poem's contrasting pairs, Jarick (2000), p. 87, paraphrases the poem's introductory statement in 3:1 as a statement about change, essentially: "Everything is changing. Changing is everything."

[350] Perhaps Jarick alludes to this aspect of Qohelet's presentation of time when he states, p. 91, that the poem's "endless to-ing and fro-ing, forward and backward, up and down, over and over, calls to mind Koheleth's earlier statements that 'all things are wearisome' (1.8) and 'there is nothing new under the sun' (1.9)." Furthermore, he states on p. 98 that in 3:1-8 "there are wheels within wheels that suggest regularity and design, yet each on-rushing time cancels out its opposite in meaningless ambiguity." I would argue that, to Qohelet's mind, this collision between an order which promises permanence and continuity, on the one hand, and what appears to be change upon change, on the other, happens especially in humanity's cognitive engagement with the temporal reality. This is an engagement which ultimately fails and creates the fractured image of permanence and repetition juxtaposed with change which we find in this poem, and elsewhere, in the book.

viewed from the human perspective does this constant reality appear one of change – a dichotomy which remains one of Qohelet's foremost examples of humankind's misapprehension of their own conditions of life.

This persistent dichotomy between world time and human time-(experience) makes Qohelet's establishment in 3:2-8 of a temporal framework within which various sets of contrasting events and activities can be embedded even more interesting, however. Will Qohelet in his later evaluation of the poem allow the existence and usefulness of such a framework in order to create, on the individual level at least, some coherence in time? Is this (ever-fluctuating) permanence more acceptable to the narrator than was the continuity on a collective level which he rejected in 1:9-11?

One final issue might be briefly considered in connection with an assessment of the poem's structural scheme and its contribution to the meaning of the poem in the wider context of the book: namely the possibility that 3:2-8 could be a quotation, rather than a poem penned by Qohelet's author.[351] Wright advances this view,[352] as does also

[351] So Brenner (1993), p. 135, who reviews the poem "by considering it independently of its immediate context, because the poem appears to be stylistically independent of the statements which frame it." She argues, p. 137, that 3:2-8 seem "to be linguistically and stylistically earlier and more conventional in its linguistic usage." She rejects the possibility that this difference could be explained by appealing to genre differences between prose and poetry. According to Brenner, p. 157, a subversion of the original poem's meaning has been achieved by placing it within a new context (3:1 and 3:9); "a frame which gently but decidedly falsifies its primary theme." In the original poem the metaphorical theme was "the cyclic movement of [male] desire and the resultant nature of gender relations." While 3:1 conforms to this general content and theme, it "omits to indicate what the specific subject matter of the poem is…" Brenner's reading is dependent, firstly, upon 3:5 containing the governing image for the whole poem and, secondly, upon the rest of the poem remaining intelligible if read as (male) love poetry. The arguments which can be marshalled in favour of either of these two premises are not very strong, however. Despite the vague, chiastic organization of the poem, a sexual context of desire does not seem the most obvious for verses 3:2-4.6-8. Koosed (2006a), p. 347, also presents a reading of 3:5a as a piece of sexual imagery, arguing that the image is highly homoerotic. She argues further that other instances of homoeroticism can be found in the

Blenkinsopp who argues that Qohelet here quotes a stoicizing Jewish sage.[353] Should 3:2-8 have originated in another context, it is possible that the author of our book, by introducing the poem into a new context, caused it to contradict the meaning it held originally.[354] This very possibility[355] may make the interpreter somewhat wary about basing key elements of her or his analysis of the book as a whole on details in the poem's *structural* scheme. If such a reading is nonetheless to be attempted, it remains dependent on the assumption that the poem, including its structural minutiae, has been purposefully inserted exactly where it is, its language and structure built upon and referred to in the wider context of the literary work. It is obvious that caution is necessary. However, in favour of such structural readings one may emphasize that Qohelet responds directly to the claims made within the poetic context of 3:2-8 not only in the prose commentary in

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book, for instance in 4:11. While it is an interesting thought experiment, it is difficult to find much evidence in the poem or elsewhere in the book to support Koosed's reading.

[352] A. Wright (1981), p. 322 and p. 327.

[353] Blenkinsopp (1995), pp. 58-59. Thus p. 59: "If Eccl. 3.2-8 is a citation from a stoicizing Jewish sage, or a Stoic composition translated into Hebrew, it would not be remarkable if it contained an allusion to putting an end to one's life at the appropriate time."

[354] In addition, of course, it must be considered whether Qohelet's author inserted the poem as further supporting material for his own thesis regarding the temporal order – or whether he wanted to argue against the understanding of the temporal order propounded in the poem.

[355] Another original context is rendered more likely by the fairly stark contradictions between the poem and some of the key-arguments of the work as a whole, the most striking of which would be the central assumption in the poem that there is a meaningful temporal scheme ordering human existence. However, one could equally well argue that Qohelet himself needs to establish quite explicitly the contradiction between traditional assumptions regarding the temporal set-up and his own perception of the temporal realities, expounded for instance in 3:9ff, and that he could have penned the poem in 3:2-8 to achieve exactly this. It speaks against the poem originating in another context that it uses language which occurs elsewhere in the book as well. Rudman (2001), pp. 85-86, compiles a list of words occurring in this poem which are also used elsewhere in the book of Qohelet. Yet, I am not convinced that the links in vocabulary between the poem and the prose sections of the book are strong enough to exclude entirely the possibility that the poem was taken from another context: these are not unusual words and it is not surprising that we should find them elsewhere in the work. Furthermore, most of these words do not occur grouped together in other passages, weakening the argument that deliberate reuse is taking place. Conclusively, the arguments supporting either case are not strong enough to be entirely persuasive. No matter whether or not the poem originated in another context, however, what matters the most in connection with a reading of the book of Qohelet is the role which the poem plays in this literary work, and this is something which can be discussed irrespective of the origin of 3:2-8.

3:9ff, but also in later passages which reference the *language* of the poem, such as 3:17 and 8:6-7.

### 2.2. Determinism in 3:2-8?

The constant repetition of "a time to…" places each activity and emotion mentioned in 3:2-8 in a comprehensive framework of if not pre-ordained, then still somehow properly structured times. Accordingly, a main focus in the scholarly discussion of the poem has been whether it expresses mainly a – more or less rigid – form of determinism or whether it can more naturally be connected to traditional wisdom ideas about human activities and choices each having their proper moment, identifiable by the wise. These two brands of interpretations are not necessarily mutually exclusive, the notion of a proper time requiring in any case such a high degree of divinely ensured, temporal ordering of events that it could easily be integrated in a loosely conceived framework of determinism. In scholarly readings, however, the attention tends to be placed squarely on one or the other of the two understandings.[356]

Attempting to establish criteria for determining whether or not Qohelet propounds a rigid determinism in this poem, Fox suggests a distinction between עת when temporally defined – for instance the dates which are considered to constitute wintertime or the time of Saul's kingship – and when substantively defined – for instance the times when it is actually cold. It is within the second category that a particular "time" can be "proper" if the conditions are right: it is not time to go skiing unless it is cold, but even when it isn't cold December is still, temporally defined, a winter month in the Northern Hemisphere. If

[356] For examples of each, see also the discussion of determinism in chapter 1, section 2.1.

Qohelet refers to the first kind of "time" when claiming that, for instance, there is a time to sew or harvest, his would be a strong determinism.[357] However, Fox argues that in Qohelet's view "God does not predetermine exactly what will happen and when. (…) The Catalogue speaks about the right times, the circumstances when, in the proper course of events, something should happen or be done. But these are not the times when things will inevitably occur."[358] Describing the temporal scheme of the poem as he sees it, Fox furthermore argues that "Qohelet does not here speak of time as a cycle in which crying follows laughing, which follows crying, and so on *ad infinitum*. (…) Rather he describes a binary pairing of opposed event-types as a structural property of reality, not as a temporal sequence."[359]

Differently, Rudman argues that not only the poem, but also the prose interpretation of it in 3:9ff, promotes a rigidly deterministic world view.[360] Since both death and birth are outside of human control, he claims that their location "at the head of the list in 3.2-8 seems (…) to be intended as a preparation for what comes after. In other words, acceptance that birth and death are in the hands of God paves the way for the acceptance of the idea that all other events and actions on earth are likewise in the hands of God."[361]

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[357] Fox (1999), p. 196-197.
[358] Fox (1999), p. 197
[359] Fox (1999), p. 200.
[360] One may also refer to Brown (2000), p. 42: "God is the primary, albeit implicit, actor on the temporal scene. The ever-constant swings of time's pendulum are suspended and held firmly by God." And he continues, p. 43, to explain the character of determined time in the book of Qohelet as he sees it: "nowhere does Qoheleth talk explicitly about purposefulness in the created order or in history, for that would assume discernible direction (…) in the course of human affairs, which he finds to be absolutely lacking. (…) As in Qoheleth's previous reflections, people are not so much the shapers as the recipients of life." In his 1989 commentary, p. 191, Fox argues in favour of a deterministic understanding of the poem, summarizing its message as "All events have a time when they will occur, and God determines when this is. Thus man cannot change the course of events, and his arduous efforts are not appropriately rewarded." Fox's later understanding, presented above, is more convincing.
[361] Rudman (2001), p. 88. Cf. also the entire chapter on 3:2-8 and its immediate context, pp. 83-98.

However, while that might be true it need not *necessarily* be so – and Rudman's reading must therefore be tested against the wider context of the book (which, he claims, supports the same brand of determinism as does the poem in 3:2-8). Already in the poem's immediate context, however, Rudman's interpretation runs into trouble. He has to reject the view of many scholars that 3:11b describes the inadequacy of humanity's cognitive prowess;[362] namely that they lack the knowledge which would allow them to undertake certain activities at the proper time. However, Rudman has no alternative way to account convincingly for the prominence of the theme of cognition here – or, indeed, elsewhere during the course of the time-discourse. Instead, he asks: "If the divine plan requires human beings to act in accordance with the 'times' which he has set, why does he deprive human beings of the necessary knowledge to do so…"?[363]

Ironically, this is one of the main questions with which Qohelet engages in his discussion of time, and it is an important interpretative crux for his depiction of the relationship between humankind and divinity, as well as of their relationship with the temporal reality. Throughout the book, the inability of human beings to act appropriately in a given situation is consistently tied to their inability to properly understand their temporal conditions.[364] As was argued in chapter 1 during the discussion of Machinist's reading of Qohelet, the author of this book does not deny human beings the ability to act freely – but he does maintain that our activity is undertaken blindfolded.

[362] Including Blenkinsopp (1995), p. 61, upon whose reading of the poem his own builds. See also von Rad (1972), p. 230, Longman (1998), p. 119, Krüger (2004), p. 87, and Crenshaw (1987), p. 98.
[363] Rudman (2001), pp. 91-92.
[364] Aside from 3:11, see for instance 6:8-9 about human striving in the context of human ignorance (6:10-12), 7:10 about human inability to judge the value and character of our present moment as well as the past, 8:6-8, and especially the admission of human powerlessness in 9:1-2 due to our mortality and our profound ignorance (9:6.11-12).

Equally problematic for Rudman's reading of the book are Qohelet's many appeals to the free will of human beings.[365] Rudman attempts to account for the tension between determinism and free will in the book by emphasizing Qohelet's use of the term שלט which he understands in its – earlier – sense of (delegated) authority.[366] Qohelet's "coherent use of שלט and the implied parallel between God and a human king whose commands have the force of the law, but who grants certain subordinates authority to act on their own initiative is a sophisticated and relatively successful attempt to explain away the problems of human wickedness and social inequality in terms of determinism."[367] He emphasizes that "Qoheleth uses this idea of divinely allocated שלטון in the context of finding happiness, but also to explain human evil and inequalities in an existence that he believes to be divinely controlled."[368] This argument does not convince. שלט is not central enough as a concept in this literary work to carry the entire weight of a sophisticated theodicy, worked out only indirectly through allusions to similarities between divine and royal power. Furthermore, many passages which appeal to free will do not make use of the word שלט at all.[369]

### 2.3. But Everything Made Beautiful in Its Time

*3:9: What benefit does the worker have from his toil?*

[365] For instance 4:17-5:6, 7:13-14, 7:16-18, 7:21-22, 9:7-10, 10-20-11:6, and 11:8-11:10. Rudman (2001), p. 149, notes Qohelet's frequent use of the imperative, which would sit uneasily with a rigid determinism.
[366] Rudman (2001), p. 151, refers to the use of שלט in 5:18 and 6:2 (the latter of which he contrasts with the depiction of the sinner's situation in 2:26). Furthermore, he refers to 2.19 in support of the legal understanding of שלט. He emphasizes the repeated use of an imperative form of שלט "in the context of 'eating' or utilizing the material benefits that life has to offer…"
[367] Rudman (2001), p. 158-159.
[368] Rudman (2001), p. 204.
[369] For example in 5:3-4, 7:15-17 and 9:7-9.

*3:10: I saw the business that God has given to human beings with which to busy themselves.*
*3:11: Everything he has made beautiful in its time.*[370] *He has also placed eternity*[371] *in their hearts*[372]*, yet so that*[373] *the human being cannot figure out the work which God has done from beginning to end.*

As mentioned above it is a commonplace assertion of scholars that, according to Qohelet, it is in the present that meaning can be found – if it is to be found anywhere. Indeed, one possible interpretation of Ecclesiastes, as summarized by Barton, is that the book "puts forward a recipe for contentment in the midst of ultimate pessimism by stressing the need to accept that all things happen in an appropriate way and at an appropriate time…"[374]

Such an interpretation could well take its starting point in 3:2-8. If Qohelet were to accept the view on the times in human existence propounded in 3:1 + 3:2-8 much of the narrator's unease about human existence would be effectively countered. For instance, the virulence of human mortality diminishes if our lives fit into the framework of nature so well that every event can be perceived as the fitting content of its own particular moment. If there really is a right time to die, mortality does not bring human beings into collision with the lasting world around them. Instead, a framework is offered within

[370] Whitley (1979), p. 33, is convinced that this clause must either be misplaced from the end of 3:8 or an editorial insertion. This assumption is not necessary on content-grounds, and it does not have any textual basis. Longman (1998), p. 119 notes the allusions to Genesis 1 in this verse in both the use of the word יפה, which carries a force similar to טוב in the creation narrative, and the verb עשׂה about God's creative activity.
[371] Fox (1989), p. 191 and p. 194, suggests emendation to עמל. Jenni (1953), p. 27 argues that the word העלם is used to denote extensive time-duration, much like the German "Zeitdauer". Zimmer (1999), p. 79-80, argues that בלבם should be connected with הכל rather than בני אדם, an option which Jenni (1953), p. 26, considers unlikely, arguing that the suffix works best with בני אדם in 3:10 or האדם in 3:11b. Whitley (1979), p. 33, argues that if העלם here means darkness or ignorance which "would agree with the burden (ענין) which according to the previous line 'God gave to man to occupy him'."
[372] In the apparatus to the Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia (editio quinta emendata), Horst suggests a textual correction to a singular suffix for reasons of dittography.
[373] Longman (1998), p. 112, translates "But still, no one can discover", referring to GKC §152y where this construction is cited as an example of a double negative.
[374] Barton (1996), p. 62.

which to fit the individual's existence – including its uncertain times and its end. Equally, one is offered help in dealing with misfortune in the present: even if now is the time for weeping, the poem suggests that there will also be a time for laughing. Were this representation of the human life in time trustworthy it could even alleviate Qohelet's distress regarding the level of our ignorance about the temporal realities.

The initial poem rejected the idea of a human, historical continuity to match the continuity and permanence of nature. In 3:2-8 another form of connectedness with humanity as a whole, as well as with the cosmic, temporal scheme, is promised. The *individual* is offered an interpretative framework through which the times of his life can be understood and rendered meaningful despite their impermanence. The poem offers a strategy for coping with the events of life as it alludes to a viewpoint of traditional wisdom: that the auspicious time of every action can be identified by the wise.[375] However, the narrator's reaction to the poem in 3:9ff demonstrates clearly that he rejects the viewpoint of 3:1-8, just as he did the possibility explored in the initial poem that a larger, human continuity might be accessible from the vantage point of our present life. Rephrasing the question of 1:3 slightly – and returning to the issue of whether human beings can gain any יתרון – Qohelet makes it clear that 3:1-8 has not sufficiently reassured him.

In 3:9ff the narrator evaluates the poem's approach to human life in the present and identifies within it at least two problematic facets. Firstly, he undermines its central suggestion that an understanding of the basic scheme which makes up our temporal

[375] Crenshaw (1987), p. 92.

conditions could provide a possible framework for our disparate experiences of life in time. Secondly – and this is not an unrelated issue – Qohelet questions the role of the divinity, stating categorically that God does not share wisdom regarding the times of our lives. Rather, he actively hinders human cognition. The latter objection is discussed explicitly from 3:10 onwards, creating an intriguing tension with the book's initial poem, 1:4-11: *there* God was conspicuous only because of his absence, whereas in 3:10ff he becomes the key-player in Qohelet's discussion of the temporal reality.[376]

Very much in tune with both the initial poem and the royal fiction immediately preceding this section, the narrator Qohelet claims that from the perspective of the individual there is no larger human continuity to discover – not even in terms of a temporal scheme which orders meaningfully life in the present. Such continuity is denied mainly from the perspective of cognition and understanding. It is the inability of human beings living their lives within the seemingly well-structured, temporal framework of 3:2-8 to engage with the reality of the temporal framework which excludes their attainment of יתרון.

Some interpreters consider it the most problematic aspect of the poem's presentation of time that it depicts events as cancelling each other out. The actions of the human being amount to nothing, balanced as they are by their counterparts.[377] For instance, Good notes that, ironically, one cannot come out ahead by acting responsibly and choosing the appropriate action.[378] Frydrych argues that the equilibrium of the cosmos rules out any permanent "imbalances" which would allow human beings to attain any long-lasting

[376] The latter of these two issues – the divine involvement – will be discussed in this chapter, section 2.4.
[377] Similarly, Zimmer (1999), p. 86, finds that the "Wechsel der Zeiten alles Bleibende verhindert."
[378] Good (1965) p. 185.

good.[379] However, Qohelet has an even more serious accusation to make in 3:9ff: the elaborate system of time in 3:1-8 is not only oppressive – it is entirely misleading. The establishment of any such scheme *exceeds* the human ability to decode the time of the world. Thus, while the poem undeniably emphasizes human activity and daily life, the problem which Qohelet investigates especially in his critical evaluation of it in 3:9ff is primarily cognitive in nature: the problem is the human (in)ability to figure out the order of the world.

Seeing as this lack of understanding is a direct consequence of the set-up of the world and the insufficient tools that the divinity has given humankind with which to grasp this set-up, the reality of the cosmos and the human ability to respond to it remains a central dimension of Qohelet's argument. However, Qohelet does not consider in 3:9ff whether, for instance, human beings have the ability to decide when to sew or to dance. As suggested above, were one to attempt such a reading of the poem and Qohelet's subsequent evaluation of it, it would require a brand of determinism so rigid that most of Qohelet's claims in the immediate context of the passage as well as in the book at large would make little sense. What the narrator does consider is our cognitive engagement with temporal reality – and it is through this lens that he considers whether the pattern of life sketched in 3:2-8 could make for a meaningful framework for a fulfilled human existence.

Especially important in this context is 3:11, in which Qohelet's immediate evaluation of 3:2-8 climaxes. This verse is a key statement in the book's discussion of the temporal set-

[379] Frydrych (2002), pp. 122-123.

up and the divinity's role in connection therewith. It claims about God that "Everything he has made beautiful in its time. He has also placed eternity in their hearts, yet so that the human being cannot figure out the work which God has done from beginning to end." While discussion continues unabated about the correct understanding of the argument in this verse – and particularly about the translation of its key-word העלם[380] – it remains relatively clear that Qohelet here claims the appropriateness or the beauty of every event in time, yet also in some way denies humanity the ability to engage with the temporal framework (despite or because the divinity has given them "eternity" in their hearts).

It is especially the meaning of העלם which is unclear in the context, and which has caused scholarly interpretations of the verse to differ substantially.[381] Usually העלם is translated either with "eternity" or "the world".[382] In response to the latter option Jenni argues that this was not a possible meaning of העלם in the third century BCE.[383] While it speaks in favour of the translation "eternity" that עולם here occurs in a temporal context, as the end of the verse demonstrates ("from beginning to end"),[384] it has been argued that the term עולם may also have spatial connotations in 3:11. Therefore, Jeppesen suggests the translation *"verdens gang"* – that is, the movement or progression of the world.[385] Taking a different tack, Zimmer argues that בלבם does not refer to האדם, but rather to הכל. He considers this the more likely solution because האדם is further removed from the

[380] עולם is written defectively in 3:11, making the textual issue even more difficult as it renders it more likely that a mistake has been made by the scribe here.
[381] Some scholars believe that העלם is a textual mistake. For instance, Fox (1989), p. 194, changes the word to העמל, strenuous work. The laborious task placed in humankind's heart is the attempt to understand that which God brings to pass.
[382] Fascinatingly, both the translations "ignorance" or "knowledge" are sometimes also suggested.
[383] Jenni (1953) p.25.
[384] Jenni (1953) p. 25.
[385] Jeppesen (1995) p. 35.

pronoun. Understood thus the verse would further the contrast between the human being and a world of natural phenomena that partake in that perspective of eternity which he is excluded from.[386] Most convincing is Barr's explanation of the word: he suggests that Qohelet in 3:11 draws attention to the discrepancy between humanity's longing to understand their world and its time in the largest possible perspective – and their inability to figure out anything about creation at all.[387] This discrepancy is heightened further because the urge to seek such understanding has been given to humankind by God, as has also their ignorance.[388]

Very differently, Kronholm reads 3:11 as part of an argument in which Qohelet claims that the perspective of eternity is available for humanity.[389] This perspective, he argues, enables human beings to recognise that the different times both in nature and in their own life continuously become part of an order established by the Creator. Consequently, every event has one auspicious and many inauspicious times. In every moment one single activity is laid before us so that we, if we seek it, can find it and make good use of it.[390] Although this reading fits well with the understanding of time in 3:1-8 it completely ignores Qohelet's rejection of this understanding in 3:9ff, and therefore it is not the strongest interpretation of the verse, its prose-context and the preceding poem. Qohelet

[386] Zimmer (1999) p. 77-81.
[387] Like Barr (1962), pp. 117-118 (footnote 4), I would retain the translation "eternity" or "perpetuity", though I agree with Machinist (1995), pp. 171-172, that this is one of the places where Qohelet uses the word for a concept to describe both the concept itself and reflection upon it.
[388] Similarly Longman (1998), p. 119: "It is as if God is baiting or toying with his human creatures, giving them a desire for something that is well beyond their reach."
[389] Brown (2000), p. 44, understands the giving of "eternity" as something fundamentally positive, though he emphasizes the ignorance which is also part of the human experience more strongly than does Kronholm: "Even though the human intellect cannot grasp the divine method behind the structured madness of human activity, God nonetheless grants a sense of the eternal to human beings. (…) There is (…) a dark side to this enlightened sense, the sense of the eternal. Human beings can only glimpse, but never grasp, the course of human affairs, much less control them."
[390] Kronholm (1999) p. 59-60.

cannot accept the viewpoint of 3:1-8 because he rejects humanity's ability to grasp the character of world time and its consequences for him (as also in 1:9-11). He does not allow human beings the ability to recognise the right moment for an action (3:11, see also 9:12). Even if there is a right moment for each and every activity in their lives they have no hope of identifying it.[391] In consequence, Qohelet interprets the poem in 3:1-8 against its inherent meaning; namely that everything has an opportune time, and one which it would make sense to encourage the reader to search out. Instead Qohelet emphasises that human beings can neither understand, nor change, the course of events that God has set.[392] Even worse: God has given us a tortuous task – to seek understanding about that which we cannot possibly grasp and even to glimpse the scope of our ignorance.

Perdue's reading of 3:11 and its immediate context is perceptive, as he argues that "the problem for Qoheleth is that God denies even to sages any comprehension of the larger temporal order of the cosmos. (…) Not only are humans unable to influence the course of cosmic and historical events directed by God, they are also denied comprehension of the larger structure of time (the 'ôlām) within which these events occur…"[393]

Somewhat similarly, Fox stresses humanity's ignorance as an important part of the message in the poem on the times, finding the message in this passage reformulated in

[391] It is time and again demonstrated that from the human perspective death comes too soon, 11:9, 12:1, and that both the time of death and the reality of death are hugely problematical, 8:8.
[392] Cf. Crenshaw (1987) p. 93, and Fox (1989), pp. 191-192, who in this his earlier commentary argues much more in favour of a strictly deterministic reading of the poem than he does in his 1999 commentary. For a discussion of the degree of determinism in this verse, as in the book more generally, see section 2.2 of this chapter.
[393] Perdue (1994), p. 217. And he states further: "Denied the comprehensive knowledge of the cosmic and historical components of time and the course of divine events – in the past, present, and future – humanity is trapped in an opaque, mysterious, and ambiguous present. (…) It is impossible even for sages to know the appropriate time for episodic events.

11:1-6: "things will happen when they will (…) and man can only cover his bets and do things at a variety of times. The only sensible way to do something is to adapt oneself to the constraints of reality, not to strain (…) against them. Man is ignorant…"[394] This only captures part of Qohelet's endeavour, however: it may well be that it makes little sense for the human being to strain against the divinely imposed ignorance – yet humanity continually attempts to do just that, and has been induced to do so by God. Qohelet himself strains too: he is adamant that humanity cannot know anything about the temporal scheme or indeed about anything that has relevance for his daily life, its rhythm and purpose (3:9-11 in response to 3:2-8). Yet, in the following verse, 3:12, and then again in 3:14, he protests: *he* knows what the best thing for humanity to do is. Furthermore, though 11:1-6 may state that one should accept that things will happen when they will – although it is by no means an unambiguous passage – other passages are less accepting of the situation produced by the human inability to grasp the temporal order.[395]

It is generally acknowledged that Qohelet depicts human beings as unable to understand the future. In Qohelet's view, there is something fundamentally wrong about the temporal

[394] Fox (1999), p. 205. In connection with another passage, namely 6:10-12, Kroeber (1963), p. 144, propounds a similar interpretation: "diese lastenden oder leeren Spekulationen über die großen Zusammenhänge, deren Erkenntnis durch die Setzung von Zeit und Stunde für ein jedes Ding dem Menschen entzogen bleibt, ist ein Weg, auf dem man das Leben versäumt." In 6:10-12, however, the tone of the narrator hardly seems one of resignation and acceptance – rather, the knowledge of which the human being is consistently deprived is necessary in order to establish a meaningful life. This is made all the more clear as Qohelet defines that which we do not know as "what is good for humankind" during their brief lives.

[395] For example 2:18, 2: 21 (with 2:18-20), 6:10-12, 8:16-17, and 9:3-5. It is true that some of the most forceful rejections of the human ability to engage cognitively with their life conditions are followed by joy exhortations (for instance 3:22 and 9:7-10). Yet such exhortations do not render the severe desperation of the admission of ignorance unimportant – much as the joy exhortations cannot be discounted simply because they occur within less than optimistic contexts. Similarly, Anderson (2000), p. 91 and 93, notes that, in fact, both pessimistic complaint and joy exhortation are destabilized when juxtaposed.

set-up which makes it "crooked" (1:15, 7:14), and it can be concluded about the obscure character of the changing times and events of our lives that "God has made both one and the other so that the human being shall not figure out anything after him" (7:14). Everything happening after death is entirely out of view as well because of the reality of oblivion and the total annihilation in death of the individual: "the dead know nothing, neither do they have a reward anymore, for their memory has been forgotten" (9:5). Qohelet laments again and again that human beings do not know the future and asks rhetorically whether anybody can remedy this situation. Ironically, the only one who is able to transgress and manipulate the temporal limitations of humanity and who might thus repair the human situation is the very divinity who has established the temporal order (3:14-15).

The issue of human non-understanding is not only raised in relation to the future or the time of the divinity, however. Rather, Qohelet makes the radical claim that the humanity does not understand their present or past either. This is illustrated beautifully in 3:1-15. While Qohelet's first and last poems concern themselves with the cosmic framework of human existence, the focus in 3:2ff is narrowed down to humanity's everyday life.[396] Yet here as well Qohelet describes the temporal dimension of human life as characterized by repetition. As he did in the framing poems he suggests that perceived differences are in reality cycles of sameness, conforming to a larger pattern. As humanity was fooled into

[396] Brown (2000), p. 40, writes "These verses form the chronological counterpart to Qoheleth's cosmology. Both poems capture the nature of existence in its rawest, most limiting, and yet all-encompassing form. The former is characterized by space and movement, a *cosmos* without *protos* or purposeful beginning; the latter deals with time and determination in the human realm…" As the discussion of the framing poems in chapter 3 showed they too are very much texts about the temporal structure, describing even the spatial features of cosmos through an examination of temporal movement. Yet Brown is right to establish a contrast between the focus on cosmology and world in the initial poem and a focus on human, daily life in 3:1-8.

believing that the sameness of things in human life ensures a degree of continuity (1:4-11), they also expect the ordering of "times" in their own existence to give them points of reference through which they can engage intellectually with their present. However, it is not so: rather, the human experience of alternating times prevents them from establishing any reliable patterns of expectations towards time (compare 3:2-8 with 7:13-14). Qohelet argues that this is not only problematic in relation to their future, but excludes any יתרון of their toil in the present as well (3:9).

That the insufficient cognitive prowess of humanity is at the heart of their failed relationship with time is thus made even more explicit in 3:9ff than it was in 1:10-11: the individual is shown to be unable to grapple with the realities of time (3:11) – this is a pervasive problem, encompassing very much the present as well as the wider reaches of time. Once again, then, the problem of human existence in time has been shown to have a forceful cognitive dimension: the time-order as it actually governs human life is not the same as the human experience of time. The cognitive nature of many of the problems experienced by human beings living in time exacerbate these problems, creating an extra layer of tension between time as it orders the world at large and human life in time.

### 2.4. The Divine Responsibility

*3:14: I know that everything which God does remains forever.*[397] *It is impossible to add to it and it is impossible to subtract from it. And God has done this so that they will fear him.*

[397] Fox (1989), p. 191, suggests an alternative translation: "whatever God makes happen will always occur." This translation is very much in line with the deterministic slant in this commentary's interpretation of the poem in 3:2-8 and its context. Fox's rejection, p. 194, of a translation in which העלם is translated as indicating duration, as in my translation, is that "the eternality of everything God creates (…) is a notion both untrue and irrelevant." Conversely, I find it a notion both true, in that Qohelet frequently emphasizes

*3:15: Whatever is has already been,[398] and what will be[399] has already been, and God seeks out that which has been pursued.[400]*

Whereas the divinity was completely absent from the depiction of time in chapter 1, it is underlined very forcefully in this passage that it is he who wills the temporal order of the world. Verse 3:14 thus states that whatever God does lasts forever and cannot be changed by human beings.[401] The use of the word לעולם creates links not only to 3:11, the argument of which 3:14 resumes,[402] but also to the contrast established in 1:4 between the permanent earth and the impermanence of the ever-changing, human generations.

Compactly, 3:14-15 sums up Qohelet's conception of the world's temporal structure. 1:10-11 had much the same function. However, while the viewpoints of the two passages do cohere the focus has now shifted somewhat: in 3:14 it is emphasized first of all that God controls the structure of time. Only once this has been established is the reader reminded of Qohelet's understanding of the temporal structure as one of sameness, cyclicality and repetition. God is the *why* of the temporal structure which was missing in 1:4-11. As Crenshaw puts it: "There is nothing new. Why? Because God ensures that

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that the structures established by the divinity are immutable, and relevant, in that the idea of the eternality of the divinely created temporal structures greatly impact human life. Jenni (1953), p. 22, argues that העלם here carries the meaning of "unchanging".

[398] Ogden (1987), p. 57, translates with a past tense. I agree with Isaksson (1987), p. 82, who argues that "what is spoken of in the preceding verses as well as in the following is what is going on just now, in the present life" and accordingly I have translated with the present form. Whitley (1979), p. 34 notes that Zimmermann – finding the tense of היה peculiar – assumes a mistake in translation from the Aramaic original which he postulates. However, Whitley argues that the tense is not problematic if כבד is taken in its later sense "of long ago".

[399] The infinitive appears to carry the force of a finite verb in the imperfect.

[400] Crenshaw (1987), p. 100, notes that the masculine form of this participle poses a problem for the understanding that here "Qohelet envisions God pursuing the past in order to bring it back into the present."

[401] As mentioned above, Jenni (1953), p. 22, draws attention to the durable quality of עולם in this verse, translating it "unabänderlich". Crenshaw (1987), p. 99, emphasises that the shift from imperfect to perfect in 1:14 syntactically reinforces the aspect of duration.

[402] The joy-exhortation in 3:12-13 is not discussed here because it is less central to the argument made regarding time and the temporal order than are the verses 3:1-11 and 3:14-15.

events which have just transpired do not vanish into thin air. God brings them back once more, so that the past circles into the present."[403]

It is important that God should become the central figure in this passage:[404] his establishment of the temporal order is the ideological basis for the depiction in 3:2-8, as well as in 1:4-11, and it is he who keeps humanity in a state of ignorance regarding the structure of time. Even the system set up by God of alternating times ultimately has the function of keeping knowledge away from them (cf. 7:14).[405] As Brown states about 3:15: the implication is not that "God will look after what people have pursued in vain." Rather the syntax "highlights divine activity over and against human activity. Only God successfully seeks out and apprehends whatever is sought…"[406] Even though creation and its order are fundamentally flawed from the human perspective, as suggested in 3:9-11, nothing can be done about it (1:15, 3:14). God continues to drive the events ahead in order to repeat the cycles of movement in the world.

Both of these verses refer forcefully to the initial poem. It has already been mentioned that 3:14 illustrates the same continuous, cyclical movement of time as did the initial poem, though 3:14 does this by describing the divine maintenance of this temporal structure, rather than the elements which embody it (cf. 1:5-7). 3:15 emphatically underlines the cyclicality of the world by restating and developing a central motif from

[403] Crenshaw (1987), p. 100
[404] One might note that the word אלהים is used twice in the verse, and then again in 3:15.
[405] Thus also Frydrych (2002), p. 110, as he emphasizes the need to fear God: "Qoheleth's God expects humans to fear him, and in fact took active steps to ensure that it would be so, by limiting human intellectual capacity and the resulting practical capabilities to interfere with his design."
[406] Brown (2000), p. 46.

the first poem (1:9a).[407] Blenkinsopp has noted that the verbal stem of נרדף (3:15), when in niphal, is used about the wind driving something before it in all its other OT occurrences. Here it is God who drives the events of the world before him in constant repetition.[408] This image creates a link both with 1:6, in which the wind turning constantly becomes a metaphor for the cyclical time in the world, and with humanity's futile chasing of the wind in the later verse 8:8.

As a result of the links established with the book's initial poem, 3:14-15 succeed in tying together more closely the natural world and cosmic scope of 1:4-11 and the human world which was explored in 3:1-11. It is shown that the same divine structure of repetition in time is the foundation of them both. Simultaneously, however, Qohelet underlines emphatically that human beings do not have the cognitive capacity to engage with the temporal order – to judge whether a certain representation of the temporal reality governing their lives is correct and to align their own activities with the divinely established order in time. In this context, too, the emphasis in 3:14-15 on the different temporal realities of divinity and human being is pertinent.

### 3. Present Life in Human Society

As mentioned in section 1 of this chapter, one of the ways in which Qohelet explores the temporal conditions governing our life in the present is by engaging with the present life as it unfolds in human society. The language in this part of Qohelet's discussion of the

[407] Christianson (1998) p. 43. Longman (1998), p. 124, also notes that 3:15 repeats the language of 1:11 in order to state that "nothing new ever happens or will ever happen. God just repeats himself through time…"
[408] Blenkinsopp (1995) p. 63.

temporal reality and the divinity's attitude towards his creatures is notably one of *power* and *rule*.[409] For example, Qohelet describes the establishment and maintenance of (temporal) power structures (3:14-15, 6:10, and 7:14), he engages with the problem of oppression in society (5:7 and 8:9), and he considers more broadly the difficult relationship between ruler and subject (4:14-16, 8:5, and 10:16-17).

One effect of this multi-layered emphasis on power structures is a blurring of the distinction between structural elements in human society and structures which are fundamentally embedded in the created world. Even the distinction between God and human ruler occasionally becomes unclear.[410] Phrased more positively: using the language of power to discuss the temporal reality in the present allows Qohelet to engage with several issues simultaneously. It is a strategy which allows the author to highlight connections between the basic, temporal reality, which God has established, and our day-to-day life in human society. 4:1-3 provides an excellent example of this, discussing the

[409] This fits well with the royal fiction in which the narrator is presented in the guise of a king. The continuing focus on rulers, domination and oppression, has been seen by several researchers as an indication that Qohelet never casts off this guise, speaking throughout from the viewpoint of a king. Amongst researchers who emphasize this possibility in connection with the thematic and language of power in Qohelet's depiction of human society, opinion is divided as to whether the author primarily presents kingship positively (Koh (2006), especially pp. 40-49) or predominately negatively (for instance Perdue (1994), especially pp. 219-224). While I agree that kingship remains an area of interest for the author I suggest that his interest in power structures is much wider than simply investigating, from the inside, the role of the king. Qohelet is interested in unequal relationships between people in general, whether the oppressors be kings or not – and he is interested in the relationship between divinity and human being, especially the divinity's dominance and his (oppressive) rule over humankind. Furthermore, in connection with the discussion of kingship specifically, it does not appear to be of great importance to Qohelet that *he* be identified with the kingly power throughout. For instance, he uses third person narration about the king(s) in his text, as well as about his subjects, in all passages which thematize kingship, aside from the royal fiction. Again, the main issue often is the existence of this power structure – not how the persona of Qohelet fits within it.

[410] That Qohelet investigates the intersection between divine and earthly power has been convincingly argued by Perdue (1994), p. 221. Rudman (2001), especially pp. 155-159, less convincingly, tries to connect the depiction of earthly and divine power structures to the determinism which he finds characterizing the work. In connection with the royal fiction Verheij (1991), pp. 113-115, has noted the possible inter-textual links with the creation stories of Genesis, arguing that (the human being) Qohelet attempts and fails to recreate an Eden like the one established in Genesis 2 by God.

structures of oppression and power in the human realm while also referring to the divine responsibility for the wider order of the world.

*4:1: And I turned and saw all the oppression which is done under the sun, and behold – the tears of the oppressed – and they did not have a comforter. And from the hand of their oppressors came force – and they did not have a comforter.*
*4:2: And I praised the dead*[411] *who have already died above the living who are still alive,*
*4:3: but better than both of them is he who has not yet been, who has not seen the evil work which is done under the sun.*

The mini-story in 4:1 is framed by the theme of mortality. It is after having discussed the consequences of human mortality in the last verses of chapter 3[412] that the narrator enters into a brief discussion of power and oppression in 4:1. The following verses, 4:2-3, explicitly refer to the reality of death as they draw into doubt the value of a life that must be lived in the world as described in 4:1.

While God is not mentioned directly in 4:1 it is strongly implied that he is on the side of the oppressors: consider the almost formulaic statement: *"and they did not have a comforter."* This accusation jars painfully against the traditional understanding of God as the comforter of the poor and oppressed.[413] The narrator then laments that the force is in the hand of the oppressors. As God is the only one who has previously been described as possessing any real power – compare for instance 1:15 and 3:14-15 with the frustration of

[411] Noting the declarative quality of the pi'el here, Fox (1999), pp. 218-219 offers the translation "So I declared the deceased (…) more fortunate than the living…" As Krüger (2004), p. 82, points out, the inf.abs. must have the force of a finite verb here.
[412] Returning, as he concludes the reflection in 3:22, once again to the limits to human understanding of the temporal reality (*"who can bring him to see what will be after him?")*
[413] Loader (1986), p. 47, argues differently that the point is that power corrupts and the repetition of the lament that there is nobody to comfort the oppressed show the hopelessness of the situation. Brown (2000), p. 49, also focuses only on the earthly king: "steeped in biblical (…) tradition was the king's mandate to defend the powerless…"

the human wielder of power in the royal fiction – *his* is the only hand that the reader would naturally expect to see described as forceful. The implicit conclusion, shocking though it may seem, is that God does not use his power to protect and comfort the oppressed. The depiction of earthly power structures here becomes a discussion of the divine attitude to humanity as well as an indictment against oppression within human relationships.

The following verses argue that the structures of oppression are firmly rooted as part of the divinely willed world structure.[414] While 4:1 does not mention the temporal structures of creation, emphasising power and oppression on a more general level, 4:2-3 connects the reflection on power to the ongoing discussion on time and mortality. Again, the lines between accusation against human beings and God seem blurred: it is difficult to ascertain whether the narrator laments the oppression carried out by human beings under the sun, or whether he comments on the structure of the world under the sun as such. It is by enlarging his subject of discussion so that it also encompasses creation on a basic level that Qohelet becomes able to lament that the most fortunate is the one who will never live; the one who will never be part of this world's order of things. The structures of oppression become near-indistinguishable from the structures of creation.

Verse 5:7 could profitably be considered in this context too: even though this verse and its immediate context do not reflect directly on time, the subtle way in which it

[414] Another, interesting nuance of the passage is emphasized by Salyer (2001), p. 304, who suggests that "King Qoheleth sounds like a prophet here, criticizing his own government in a way that reminiscent of the prophet Isaiah..." If Qohelet does indeed draw upon prophetic rhetoric here, it makes even harsher and more effectful his claim that oppression within the human realm can be connected to the divinely established world-structures too.

intertwines human and divine power structures is similar to the manner in which the same is achieved in 4:1, and it may therefore help the reader understand juxtapositions of the divine and the human sphere of power which do reflect on time.

*5:7: If you see oppression of the poor and the robbing of justice and righteousness in the province, do not be surprised about this; for above the mighty another mighty is watching and there are mightier ones above them.*

Verse 5:7 is often read in isolation from its context simply as a discussion of human power structures.[415] However, explicitly presenting a hierarchy of oppression, in which an oppressor with more power can always be found above every other oppressor, and following a passage that discusses the proper behaviour towards God, it is hardly a stretch to understand 5:7 as referring to divine power as well as the earthly. Thus also Perdue, who finds that in chapters 4 and 5 of Ecclesiastes Qohelet argues that those "negligent of social duty would include both the ruling aristocracy and God. (…) standing behind the oppressive rule of kings is God."[416] It is possible, but not necessary, to understand גבהים as a plural of majesty. However, even if 5:7 does not refer to God as "the mightiest" it still demonstrates the basic hierarchical structure of oppression. The verse does not suggest that there are spheres of power – such as the divine – into which this structure does not extend. The very structures established by God support oppression. As shown explicitly elsewhere these structures are oppressive themselves.[417]

[415] Thus Koh (2006), p. 56, Loader (1986), p. 60, McNeile (1904), p. 69, and Galling (1969) p. 69.
[416] Perdue (1994), p. 221.
[417] For instance 1:15, 7:13, and 8:16-17.

Both 4:1-3 and 5:7 make elegant use of a slide from an evaluation of purely human matters to an appraisal of structures which God has established in the world, as well as in the human society. In the following chapter, one of the texts that will be considered at some length discusses exactly the impact which the divinely structured time may have upon our ability to live sensible lives and react in a timely manner to events within our human society (8:1-9).

In order to sum up this chapter let us return to where we began it, referring to the discussion of whether the present moment as depicted in the book of Qohelet offers individual human beings sufficient *joy*. Because of the fundamental inaccessibility of past and future, it was maintained that to Qohelet the present is the only dimension of time within which meaning is potentially possible. However, the exegetical analysis has shown that a simple dichotomy between a somewhat meaningful present moment and an uncertain future dominated by the reality of mortality is not sustainable on its own as a reading of the book's presentation of human life in the present. Rather, Qohelet's evaluation of the divinely established time-order in 3:9-11 and 3:14-15 accentuates that the present moment *too* is rendered problematic by the limitations placed on humanity's understanding of their temporal conditions.

It is in vain that human beings attempt to transgress the boundaries which God has set for their cognitive engagement with the temporal process. We live without orientation points. We know that there is an end-point in death, though its temporal position remains unknown, but we cannot engage with the temporal framework within which our every

activity takes place. While more traditional wisdom would happily echo Qohelet's belief that there is a fixed rhythm to the cosmos and that a similar regularity characterizes human existence,[418] Qohelet stands alone when claiming that this particular temporal set-up isolates the human being, rather than providing illumination. The sameness in time makes blind. It does not give clarity.

[418] Frydrych (2002), p. 119, argues, however, that the uniformity which Qohelet observes in the world is of a different character than that championed in Proverbs: "*macroscopic* is the key word here." This regularity "does not extend to the lower detailed level of specific human actions and their consequences. The macroscopic regularity stems from the fact that there is no real progress in time." With this distinction in mind Frydrych states, p. 124, that both Proverbs and Qohelet see the world of the living as "orderly and predictable so as to allow the formulation of a paradigm that describes its behaviour." As discussed in this chapter, however, it is necessary to question whether in Qohelet the human intellect is at all up to the task of formulating such a paradigm in a way which would coherently structure the individual's life experience in time.

# Chapter 5: Connecting Present to Past and Future

*What might have been and what has been*

*Point to one end, which is always present.* (T.S. Eliot, Burnt Norton, Four Quartets.)

Whether discussing human life-conditions more generally or reflecting specifically on the temporal realities of our life now, it is a marked tendency of Qohelet's to portray life in the present as lived within the constraints of the wider cosmic order. He stresses that there is a larger framework of time within which the present *must* be understood: its relation or non-relation to past and future very much affects the possibilities of establishing a meaningful existence within the present. Furthermore, humanity's inability to properly understand this wider temporal framework, and indeed the entire temporal dimension of their existence, is a central component of their engagement with their conditions of life in the present.

This leads to an ongoing tension in the depiction of temporal reality which is evident throughout the whole of the book: Qohelet *wants* to investigate past and future, and he argues that the present cannot be comprehended in isolation from these temporal horizons. As a result, much must be written about both past and future. Yet, because we have no real access to either of these, reflection on them continually throws Qohelet back into the present. As mentioned in chapter 1, Schubert argues similarly that there is a tension in the book between Qohelet's experience of living within the framework of human finitude and his structural, communicative efforts to gain understanding; efforts

which do not relent despite the fact that they are continually faced with the limitations imposed on them by the very character of human, finite existence.[419]

Certainly, the dichotomy between our ignorance, which is enforced by the temporal conditions of humankind, and our attempts nonetheless to gain knowledge occupies a centre-stage position in the framework of Qohelet's thinking on time. It is with this tension in mind that the relationship between our present lives and the invisible horizons of past and future will be investigated in this chapter – with particular attention being paid to the strategies that Qohelet employs to discuss the temporal horizons with which our mind is not equipped to engage.

**1. Looking at Lost Horizons: Qohelet's Approach to the Past and the Future**

As was suggested in chapters 3 and 4, the repetitive character of the world's temporal set-up has as a consequence that the present to some extent loses its value. Not only is it doomed to become past – it is doomed to disappear entirely and be forgotten, just as the memory of the past has disappeared in the present. The analysis of 1:11 emphasised this problem too, noting that as the same types of events recur continually the present too is continually replaced by a new present. Time which has passed cannot be remembered, and neither can the individuals who lived in it. The present consequently exists in a very uneasy relationship both with the past with which we have no real connection and which is wholly inaccessible to us in the present – and with the future: in the future it is *my own* oblivion which is at stake. For the individual this amounts to an exacerbation of the

[419] Schubert (1989), p. 124.

problem with the past. There is thus a strong sense in Qohelet that the past and the future are eating away at the edges of the present.[420]

It may be worthwhile to pause here and compare Qohelet's claims regarding the inaccessibility of both past and future with what is established elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. The first observation which ought to be made is that it is not unusual in the Hebrew Bible books to understand and describe the future as a realm which we cannot know.[421] However, while Qohelet is not unique in claiming that the future is opaque, he does draw far more radical conclusions on the basis of this conviction than is the norm, arguing in several passages that the opacity of the future affects our present existence severely as well. For Qohelet, the notion that the future is inaccessible creates disorientation in the *now*.[422] He repeatedly insists that our ignorance regarding the future is a significant factor for our lacking ability to establish in our day-to-day lives any form of meaning – and that is highly unusual.[423]

Even more radical are Qohelet's assertions about the past. Among other scholars, James Barr has observed that in the Hebrew Bible, one of the functions of history – or, as he

[420] Qohelet repeatedly uses a small, consistent vocabulary of words which contrast present with past/future, as well as with that which endures. This has the effect of creating a sense of claustrophobia and panic –כבר, (found in 1:10, 2:12, 2:16, 3:15, 4:2, 6:10, 9:6, and 9:7) עדנה/ערן (found in 4:2-3), and עולם (1:4, 1:10, 2:16, 3:11, 3:14, 9:16, and 12:5) The final poem achieves a similar effect through the repetition of עד אשר coupled with ביום.

[421] Examples include, for instance, Psalms 39 and 90.

[422] For instance Qohelet 6:10, 6:12, 8:6-8, 9:11-12. Qohelet may attempt to overcome this problem in 7:13-14 where he describes the divinely established order as "crooked" and purposefully opaque, yet also counsels acceptance of the current situation, whether joyful or not.

[423] The insurmountable distance between present and the future, especially that which happens after the death of the individual, is problematized occasionally elsewhere, however (Job 14:7-10.14.)

prefers, the *story*[424] – is aetiological. History is furthermore seen as paradigmatic for present and future: "Aetiology gives an explanation, set in the past, of how something came to be as it now is. The paradigmatic provides analogies in which experience, past or future, can be understood or expressed."[425] Both of these two concerns demonstrate the expectation, found in most of the Hebrew Bible corpus, that the past is available to the human mind; something with which one can engage and from which lessons can be learned.[426] In the book of Qohelet, however, the past has disappeared from view too (1:11, 2:16, 4:13-16, 9:13-15, for example). The loss of the past can be seen as the most drastic shift in the book's conception of the temporal dimensions in comparison with the wider Hebrew Bible framework. With both the past and the future lost, there is no wider temporal framework available with which human beings can align their lives, meaning that even the current existence of the individual becomes opaque when considered in a temporal perspective.[427]

[424] Barr (1980), p. 6: "The long narrative corpus of the Old Testament seems to me, as a body of literature, to merit the title of story rather than that of history. Or (…) it seems to merit entirely the title of story but only in part the title of history…"
[425] Barr (1980), p. 8.
[426] In a somewhat related manner, Ebach (1986), pp. 51-53, draws attention to the fact that the Hebrew words for past can also mean "face" or "front" (*pānīm*, esp. in connection with the preposition *le*, as well as *qedem*), while the Hebrew word for future can mean "back-side" or "behind" (*aḥarīt*/*aḥarōn*). This lexical feature allegedly demonstrates that the past was conceived of by the Hebrews as that which lies in front of us, accessible and visible. However, as was discussed in chapter one, it is problematic to base our assumptions about the Hebrew mindset on the lexical structure and vocabulary of the language so that, by necessity, there must be a connection between the language users' conceptual capacity and their vocabulary. In connection with this particular claim, it should be noted too that this distribution (future/behind – past/front) is far from unique to Hebrew, rendering it unlikely that a particularly *Hebrew* conception of past and future could be discovered on the basis of these words and their lexical potential. I am grateful to Benjamin Cartlidge for pointing out to me that, similarly, in Latin *anterior* can be used both temporally and about that which is in front of or before something, and *posterior* similarly both temporally and about that which is behind. Furthermore, the Latin word *ante* (meaning previous) is cognate with the Hittite ha-an-za and with the proto-Indo-European h2enti, both of which mean face.
[427] As seen in chapter 2, the narrator of Ecclesiastes ties the loss of these temporal horizons to the overall structure of the world's temporal set-up: it is a cyclical reality, characterized by repetition, which wipes from view everything which has gone before and thus eliminates all human attempts to establish meaningful continuities.

Since past and future are entirely lost from view in Qohelet's depiction of the human life-experience, these temporal horizons are described mainly by what they are *not* or how they are not comprehended by the human mind. Qohelet only establishes *negatively* a wider temporal scheme which reaches beyond the reality of the extended, present moment in which we live and act. If the horizons of past and future are described primarily as they are denied and hidden from view,[428] however, this then presents an obvious challenge for any analysis of Qohelet's thinking about past and future. Because he approaches these temporal dimensions through assertions about what they *cannot* be, one can only consider past and future in the book of Qohelet by unpacking the author's highly *indirect* depictions of them. The reader must ask questions such as: why does Qohelet take issue with commonplace assertions regarding past and future? When he challenges the conventional understanding of the past and the future and their relationship to the present, what does that tell us about his own conception of these temporal dimensions?

As an example, let us take a closer look at Qohelet's caution against nostalgia in 7:10.[429] The author states in this verse that we are wrong to protest that the past was better than the present – there is no wisdom in such a complaint.[430] The immediate context of this

[428] The three narratives in 1:12-2:20, 4:13-16, and 9:13-15 constitute something of a special case and will be discussed in the following chapter.

[429] The translation offered in chapter 4 of this verse was "Do not say: 'how is it that the former days were better than these?' for it is not from wisdom that you ask about it." Brin (2001), p. 177, finds that the usage of the idiom הימים הראשנים in 7:10 "suggests that this does not refer to the very distant past." However, the idiom can do exactly that too, he notes, as it does for instance in Deut 4:32. He later notes, p. 187, that in Ecclesiastes 7:10 מאלה is used "as a "specific" designation for the present.

[430] Referring to a few scholarly readings may be helpful here. For instance, Crenshaw (1987), p. 137, states: "If there is nothing new under the sun, the past is not superior to the present." Krüger (2004), p. 137, suggests a different interpretation, namely that "the times are not getting worse but better – or at least they still remain just as good." He does note that "This does not entirely correspond to the view of 1:9-10; 3:15;

proverb-like saying offers us little help in understanding it and Qohelet gives no further explanation.[431] However, read as a statement about time and cognition, and therefore interpreted within the context of the wider discourse on time, 7:10 advances a case regarding past and present which corresponds well with what is said elsewhere: Qohelet claims here, as he has already done in other passages, that we misremember or misconstrue the past. The past is no better than the present – in fact, it is of exactly the same character as the present due to the sameness in events in time. If we expect the past to have been better than the present we have not grasped this fundamental trait of the temporal structure. Such a misapprehension of the temporal reality is fairly unsurprising, however: indeed, Qohelet has already argued that one result of the time-order's repetitive, cyclical character is that we forget the past (1:10-11) – and there can be no longing for a past to which the human being has no access. What verse 7:10 also shows us is that while Qohelet's reflections on the past and the future provide us with some information about his conception of these temporal dimensions, however negatively established, they inevitably lead back to the present moment. Our attempts to establish temporal continuity are inexorably thwarted.[432]

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and 6:10, according to which in the context of a comprehensive return of the same kinds of things, limited changes from better to worse are just as possible as those from worse to better." Against this, I would argue however that all of these passages, 7:10 included, emphasise especially that there is nothing new. The temporal structure is one of constant repetition and (especially in 3:15 and 6:10) God remains the only one who can manipulate this temporal structure and seek out that which – from a current, human perspective – has been lost. For a similar perspective on the latter of these two ideas, see 2 Sam 14:14 which emphasizes the shared fate of humanity and the divine control.

[431] Whybray (1989), p. 117, does refer to the context. He notes that the verse is in line with the statement in 1:9, but argues further that 7:10 "continues and particularizes the thought of vv. 8-9:the degeneracy of the times is to show a lack of patience and self-control which is the mark of a fool…"

[432] See for instance also 6:10-12, 7:13-14, 8:7-8, 8:16-17, 9:9-12 (especially if the joy exhortation and the following complaint in 9:11-12 can be read together as (part of) an ongoing reflection), and 11:1-6.

Throughout the book of Qohelet, his comments on the temporal dimensions of human life maintain the impression that the present is seen as problematically fenced in by past and future. Each of the instances of narrative in the book concludes simply that all will be (or already) is forgotten (1:12-2:20, 4:13-16, 9:13-15). The future of my own existence is opaque as well, as is also the present facing me now: as has been seen previously, human beings simply do not understand the set-up of the temporal world within which we move (3:11, 3:22, 6:12, 8:7 and 10:16).

One of Qohelet's strategies throughout the book is to depict the individual human being in terms of *isolation* in order to demonstrate problematic aspects of the temporal structures. The human being is described in such a manner as to stand isolated from those of his usual relationships that are mediated through time.[433] One example of this strategy is Qohelet's depiction of humankind's relationship with the divinity.[434] As was seen in connection with 3:14-15, the establishment of any such relationship is perceived as intensely problematic by Qohelet: the divinity occupies a different temporal reality than humanity and, in addition, upholds the structures of time within which we live, ensuring that they remain opaque to us.[435] Nowhere, however, is Qohelet's literary strategy of

[433] Schubert (1989), p. 120, has noted that the "Unfreiheit gegenüber dem ewigen Kreislauf der Welt erkennt Kohelet auch in verschiedenen zwischenmenschlichen Beziehungen." Amongst the passages which he cites in support of this view I find 4:13-16 and 6:1-3.4-6 particularly convincing. The passages chosen by Schubert indicate a particular focus upon the lacking correspondence between a person's actions and the overall character of his life and death (for instance 7:15 and 8:10), yet I would argue that the effects of the temporal reality upon human life creates isolation on an even more basic level too. Schubert seems to acknowledge this too, stating, p. 121, that the question regarding the meaning and character of human life in the course of history is one which in general becomes pertinent when, like in Qohelet, "die Integrität zwischen Mensch und Mensch, Mensch und Natur, Mensch und Gott nicht funktioniert…"

[434] Similarly Mills (2003), pp. 7-8, who argues that: "Although God is consistently equated with the cosmic order (...) the gap between humanity and divinity is unmistakable and the relationship between universal order and human activity is problematic, linguistically contained within the view that all is *hebel*."

[435] Later passages raise the bar for establishing a relationship between divinity and human being even further. Rather than describing the positive qualities of this hypothetical relationship, Qohelet deems its

depicting human existence in terms of isolation as strongly apparent as in his discussion of our present life in relation to the horizons of past and future. The rejection of the human ability to relate in any meaningful way to these temporal realms gives Qohelet's presentation of the present an aspect of the claustrophobic. We are fenced in and alone. This is true on the level of human relationships – for instance, the relationship with one's ancestors as well as with one's descendants must disappear when Qohelet draws the potency of human memory radically into doubt.[436] However, it is also true on a more immediate cognitive level when Qohelet denies humankind the ability to orientate themselves in their temporal reality. Properly understanding and responding to the temporal reality of the present becomes impossible when one cannot connect it to past and future. On this level too, then, human beings stand isolated, threatening very much their relationship with the surrounding world.

### 2. 6:1-6: The Best Is Not Enough

*6:1: There is an evil[437] which I have seen under the sun – and it lies heavily[438] upon humanity.*

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existence fundamentally impossible. He famously warns his reader in 5:1 that "God is in heaven and you are on earth", and states in 6:10 that the human being "cannot contend with the one who is mightier than he." The harshest indictment on the relationship between divinity and humanity is delivered in 9:1-3 which depict the divinity as fundamentally indifferent to human effort, even when it comes to their proper maintenance of the relationship between the divine and human sphere through the practice of righteous living and religious obligations. Instead, God ensures that every human being meets the same final fate. Even the timing of this final event of death is shrouded in mystery – as are the fixtures of our temporal existence in general. No contact can be made with the deity who maintains this system, rejecting and hindering our attempts to grasp it.

[436] This is true in the royal fiction, especially in 2:18-19, but also in 1:11, 3:20-22, 6:3, and 9:5-6. Differently, 4:8 and 5:13 seem to maintain a more traditional line that there is some sort of worth to be gained from having sons to whom one's possessions can pass. However, the main stress in these verses is on the serious uncertainties connected to this traditional ideal.

[437] Some Hebrew manuscripts read רעה חולה - a bad or a sick evil, as in 5:12 and 15. Crenshaw (1987), p. 126, argues that while יש usually introduces a new idea this would seem not to be the case here.

[438] Krüger (2004), p. 117, notes as a possible alternative translation: "in multiple ways."

*6:2: There are people*[439] *to whom God gives wealth, possessions, and honour, so that they lack nothing of all that they desire. Yet God does not allow them*[440] *to enjoy it, for a stranger*[441] *consumes it. This is a* הבל *and it is an evil sickness.*
*6:3: If a man fathers a hundred children and lives many years and many are the days of his years, but he cannot satisfy himself from the good things*[442] *and he does not even get a burial,*[443] *I say: the stillborn is better than he.*
*6:4: For it came in* הבל *and in darkness it will go,*[444] *and in darkness its name will be covered.*
*6:5: Even though it has not seen the sun*[445] *and has had no knowledge, it has more rest than he.*
*6:6: If he lives a thousand years twice over, but does not see good things – does not everybody go to one place?*

As well as contributing to Qohelet's contradictory exposition on the value of joy and material benefits, the passage in 6:1-6 introduces well the fraught relationship which the present has with the past and future in the thought of the book. These verses are generally understood by researchers as Qohelet's presentation of a marginal case; namely that even if somebody's life should be filled to an extreme degree with divinely bestowed joys –

[439] Alternatively: "God may give a man wealth…"
[440] Literally: "yet God does not allow him…"
[441] Gordis (1968), p. 257, is right that נכרי does not refer to a foreigner here. "That a kinsman would inherit the property which a man has failed to enjoy in his own lifetime would not diminish the tragedy for Koheleth."
[442] Literally: "but his desire/he is not satisfied by the good."
[443] Crenshaw (1987), p. 126-127, understands this clause as referring in an anticipatory manner to the stillborn infant. Such a reading would require a change in the masoretic pointing so that the clause about the stillborn is not separated by an *atnach* from "and he does not even get a burial." The ambiguity here is interesting, and would have been even more strongly apparent in an un-pointed text. In fact, the ambiguity goes even further than this: while the verbs in 6:4 are almost universally understood as referring to the stillborn they could refer also to the man described in 6:3 – making the point that even the richest of human lives is ultimately a life covered in darkness. This creates a somewhat distressing uncertainty for the reader: one expects to be able to tell apart a successful human being and a miscarriage – here, however, it is suggested even on the level of the text's syntax that in death this becomes impossible.
[444] The Qumran manuscript reads הלך, which can be interpreted as a participle or a perfect, rather than ילך. As noted by Goldman (2004), p. 87, the Qumran manuscript tends to use plene writings, which would make a perfect more likely than a participle (which would probably have manifested itself as הולך). One may here note the connection to 1:4a which described the human generations.
[445] Crenshaw (1987), p. 127, notes that in 6:5 "Qohelet refers to the source of light, the sun (without the article, which is unusual.) Elsewhere he combines the two, sun and light (11:7, "sweet is the light (…) and it is good for the eyes to look on the sun…")"

which, as seen in earlier passages, is the only human ideal granted by Qohelet[446] – this remains worth next to nothing, should God render him unable to enjoy these benefits properly. However, Qohelet is not simply envisioning a set of unlikely circumstances in this passage. Through his description of an exceptional situation, the narrator speaks about the human condition more generally too – and his indictment in the passage against a specific, divinely willed, situation is all the more dire because it is also a description of human life in general.

### 2.1. Imagine a Man Who Has Everything Your Heart Could Desire!

Qohelet initially introduces the issue at stake as an evil which lies heavily upon humanity. As he often does, the narrator emphasizes that he has *seen* the situation on which he is about to comment. Interpreters frequently stress that Qohelet's mode of dispensing wisdom is based to a high degree on empirical observation, in contrast to a traditional reliance on transmitted teaching.[447] Such an epistemological shift would make a lot of sense given Qohelet's view of the past as something inaccessible, our memory of

[446] For instance in 2:10 and in all the joy-passages' focus on the present. As summarized by Kroeber: (1963), p. 143: "Nichts ist für Qoheleth nichtiger, als in die Dunkelheit zu gehen, ohne sich am Dasein unter der Sonne gefreut zu haben." While agreeing with the basic statement here, I would argue too, however, that Kroeber underestimates the universal dimension in Qohelet's argument in these verses, appearing especially in 6:3ff.

[447] A prime example is Fox (1993), p. 121, who argues that Qohelet's methodology "is grounded in individual experience. He seeks experience, observes it, judges it, then reports his perceptions or reactions." Crenshaw (1998), p. 212, reminds the readers of the book that Qohelet's method is not wholly empirical, however: there is an "extensive impact of non-experiential data on his thinking", and p. 213: "How does he know that what has been will recur, that people will not be remembered, that everything belongs within an ordered scheme…" And further: "Qoheleth accepted an astonishing variety of transmitted teachings without submitting them to the test of experience." This, however, does not take anything away from the fact that Qohelet appeals *more* to the experience of life now than is usual within the wisdom tradition. Even so, there are issues which simply cannot be investigated through observation and life-experience. A further, related viewpoint is that of Frydrych (2002), p. 80, who states regarding Qohelet's epistemology that he only considers secondary experience valid when this conforms to his personal experience. On p. 81 Frydrych furthermore emphasizes an important limitation placed on wisdom in Qohelet, namely that "Qoheleth's God is prepared to provide only limited insight to humanity…"

which is at best untrustworthy. It has been seen that a primary interest of Qohelet is to discover what the individual human being is able to think and understand about the world, and what sort of life a person can live on the basis of his understanding of humanity's life-conditions. An empirically-flavoured investigation of life as it is lived within the constraints of the temporal reality is thus a sensible authorial choice.[448]

Within Qohelet's discussion of human reality I would emphasise, however, the aspect of *experience* or *participation* as being just as important as that of observation.[449] As seen in the excursus above, Qohelet habitually uses the expression "to see the light" as an image for *living*;[450] "under the sun" being his favourite short-hand for the human existence in its totality. When Qohelet *sees* an evil matter *under the sun*, he is not merely presenting a detached observation – instead, he appeals to a common experience of human life.[451] This is not an unimportant point to make: Qohelet's experientially informed discourse speaks about the general character of human life to a much higher degree than it refers to unlikely border-line cases. When Qohelet sees something occurring under the sun, he

[448] One question which could be asked regarding Qohelet's method of investigation is whether it is based on actual empiricism or claimed empiricism. A possible perspective in this context is Psalm 37:25. However, I wonder whether this would be the right type of question to pose at all: within the *literary fabric* of the book the first-person narrator claims – and this is one of his main claims – that he is reporting his own experience and observation. Can we really ask of fiction – even of fiction which has a philosophical aim, such as Qohelet's – whether or not the empirical basis claimed is "real?"

[449] Mills (2003), p. 46, notes that the narrator "is one who not merely sees and speaks in a swift and single movement but whose seeing and speaking are considered and deliberate acts to which the 'I' has turned or applied itself. In this framework 'testing' and 'finding' also have their places…" In this connection one ought also remember the close connection between the act of seeing – observing and experiencing – and the cognitive evaluation and judgement of a given human situation. Again one may refer to Mills (2003), p. 45, who finds that in the book seeing "is an action that starts off as simple observation but shifts towards the concept of perception or understanding, since the seeing leads to commentary on the value to be attached to the social world…"

[450] So also Crenshaw (1987), p. 127: "For Qohelet, to see light and the sun is to live (cf. Eccl. 7:11, "an advantage to those who see the sun")."

[451] Stylistically, the choice of the first-person style also gives "the impression of total involvement in the learning process." Crenshaw (1998), p. 208.

describes an element of human existence; the reader is meant to see him- or herself in the depictions, much in the same way as the king's observations in 1:12-2:20 are relevant not only to the highly privileged monarch himself, but attempts to capture truths about human existence in general.[452]

In verse 6:2 Qohelet evokes the image of a man who is given everything by God, save the ability to enjoy – literally eat – his benefits.[453] Verse 6:3 continues along the same lines of argumentation, shifting the focus from wealth to longevity: one may achieve all the privileges that traditional thinking expects wisdom to bestow – yet this may be worse than having nothing at all. This can be the case, Qohelet argues, both in 6:2 and 6:3, because God may choose to withhold joy. It would appear, then, that Qohelet has once again diminished the space within which meaning and happiness can be found (as he also did in, for instance, 2:26). It is not enough simply to have material blessings bestowed by the divinity – blessings which are in themselves randomly given (8:14, 9:1) – it is also necessary to have God's active support in making use of them.[454]

Moving from an exceptional, but realistic situation, however, from verse 6:3 onwards Qohelet gradually transports his example case into the realm of the absurd,[455] rendering it

[452] In itself, however, "seeing" something "under the sun" does not imply negativity, although Qohelet often introduces a problematic experiential observation in this way (7:15, 8:9-10 and 9:11-12, for instance). Qohelet's final, and to my mind most emphatic, endorsement of life's potential value in 11:7, makes use of the same formula: "it is good for the eyes to see the sun."

[453] Anderson (2000), p. 87, argues that this is the most problematic verse for readings which emphasise the joy statements in the book. Arguing that the exhortations to joy may be ironic, he states that "6.2 might be the *arch-ironical* statement in *Qoheleth*."

[454] "Qohelet's interest centers on stating the ultimate cause of the misfortune: God." Crenshaw (1987), p. 126.

[455] Krüger (2004), p. 125, notes that the shift from יש to אם and ואלו indicates a shift from the "realistic and concretely conceivable" to the "clearly fictitious…" According to Krüger this exaggeration "serves to

increasingly unlikely that he is thinking about a specific situation only. Qohelet's hyperbolic style from this verse onwards serves to portray what would appear to be an unrealistically good human situation as a basis for making universal claims about human existence. It bears repeating that the narrator uses a similar strategy in the royal fiction where the exceptional wealth, wisdom and privilege of the kingly narrator underscores the universal character of the problems he encounters; for instance that even a person who appears eminently well equipped to search out meaningful aspects of the human existence remains unable so to do. In this manner, the applicability of Qohelet's example in 6:2 is broadened out by being transferred into the realm of the impossible.

It is also from 6:3 onwards that it becomes particularly relevant to draw upon the wider context of Qohelet's time-discourse, since the issue in 6:3ff is not simply one of enjoying oneself sufficiently in the present – even though this is where Qohelet's argument began in 6:1 – but one of living meaningfully under the (temporal) conditions shared by all of humanity. This adjustment of focus is indicated in a number of ways, the first of which happens through a change in language. While the author lamented initially that people may be unable to partake of their good (6:1), the unhappy man of 6:3 is one whose spirit is not sated (שׂבע) by good. Nowhere, however, does Qohelet allow humanity this blessing. He opposes the very possibility of fulfillment, from the very beginning of his book. Indeed, שׂבע only occurs elsewhere in the context of that which humankind cannot

prove that even numerous progeny and a long life do not make up for the lack of possibilities for enjoyment."

achieve, specifically in connection with the sensory dimension of life (namely in 1:8 which refers directly to our existence in time, 4:8, and 5:9).[456]

Qohelet indicates his interest in the wider temporal horizons also by emphasizing the importance of getting a burial, 6:3,[457] as if achieving *that* would somehow counteract the lack of fulfillment in the present. Significantly, the notion that a potential benefit may arise from one's work and activity is here married to a reflection on the temporal conditions: the present moment and its (insufficient) joy cannot be considered apart from its connections to what is to come. If the future is characterized by oblivion, then life now loses meaning too. Even though the language is still that of an extreme case – the unfortunate person who gets no burial at all – the consequences are, in fact, the very same as those which Qohelet has repeatedly outlined as characteristic for human existence in general. If you are not awarded a burial, total oblivion is a given – and oblivion as a basic condition is a central worry of Qohelet's throughout the book.[458]

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[456] For instance, and remarkably, in none of the exhortations to joy does Qohelet make use of the word שבע. In fact, his vocabulary in these passages is remarkably consistent, describing the desired life in the present through a key-group of verbs and nouns, especially: אכל, שתה, ראה טוב, שמח,עשׂה טוב, שׂמח, and חלק. (Thus, in 2:24-25: אכל, שתה, ראה טוב, in 3:12-13: שׂמח, עשׂה טוב, אכל, שתה, ראה טוב , in 3:22: שׂמח, חלק, in 5:17-19: אכל, שתה, ראה טוב, חלק, השליט לאכל, שׂמח, in 8:15: אכל, שתה, שׂמוח, in 9:7-9: אכל, שתה, חלק, and here also the expression ראה חיים, and in 11:8-9: שׂמח.)

[457] A different reading is suggested by Jones (1961), p. 312, who notes two possible interpretations of the reference to burial. Either it could refer to an honourable burial or the thought of the passage could be that "even if the rich man had lived on and on, enjoying his wealth, and actually never died, it would still have been better for him to have been still-born!" Commenting on the second reading Jones continues, p. 311, that: "This is bitter irony and shatters any protest that life is too short to enjoy all one has!"

[458] Given the further development of the argument of the passage in 6:3, one may consider too whether an element of a universal indictment may be present also in the first half of the argument. For instance, 6:2 contained a reference to a stranger eating the benefits of the rich man – the same complaint, in fact, as in 2:18, where the kingly narrator was driven to hate his life and achievements even in the present because he would have to leave his portion to the stranger coming after him. Qohelet has claimed this as one of the main problems attached to the human life in the present: the invisible past and future are eating away at its edges, and the knowledge that the now is impermanent, that it is never enough, and that it can never be trusted, renders enjoyment in the present a severely problematic affair.

Qohelet thus makes two related points in 6:3-6 both of which nuance and broaden out the scope of 6:2's example-story: firstly, that joy in the present is never enough, and that it does not diminish the virulence of passing time. And secondly, that ultimate oblivion, here envisaged through the idea of not attaining a proper burial, precludes any real worth of the life lived in the present. Even potentially positive aspects of human present existence, such as acquiring wealth and having many children, are undermined.

It is this double complaint – the lack of sufficient enjoyment in the present and certain oblivion in the future[459] – which leads Qohelet to the indictment that even the stillborn child is better off than somebody who has lived a life containing everything for which wisdom searches. What characterizes the stillborn child is, more than anything, its complete lack of identity. Oblivion has claimed it even before it could carve out a life and name for itself. However, as one must relinquish everything gained anyway, these circumstances are to be preferred, Qohelet claims.[460] Indeed, it is good that the stillborn has not had any experience of life.[461]

In this manner, as well as presenting a specific case, 6:1-6 also functions as a summary of Qohelet's basic complaint regarding the human condition. While it is problematic in itself that some unlucky individuals lack the ability to enjoy their benefits, Qohelet claims also that every human life can be compared to the nothingness and characterless nature of a

[459] Because the complaint encompasses both of these dimensions, I agree only in part with Krüger, (2004) p. 126, who argues that verses 6:3-5 make the point that even if a man has a hundred heirs he should not deprive himself of enjoyment.
[460] Though focused on the specific case of the rich man only, the observation of Crenshaw (1987), p. 127, is pertinent: "Although Qohelet does not elaborate, he could not emphasize the rich man's plight more strongly than by this comparison. The stillborn lies at rest while the rich man continues in frustration."
[461] Literally "has not seen the sun" which is in 11:7 characterised unequivocally as "good".

stillborn infant, and this remains true however magnified its joys and blessings. In 6:6 Qohelet drives home this point forcefully: even if human beings were to live extraordinarily long lives and beget numerous offspring, their existence cannot be said to have any value in comparison with the nameless non-existence of the stillborn child because of their ultimately shared fate.

The point made here resembles strongly that of 2:14bff where Qohelet denies wisdom any advantage due to the shared fate of wise and fool. As in that former passage,
6:1-6 is clad in hyperbolic language in order to present not only the worst possible situation – that occasionally God may not allow joy even after having bestowed upon a person material benefits – but to sketch out also the best situation imaginable, only to show that even in *that* situation the temporal realities, as experienced in present and future both, render human life without ultimate meaning.[462]

While Qohelet's indirect references to the temporal framework of present and past/future are significant to the interpretation of 6:1-6 suggested here, it should be emphasized that the aspect of *cognition* comes much less to the fore in these verses than in many other passages which reflect upon the relationship between the present life of human beings and the wider temporal horizons. Instead the stress is on experience; on sensing and enjoyment.[463]

[462] Therefore I disagree with Longman (1998), p. 171, who understands the situation as something exceptional throughout: the indictment applies only to "the life of one to whom God has given riches, long life, and many children, but not the ability to enjoy it all."
[463] It is worth here referring to the observation of Ginsberg (1950), p. 2, regarding the "programme" of Qohelet. As this is set out in the royal fiction, the narrator emphasizes the "two alleged purposes of life: the pursuit of wisdom (1:16-18) and the pursuit of pleasure (1:12-15)" as being especially pointless.

### 2.2. The View on Mortality in 6:4-6 and in 9:4

One issue which continues to puzzle scholars is how the fate of the aborted foetus can here be deemed preferable to that of a man who has everything when Qohelet claims later in the book, in 9:4, that even the most meagre excuse for a life is preferable to death. Does one passage somehow glorify the non-existence of death, whilst the other, along with most of Qohelet's reflections on mortality, considers death the ultimate evil – the negation of any and all imaginable distinctions, as well as a complete loss of everything human, cognition included?[464]

I would argue that the passages seek to accomplish two different things, however. In 6:4-6, the idea is to juxtapose that which is the least and that which is the most and show – in a manner not dissimilar to what is accomplished in 2:14bff – that they are in fact almost indistinguishable, given the ultimate fate and the basic conditions of human beings. Qohelet blurs the distinction between the two even further by making it syntactically unclear whether it is the privileged man whose name is covered in darkness – or whether it is that of the stillborn child.[465] All too soon it will be true for them both. What remains to us is a brief life in the present – the life which the human being lives like a breath, like a shadow under the sun – and Qohelet suggests again in this passage that the onslaught of

[464] It does not seem sufficient to say, as does Seow, (2008a) p. 226, that whether life is to be preferred to the fate of the still-born or not depends on one's perspective – how one sees and knows.
[465] Fox (1999), p. 220, emphasizes this point. Longman (1998), p. 171, disagrees with Fox, and Schoors (2004) notes that Fox runs into problems because he wants 5a to refer to the unhappy man.

oblivion hits us so hard even in the present that the most extravagant benefits offered within this life may not be worthwhile.[466]

Differently, 9:4 will claim, with something like a desperate irony, that the knowledge of unavoidable oblivion is at least a form of *knowledge* – the only knowledge, in fact, which human beings can achieve regarding the larger temporal scheme of past and future, and therefore also their only hope.[467] The most wretched existence is therefore to be preferred to even the most glorious death. Once darkness has closed over us, all distinctions vanish and all differences are negated: a life of privilege and joy does not differ from a miscarriage, and a lion is no more than a dog.

### 2.3. 6:7-12: Who Knows What Is Good For Humanity?

There are close connections between 6:1-6 and the following verses, 6:7-12, which in an associative manner continue the reflection of the former passage, denying human beings satiation through their senses (cf. 1:8), as well as dismissing the advantages of wisdom:

*6:7: All of the toil of humanity is for their mouth and yet the appetite is not satisfied.*[468]
*6:8: For what advantage does the wise have over the fool? What use is it to the poor man if he knows how to live?*[469]

[466] Similar imagery is used in Job 3:16 to make a related point: "Why was I not like a stillborn which is buried; like children who never see light?" Like Qohelet, Job considers death the ultimate leveller (Job 3:17-19), but in his desperation he appeals more strongly to the rest offered in death than Qohelet would be able to do.
[467] Johnston's reading (2006), p. 96, of 9:4 encapsulates much of this, yet also emphasizes the potential presence of something more positive in the image. He argues that "it seems better from one perspective if we might never have been born. However, viewing the same reality from a different vantage point, life is also precious. It has so much useless beauty. (…) We must speak of both life's futility and its wonder. In fact, we must speak of them in the same breath."
[468] Literally: "All the toil of man is for his mouth…"
[469] Literally: "What is it to the poor man who knows to walk before the living?"

*6:9: What the eyes see*[470] *is better than the wandering of desire.*[471] *This, too, is a* הבל *and a pursuit of wind.*
*6:10: Whatever came into being was already called by name, and it is known what a man will be. And he cannot contend with the one who is mightier*[472] *than he.*
*6:11: Given that many words increase* הבל[473] *– what is one the better?*
*6:12: For who knows what is good for humanity in life, the few days of their life of* הבל*, which they live like a shadow – for who can tell them what will be after them under the sun?*[474]

The claim made in 6:7 regarding the impossibility of satiation is entirely general in nature.[475] In this and the following verses Qohelet abandons completely the ties to the specific, marginal case of 6:2 and reflects instead solely on universal, human conditions. Human beings toil in order to be satisfied, to eat and enjoy – so claims Qohelet – and every effort of ours serves this purpose. Yet, as was demonstrated through Qohelet's discussion of the exemplary case in the preceding verses, we will always be unable to satisfy this hunger of ours for *more.*[476]

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[470] Literally: "better is the view of the eyes" which, as noted by Krüger (2004), p. 118, could be both a subjective genitive ("the seeing of the eyes") and an objective: ("that which the eyes see.")
[471] Krüger (2004), p. 117-118, refers to GKC paragraph 118q for the alternative translation "than going around with desire" which he does not follow, however, translating as he does "than to give appetite free reign."
[472] Gordis (1968), p. 263, argues that the kethib here reflects a conflation of two variants, namely שׁחקיף and התקיף, but Goldman (2004), p. 88, notes that it could also be the relative שׁ followed by a hiphil of תקף, though this form is not attested elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. Krüger (2004), p. 132, follows Qere.
[473] Gordis (1968), p. 172, translates: "Many words merely add to the futility…"
[474] The Hebrew uses singular forms throughout: "For who knows what is good for man in life…" etc.
[475] There is a possible connection here with the statement in 1:8 which in similar language denied the possibility of human fulfillment.
[476] Ackroyd (1967), p. 84-85 has noted that the language is similar to that used about the insatiability of Sheol, and that as such it could be Sheol's appetite which was never satisfied. In support of this reading one might enlist especially Proverbs 30:15-16. Differently, Seow (2008a), p. 226-227, finds that the issue here is insatiability of people, arguing that in several Hebrew Bible books the same type of imagery is used about the rich and arrogant as about Sheol, for instance Ps. 73:9 and Hab. 2:5. Thus, p. 227: "The implication of what Qoheleth is saying is that the insatiability of the rich is not only self-destructive, it poses danger to others who fall prey to their greed. (…) Qohelet elevates the issue to a higher plain so that discontentment is seen to have consequences not only for individuals, but also for society at large, even for the cosmos." Similarly, Crenshaw (1987), p. 128, states: ""Like the frustrated rich man, Sheol is never satisfied…" However, it should be stressed *material* greed does not seem to be the main issue in the passage. It is more likely that the use of language borrowed from depictions of Sheol should be understood in connection with the ongoing discussion of issues connected to mortality and oblivion (Qohelet 6:4-6, 6:12).

The use of כי as the first word of 6:8 suggests a close connection between the lack of fulfillment described in 6:7 and Qohelet's disavowal of the advantage of wisdom in this verse.[477] Wisdom, too, is never enough, and its inability to provide a genuine advantage can be connected to the human inability to reach fulfillment.[478] Indeed, verses 6:10-11 will continue to dismiss the validity of wordy reflection, as well as attempts to contend with the divinity.

From verse 6:9 Qohelet returns explicitly to his ongoing exploration of the temporal conditions of life. He maintains once again in 6:9 the advantage of the present – of that which one actually sees and experiences – above the wisdom enterprise as well as above a longing which remains unspecified by the author. Possibly Qohelet is only able to refer to this longing in the vaguest of terms: living with both the past and the future hidden from view, we cannot actually know that for which we long. In 6:10 Qohelet reminds the reader of the immutability of the temporal conditions: it has long been known what the individual will be (cf. 3:14ff) and we can neither change this nor seek out understanding which is not available to us.

Qohelet appeals explicitly to our inability to engage with the temporal framework in verse 6:12. Here he maintains the connection between the human inability to determine what would be good to do during one's life *now* and our utter ignorance regarding the

[477] If translated causally כי would suggest a causal relationship between the statement in 6:7 and the one in 6:8, and if emphatically one would also expect 6:8 to illustrate further the point of 6:7, offering an additional, possibly a stronger, example of the same situation.
[478] This line of thought is similar to that of several other passages which emphasize the ultimate inadequacy of wisdom (including 2:14b-15, as well as 6:11 in this very passage).

future. The emphasis on the effect of the hidden future upon the present, hindering our establishment of meaning in the now, creates an interesting dynamic with the focus in 6:7 on sensory experience in the present and its insufficiency. Qohelet underlines that our desire for sufficient present enjoyment cannot be separated from our failed cognitive engagement with the temporal framework more generally. If ignorance about the future can be regarded as a determining factor for our ability to live worthwhile lives in the present, this may give us the necessary clue to understand why the present satisfaction is deemed impossible in 6:7 – and why even the longest life must be deemed worth less than nothing when the reality of oblivion is considered.

The divine responsibility is stressed very directly in 6:10-12: like in 3:15, God is presented as the one who transgresses the temporal limitations which he has set for humanity. God has already long known the name of the individual and what he will become. This statement smacks of dark irony when read in connection with 6:1-9: what the human being will become is forgotten – no more, no less. His name will be covered in darkness, like that of the nameless stillborn, and the memory of him will be inaccessible to those who come after him and from whom he is utterly separated. Similarly, the human being has no access either to the distant past in which God knew precisely what his life and end would be. The powerlessness of human beings when faced with the temporal reality could hardly be underlined more forcefully.[479] It is entirely apt that the individual's life be compared to a shadow in the concluding statement of the passage (6:12).

[479] The same is accomplished in the presentation of the relationship between human beings and God who alone knows what would be good for us during our lives and with whom we cannot contend.

### 2.4. The Relationship between 5:17-19 and 6:1-6

6:1-6 should not be interpreted in isolation from the preceding verses 5:17-19 either.[480] This is a passage which, like 6:1-6, appears to discuss universal conditions of human existence, as it argues in favour of enjoying the pleasure afforded by one's work.[481] In a manner similar to 2:10 Qohelet describes this enjoyment as one's "portion".[482] Of particular interest in the present context, however, is the author's appeal in 5:19 to the temporal conditions of human existence: here it is argued that, should a person manage to live the life advocated in 5:17-18, this will protect him from thinking too much about the brevity of life. Rather, his mind will be focused on the present moment.

If both 5:17-19 and 6:1-6 aim to describe universal aspects of human life, however, they seem to contradict each other quite starkly.[483] Thus Seow states that verses 6:1-2 "are

[480] In addition to the strong thematic connection between the two passages, they are also somewhat connected in terms of language, both of them using words such as "good", "portion", "see good". Granted, these words are frequently used in the book of Qohelet, but it remains noteworthy that they occur in two adjacent passages which discuss the same issue.

[481] However, Krüger (2004), pp. 121-123, also notes the connections between 15:17-19 and the passages preceding these verses, in that 5:9.11 describe first in three proverbial and ambiguous statements the theme of wealth and poverty which is then developed in a series of negative cases, 5:12-16, and positive cases, 5:17-19. He understands 5:17 as referring back to 5:15-16, 5:18 to 5:12-14, while 5:19 brings into play the viewpoint of the "length of life"; an issue which will be discussed further in 6:3ff. It is also worth noting that both the passages 5:14-16 and 5:17-19 comment on the temporal themes of ephemeral existence, 5:14-16 claiming the impossibility of holding on to present benefit in 5:14-16 (opposite 5:17-19).

[482] Considering the thematic connection to the reflections on work and wealth in the book's second chapter, it is interesting that Krüger (2004), p. 123, suggests the following reading of the passage in 5:17-19: "In the broader context of the book of Qoheleth, 5:17-18 can also be read as a critique of the judgment of wealth and enjoyment by the "king" in 1:12-2:26: wealth is not something that a man acquires completely by himself…" The focus on the divinity is central, I agree, but read in context with 6:1ff the main issue seems less the human arrogance in ascribing success to one's own achievements. Much more it is the randomness of the divine favour which worries Qohelet, as well as the universally problematic conditions established by the divinity.

[483] Krüger (2004), p. 125, suggests a social setting for this complaint of Qohelet in the historical conditions in the third century BCE, connected to the period's "immense increase in the already substantial burden of taxes." This remains, however, an unnecessary conjecture. Furthermore, Krüger's case rests largely on the term נכרי designating a non-Jew, the Tobiad Joseph being the tax-recipient whose membership of the Jewish

problematic for the interpreter because they seem to negate what has been said…" in 5:17-19. "This appears all the more so because the vocabulary and style in 6:1-2 suggest that this section is intended to mirror 5:18-19 (Heb vv 17-18) in some way, as if the two were together a paradox, the one as true as the other."[484] Similarly, Fischer finds that "5,17-19 und 6,1-2 stehen in der schon aus 2,24-26 bekannten Polarität zueinander. (…) Der Mensch ist dem Handeln Gottes unbeeinflußbar ausgeliefert, hier nur unter negativem Vorzeichen (cf 2,26) (...) Gott ist frei, einem Menschen die Beschäftigung mit dieser Herzensfreude zu geben. Er gesteht sie einer Person zu – einer anderen jedoch nicht."[485]

Seow claims, however, that there is a marked difference between the two passages in that the "first concerns the universal, the second the particular." 6:1-2 does contain language which seems to address the universal, rather than the particular, but Seow argues that the issue is still one of a specific, possible evil: "To be sure, 6:1 speaks of the evil being great over humanity (…) but that means only that humanity as a whole is subject to the possibility of such instances…" Indeed, according to Seow, 6:1-2 indicate the exception, 5:17-19 the rule.[486]

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people was doubtful. Crenshaw (1987), p. 126, is right to note, however, that "the word *nokrî* (stranger) does not necessarily indicate a foreigner. For Qohelet, it may simply describe the "someone else" who enjoys what a rich man worked to acquire."

[484] Seow (2008a), p. 224.

[485] Fischer (1997), p. 57. Longman (1998), p. 169-170, notes that the two passages contrast different life-situations, but does not consider them contradictory: 5:18-19 is part of an exhortation to joy in which Qohelet encourages those who have been given benefits and the ability to enjoy them to do so. Other people have not been given the gift of enjoying their benefits and these unlucky individuals are the subject of 6:1ff.

[486] Seow (2008a), p. 225. Isaksson (1987) p. 122, presents the same view. Seow finds that 6:3-6 matches 5:12-16 – the problem in both sections being that there are people who cannot enjoy what they have. Thus on p. 226: "If they have everything in life – wealth, progeny, and longevity – they will complain about the days that are still to come and about death."

However, such an interpretation misses the universal implications of Qohelet's argument in the second of the two passages: a stranger will always eat of one's portion and one must always die and be forgotten. While both passages use language that seemingly addresses the particular (5:18 and 6:1-2), both of them also conclude in a universal manner (5:19, 6:3ff).[487] One claims that enjoyment of one's portion in the present can sufficiently keep at bay thoughts about what is to come, while the other deems this impossible.[488] The tension cannot easily be resolved.[489]

If the two passages are to be reconciled somewhat – and, given their connection to Qohelet's notoriously contradictory discussion of the worth of enjoyment, this may well be one of the cases where the tensions cannot be eliminated entirely – I suggest that focusing on their different emphasis regarding *dimensions of time* would provide better criteria for distinguishing their respective aims than would a reading which deems only one of the passages descriptive of the general human situation. Qohelet initially presents his ideal for enjoyment in the present (5:17-19), and then in the latter passage, unavoidably, the horizons of past and future creep in upon and threaten the present. This is consistent with what happens, for instance, in the royal fiction which stresses the value of one's present enjoyment in 2:10, only to negate the enjoyment found in the present on the basis of oblivion in the following verses. Another example of a similar movement is 8:1-9 which will be discussed below. I would suggest that within passages that offer

[487] Note also that Qohelet introduces both 6:1 and 5:17 with the emphatic "I saw…"

[488] On a thematic level, which does not demand consistency in terms of viewpoint and argument, the two passages are closely connected by their preoccupation with the problem of that which is to come and the threat which mortality and oblivion pose to the present.

[489] In a sense it would be surprising if this was possible: as mentioned in chapter 4, the book's establishment of contradiction between the exhortations to joy in the present and the insistence that such joy is not simply limited, but rendered impossible and without any real substance, has been discussed again and again by scholars.

contradictory advice on human life, it is often in connection with an evaluation of the temporal reality that Qohelet's focus and opinion change. When Qohelet grasps for the wider horizons of past and future he tends to go back on positive statements just made. Again, this does not eradicate contradiction in the text, but it does lend some degree of coherence to Qohelet's argument, filled with tension and uncertainty though it is.

It speaks in favour of this reading that the following verses, 6:7-12, expand further the tension between an ideal life focused on the present reality[490] and the human engagement with what lies beyond that present. Here an affirmation of the present and its benefits as preferable to our longing for that which remains out of reach is knitted together with an emphasis on the effects of past and future upon life and joy in the present – especially emphasizing, as the narrator has done before, the cognitive dimensions of our life in time and the divine responsibility.

### 3. 8:1-9: The Evil of Humanity Lies Heavily upon Them

In several ways Ecclesiastes 8:1-9 is a problematic passage. It is steeped in contradiction and to make matters worse, it is not particularly easy to figure out what the passage is actually about: it envelops a reflection on the divine ordering of the temporal world within a discussion about earthly powers and the correct attitude before them. It is, furthermore, difficult to be entirely sure *who* Qohelet is talking about at various points of 8:1-9. This passage with its convoluted conclusions thrives on ambiguity, especially

[490] Kroeber (1963), p. 143, captures this dimension of 6:7-9 well, stating that wisdom can give the insight that "der Augenblick der Erfüllung nicht vergehen darf über dem wirklichtkeitsblinden Laufen nach einem imaginären "Lebensglück". Das Glück ist immer nur der unsichere, flüchtige "Teil", der aufgenommen werden will, wie er sich darbietet."

regarding the identity of the king and the potential ability of the wise to cope with the realities of power and time facing him.

While it is difficult to bypass completely the fact that in this passage Qohelet has something unexpected to say about the human relationship to time, in scholarly readings the temporal aspect of 8:1-9 often gets shoved quite far into the background. Instead, the evaluation of earthly powers is placed at the forefront. Loader's interpretation is characteristic of this kind of work, seeing the passage mainly as a meditation on human power: "the king can do what he pleases (v. 3c) and no one can call him into account (v. 4). In this manner the Preacher stresses the political supremacy of the king and the total powerlessness of the subject."[491] Brown describes the passage as "a survivalist's guide" for conducting oneself before royal power.[492] As well as not giving sufficient weight to the statements on time and the temporal order in the passage, however, this type of reading is hard pressed to account for Qohelet's change of mind between the beginning and the end of the passage regarding earthly power. In 8:9 Qohelet is happy to state that the earthly hierarchies of power are to the detriment of human beings, while in 8:2-5 he championed a much more traditional doctrine, allowing the wise the ability to act prudently before power to avoid evil consequences.[493] These two viewpoints are separated by an explicit reflection on the divinely ordered cosmic time in 8:6-8.

[491] Loader (1986), p. 96.
[492] Brown (2000), p. 87.
[493] Hatton (2008), p. 119, attempts to deal with this problem by arguing that the passage is dialogic, allowing contradictory voices to be heard: "So Qohelet 8.2 begins a passage on the subject of obedience to authority with an appeal for unconditional compliance with royal commands as both pious and right (…) Verses 8.3-8 urge further prudential reasons for loyalty, namely respect for royal power in an uncertain world. So Qohelet 8.9 is unexpectedly negative…" Brown (2000), p. 87, simply acknowledges that earthly powers have a tendency to use them at others' expense, but does not go into the matter further.

My interest here is to suggest how this passage with its puzzling statements about time and power might be understood if read in close connection with the temporal discourse in the book – focusing especially on the connection between the present and the wider temporal framework, and how this may influence the possibility of establishing a well-considered life in the present.

### 3.1. 8:1-5: Timely Action in Human Society

The passage in 8:1-9 concerns itself with authority, both earthly and divine, discussing the possibility and the benefits of obedience, as well as meditating on the relationship between subject and ruler. After an initial praise of wisdom in 8:1, 8:2-4 suggest several reasons why one should obey the earthly ruler: because of the divine oath (8:2), because of the king's sovereign power (8:3),[494] and because the subject ought not to question the king (8:4). Most interesting for our purpose here, however, is the baffling statement from Qohelet in 8:5 as he argues that such obedience is absolutely possible: he claims that the wise man knows "time and judgement." The man who is wise can discern what will be the proper action at the proper moment. To him time makes sense in the present:

*8:5: He who keeps the commandment shall not experience evil, and the heart of the wise knows time and judgement.*[495]

[494] Krüger (2004), p. 152, notes about 8:2.3a that it is "an admonition that is in several respects unclear and ambiguous." For instance, is the reader asked to obey the king or to pay attention to his mood? What is meant by the oath of God? Should the Masoretic text division be kept? Does בהל mean to hurry or to be frightened? Longman (1998), p. 211, suggests a departure from the Masoretic verse division and moving "to not hasten" from 8:3 he translates: "and do not rush into a vow to God." While this emendation does not strike me as necessary and ruins the parallelism between hasten/depart in 8:3, it does pick up on the fact that the wider passage concerns itself with divine as well as earthly authority.

[495] As noted by Fox (1999), p. 278, ועת ומשפט, could also be understood as a hendiadys and translated either "the right time" or "the time of judgement."

Just how unexpected this viewpoint is becomes clear if one compares it with Qohelet's other statements on the subjects of knowing the right time to act and understanding in general the temporal set-up of the world. Qohelet 8:5 seems to completely contradict earlier statements such as Qohelet 3:11: "Everything he has made beautiful in its time. He has also placed eternity in their hearts, yet so that the human being cannot figure out the work which God has done from beginning to end." Similarly, 7:13-14 states: "Behold the work of God, for who can make straight that which he has made crooked? In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity realise that God has made both one and the other so that human beings shall not figure out anything after them."[496]

While the latter of these two verses focuses on the future almost exclusively and could therefore more easily coexist peacefully with verse 8:5, verse 3:11 is orientated much more towards the present, reflecting on creation's temporal dimension in its totality. This is also the case in verse 8:17 where Qohelet unequivocally claims that: "And I saw the whole work of God; that humankind cannot figure out the work which is done under the sun. Even though the human being works hard to seek it, he will not figure it out, and even if the wise man claims to know (it), he cannot figure it out." The encouraging view of 8:5 jars painfully against this highly emphatic statement[497] from which it is separated by only a dozen verses.

A striking feature in 8:2-5 is, however, that Qohelet has removed God and the temporal order established by him from the equation. Focusing solely on earthly affairs he is able

[496] Literally "…man shall not find out anything after him."
[497] 8:17 repeats constructions with לא + מצא three times in this one verse!

to affirm the human ability to choose the proper moment to act. Yet, while earthly power is the sole focus in 8:2-5, the scope of the discussion expands in 8:6. Qohelet here elegantly merges the question about timely action in the worldly sphere with the problem of recognizing time in general.[498]

### 3.2. 8:6-9: The Effects of the Wider Temporal Order for Present Activity

*8:6: Indeed, every matter has its time and judgement, for the evil of humanity lies heavily[499] upon them.[500]*
*8:7: For they do not know what will be, for who can tell them when it will be?*
*8:8: Humanity does not have power over the wind so as to retain the wind, and they do not have power over the day of death. And there is no discharge from the war, and injustice will not save those who practise it.*
*8:9: All of this I saw and I applied my heart to everything which happens under the sun – while one man has power over another man to his hurt.*

The particular focus in 8:6 is the proper recognition of the time to come. This encompasses both that which is appropriate or characteristic of the future and the awareness of when life will end. Humanity's faulty and limited perception of structured world-time, and therefore of the quality and content of time to come, is an issue that Qohelet has already discussed at length – especially in chapters 1 and 3. The author is therefore able to indicate, through catch-phrases already known to the reader, the change of focus from worldly power to divine establishment of the temporal order and the human's place within it. Most noticeable are the phrases "every matter has its time" (cf. 3:1 and 3:17) and "the evil of humanity lies heavily upon them" (cf. 1:13).

[498] As discussed above, a similar move can be seen from 4:1 to 4:2-3 where the lament about oppression under the sun is connected to the wider (temporal) structures in the world.
[499] Literally: "is heavy upon him."
[500] The main textual issue in 8:6-7 is the translation of the many occurrences of כי. Here the first is translated emphatically, and the second causally. It should also be noted that the Hebrew text uses singular masculine forms in 8:6-8: "the evil of man lies heavily upon him…" etc.

In this subtle shift of focus, the temporal reality of humanity – their mortality and their understanding of the time which governs their lives – comes to occupy the space held in 8:5 by the prudent time to act in relation to the earthly powers. It is this shift which allows Qohelet to turn upside-down the conclusion of 8:5 and state flat out in 8:7 that human beings cannot know what will be.[501] Qohelet emphasizes again that in temporal matters no real power belongs to humanity – and certainly not within the sphere of cognition and timely actions.

Krüger suggests differently as the implication of 8:6 that the time-bound nature of all events and actions (v. 6a) is a consequence of the "evil" of human beings.[502] He interprets the passage as dealing with an opportunistic type of behaviour which, given the temporal realities in 8:6ff, makes little or no sense.[503] I agree with Krüger that the discussion of time in 8:6ff is to be read in connection with 8:2-5, but I do not think that it is the general guilt of every human being which is in view here[504] – rather, the limitations placed by the temporal conditions on human existence and cognition demand that Qohelet adjust his view in 8:2-5 on the human ability to act in a well-considered manner at the appropriate moment.

[501] As noted by Krüger (2004), p. 156, the statement about humanity's evil lying heavily upon them in 8:7 does not fit well at all with the claim that the wise will not know any evil thing.
[502] Krüger (2004), p. 156. I agree with Fox (1999), p. 279, that the point "is not the evil in man's actions so much as the misfortune he suffers…"
[503] Krüger (2004), p. 157.
[504] Regarding the word רעת I agree with Whybray (1989), p. 132, and Longman (1998), p. 214, that it is not human sin, but human ignorance which is in view here.

The imagery of verses 8:6-9 draws on the semantic field of power, as did the previous verses, incorporating especially images from the sphere of military and authority. However, the positive assertions of 8:2-5 are completely gone. 8:8 retains the temporal focus, using again language which already has well-established connotations in Qohelet's discourse on time: the subject is holding on to the רוח; a word which has been used, firstly, about the wind exemplifying the cosmic temporal structure that humanity is unable to grasp or fully participate in and, secondly, about the divinely given life-breath.[505] Probably both possible meanings are in play here. As in 2:14b-16 the problem of death is in view, impacting the life-possibilities in the present. Simultaneously, I would argue, there is in the image of the wind a dimension of non-knowing, of the opaque, of that which continually slips out of our grasp when we try to hold on to it. Thus, in 8:8 several of the temporal order's problematic dimensions are foregrounded, dealing severe damage to humanity's attempts to live meaningfully, also in the present. Life becomes a battle in which we continually attempt to gain dominion over that which is out of our reach. It is a relentless war, from which there is no respite and no discharge, save in the form of the obliteration of the individual in death.[506]

Since Qohelet in 8:6-8 stresses humanity's lack of knowledge about that which is to come, one could object to the present reading that Qohelet's focus moves completely away from the time of the present when he transfers his discussion from earthly matters

[505] Crenshaw (1998), p. 152, notes the ambiguity of this particular reference to רוח as it might deny "that anyone is strong enough to resist the powerful force of the wind" or alternatively "indicate life-force, which no one can hold at the moment of death", and he prefers the second option.
[506] Interpreters who discuss in connection with 8:8 whether one could be discharged from Israel's battles or not, looking to the law-code for support, seem to miss the point of the verse: the battle is a metaphor for life and it is unimportant whether it emulates actual warfare in this particular aspect, pace Whybray (1989), p. 215, and Ogden (1987), p. 133.

to the implications of the cosmic design for humanity. I would argue, differently, that Qohelet here demonstrates as divinely willed the human inability to figure out our temporal conditions, even to the extent of acting sensibly in our present. Qohelet's depiction of humanity's inability to understand the temporal reality well enough to navigate within it, including developing reasonable expectations about what is to come, springs in this passage directly out of his discussion in 8:2-5 of acting sensibly in the world here and now. Verses 8:6-8 thus provide the cosmic framework within which human, present activity must be understood and judged. Furthermore, the language which Qohelet uses in 8:6ff helps maintain the connection to the present life of human beings, for instance when Qohelet refers to the different times and events in our present life as he did in 3:1-8. The use in 8:6-8 of central words from 8:2-5 have the same function, especially רעה and ידע.

Finally, Qohelet returns explicitly to this passage's opening theme: earthly powers and how to act before them.[507] Thus, in 8:9, Qohelet ties together his initial observation about the reality of worldly power with his discussion of humanity's temporal reality. Having interlocked notions of human and divine dominion the narrator passes judgement on human rule, flat-out contradicting what was said initially.[508] The relationship between divinity and human being in the realm of time (8:6-8) so affects the human/human relationship that Qohelet reverses his previous statement. Connecting the human inability

[507] I agree with Longman (1998), p. 215, that 8:9 makes much more sense as a conclusion to 8:1-8 than as the introduction to the next unit.

[508] Some scholars understand the verse as dealing with another kind or another aspect of power entirely and thus disregard the tension with 8:2-5. Crenshaw (1998), p. 153, chooses such a solution and does not comment on the relationship between 8:2-5 and 8:9, asking instead whether those wielding power are most likely to hurt themselves or others. As the verse carries on the discussion of what is a prominent theme in the rest of the passage, however, it does not seem warranted to interpret 8:9 in isolation from what has gone before.

to relate to time with the situation in human society he suggests, now, that every relationship of power even within the sphere of human life is problematic. Is God still lurking in the background here; the ultimate king and oppressor?[509]

The reversal in the attitude towards earthly rulers, as well as the fact that the reflections in this passage begin and end in the realm of human activity in the present also underline that both present moment and future are implicated in Qohelet's indictment of the human understanding of time. The deceptiveness of the temporal order has implications both for humankind's understanding of the future and the widest limits of their existence, and for their everyday life: even their seeming ability to navigate in the present is revealed as an illusion. They cannot even comfortably judge their ability to act responsibly towards human rulers – it would *appear* that one can make the right decisions if one is wise, but Qohelet suggests that even in human matters, such appearances are deceptive: the divinely established temporal order is unknowable and our belief that we can intellectually engage with it and navigate within it in our daily life is fundamentally a mirage.

[509] The entire passage is somewhat ambiguous regarding the identity of the ruler. Even in 8:2-5 where the earthly king is explicitly in focus, the author uses language that sows doubt about this king's identity. Firstly, there is the issue of "the oath of God" or the "divine oath". This could be either a subjective or an objective genitive, referring either to God's oath regarding kingship or alternatively an oath sworn in the name of God to the king. See for instance Crenshaw (1998), p. 150. Secondly, the language about the king is elsewhere also used about the divinity: in Ps. 115:3 it is God who does what he wants (חפץ עשׂה), and Qohelet's warning about the distance between subject and ruler is not a far cry from the warning in 5:1 to keep in mind that "God is in heaven and you are on earth." As noted by Longman (1998), p 212, the warning in 9:4 that the king cannot be gainsaid is similar to a rhetorical question posed by Job to God in Job 9:12. An interesting passage for comparison is 4:1-3 which discusses the structures of power/oppression and power in the human realm while simultaneously referring to the divine responsibility for the wider order of the world, see above chapter 4, section 3.

### 4. 9:1-12: There Is Hope for the Living Who Know That They Must Die

Verses 9:1-12 is, in several ways, an ideal passage with which to conclude this section. It very effectively recapitulates Qohelet's view on the present in its relationship to the wider human continuity. In addition, this passage contains some of the book's most powerful and disturbing imagery in its depiction of human mortality. Utilizing as one of its metaphorical strategies the comparison of human beings with animals, 9:1-12 emphasises forcefully powerlessness and ignorance as universal conditions of human existence. As in the other passages which have been discussed in this chapter, the loss of past and future as meaningful temporal horizons are shown to impact life in the present in a deeply problematic fashion. In 9:1-12, however, this problem is investigated explicitly in the context of human mortality. This rhetorical move of foregrounding death in his evaluation of human life significantly sharpens the tone of Qohelet's discussion.

*9:1: For[510] all this I took to heart and I examined[511] it all, that the righteous and the wise and their works are in the hand of God – whether love or hatred, the human being does not know – anything may happen to them.[512]*
*9:2: All things come to all in the same manner; there is but one fate for the righteous and the sinner, for the good [and for the evil],[513] and for the clean and for the unclean, and for the one who sacrifices and for the one who does not sacrifice, for the good as for the sinner, for the one who swears an oath as for the one who fears an oath.*
*9:3: This is an evil in all which is done under the sun: that there is one fate for all. In addition, people's hearts[514] are filled with evil and there is madness in their hearts while they live – and afterwards to the dead.[515]*

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[510] Fox (1999), p. 290, notes the "evidential" function of כי here, explaining why what was stated above is trye.
[511] The Masoretic text is awkward syntactically. Seeking support in the Greek text, Fox (1999), p. 288, reads ולבי ראה instead of ולבור. With Schoors (1992), pp. 27-28 and Gordis (1968), p, 299, I argue in favour of retaining the more difficult Masoretic text, however, understanding it as an infinitive construct which functions as a finite verb.
[512] So also Crenshaw (1987), p. 159, and Gordis (1968), p. 186. Literally: everything is before them. Fox (1999), p. 288, reads הבל, moving and changing הכל from the beginning of 9:2 to the end of 9:1.
[513] Probably one should add ולרע here, or delete וטוב.
[514] Literally: "the heart of human man".

Qohelet introduces the passage's reflection by establishing a tension with the preceding verses, 8:16-17. As has happened elsewhere (for instance in 3:11-12), Qohelet moves from an emphatic statement regarding human ignorance to an equally emphatic claim of knowledge. The inherent contradiction between the two statements appears particularly stark here, however: in 8:16-17 it was underlined strongly and conclusively that a search for "that which is done under the sun" is always impossible. The wise who claims to possess any such knowledge must either be deceiving himself or lying. *Now* Qohelet states his intention to "search out the whole." He has taken to heart that knowledge cannot be gained – so he sets off to search for it.[516] This produces a powerful tension and one of which one may assume that the author was aware. Furthermore, the tension is reinforced during the course of the passage, as Qohelet, on the basis of the knowledge claimed in 9:1-2, goes on to assert, once again, humanity's basic ignorance (already in 9:1's claim that "it is all before them,"[517] and then again in 9:11-12). Indeed, as the argument regarding the fundamental conditions of human existence develops in 9:1-12, Qohelet's reflections continue to centre on knowledge – our successful and unsuccessful cognitive efforts, as well as the "cognitive" situation of the dead (9:3-6.10-12).

The interest in time is evident especially from verse 9:3 onwards, before which point the passage describes the relationship between divinity and human being especially through

[515] Schoors (1985), p. 298, argues in favour of 9:3b being a later insertion because it would not fit well with Qohelet's theology to refer to human sin as an explanation for the fate of the righteous. He notes, however, p. 299, that even if the whole passage is ascribed to the original author, its purpose remains to state the equality of all in death.
[516] The tension appears even stronger in the translation of Gordis (1968), p. 168: "All this I grasped and clearly understood…"
[517] An expression which, as noted by Crenshaw (1987), p. 160, could be both spatial and temporal.

an examination of the divine attitude towards the actions of his creatures.[518] Verse 9:3, however, initiates a more specific, temporally focused exploration of what consequences the divinity's indifference to human behaviour may have. At this point in the book the reader is hardly surprised to find Qohelet emphasizing the shared mortality of humanity as a basic, existential problem. As in 2:15-18 and 6:12 he connects this concern, which in itself is future-orientated, with our inability to live well in the present.

Verse 9:3 emphasizes directly that the human disorientation and the lack of control caused by our temporal conditions reach far into the ongoing present of our existence (9:3). Human beings live in a state of extraordinary helplessness. Not knowing the attitude of the deity, and remaining entirely unable to influence that attitude, the human heart is filled with evil. I would argue that Qohelet is not very interested in passing judgement on the moral character of humanity here. It is more likely that one is encouraged to remember the "evil" character of human life as it has been structured by the divinity.[519] Qohelet stresses the crisis produced by impending death especially forcefully in 9:3, presenting within this one verse his indictment on the human ability to live meaningfully in the present. As we all must die, we must also live lives of madness

[518] Schoors (1985), p. 297, suggests that the passage presents a fairly rigid form of determinism so that "the total dependence of man on God is apparent from his inability to understand and to determine his own activity, including his deepest feelings of love and hatred." A stronger determinism than God determining even the individual's feelings and their various manifestations is scarcely imaginable. However, given that the focus in this passage remains on knowledge and cognition (rather than ability to act) – a stress which recurs regularly when Qohelet mentions the divine ordering of the world and of the individual's life – I would not consider it the strongest reading of 9:1. One may also note with Fox (1999), p. 291, that love and hate "here are God's favor and disfavor towards individuals."

[519] This is a notion which is stressed several times elsewhere, for instance in when Qohelet connects הבל with רע to describe human existence. Possibly, Qohelet also fashions a link here to his references to the evil business or task of humanity (especially 1:13, and with more specific scenarios in 4:8 and 5:13). One may also note the distinction made in 2:26 between the one who pleases God and the one who does not which does not seem dependent on a distinction between righteous and sinner. Rather, God's favour is random. With a slightly different focus Fox (1999), p, 292, notes that "the universality of death provokes man to inane, irrational behaviour."

and evil – after which, Qohelet repeats, as if obsessively focused, we all must die. The following three verses spell out the consequences of death in a depiction of ultimate oblivion and cessation of existence.

*9:4: For to the one who is joined to*[520] *all the living there is hope, because a living dog is better than a dead lion.*
*9:5: For the living know that they must die, but the dead know nothing and no longer do they have a reward, for their memory is forgotten.*
*9:6: Their love and their hatred and their envy have long ago perished, and never anymore do they have a portion in anything which is done under the sun.*
*9:7: Go, eat your bread in joy and drink your wine with a happy heart, for God has already approved* [521] *of your work.*
*9:8: Let your clothes always be white and let oil never be lacking on your head.*
*9:9: Enjoy life with a woman whom you love all the days of your life's* הבל *which has been given to you under the sun all your days of* הבל,[522] *for that is your portion in life and in your work with which you toil under the sun.*
*9:10: Everything your hand finds to do, do it with*[523] *all your strength, for there is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol where you are going.*
*9:11: I turned and saw under the sun that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favour to the knowledgeable, for time and chance*[524] *happen to them all.*
*9:12: For humankind too doesn't know their time*[525] *– like the fishes who are caught in an evil net and the birds who are caught in a trap, so too the sons of men are snared by an evil time when it falls suddenly upon them.*

An important part of the metaphorical strategy in 9:4-6 is likening the human being to an animal. On a general level, one may note that Qohelet establishes such a comparison elsewhere too to stress the powerlessness of human beings, as well as our lacking

[520] Following the qere, rather than the kethib, see for instance Krüger (2004), p. 166.
[521] Literally: "will have favoured." Fox (1999), p. 294: "the sentence does not imply that God has in some time in the past chosen you as the one who will enjoy life, but if and when you do so, that will be post facto a sign of divine approbation…"
[522] It may be appropriate to delete this repetitive clause in accordance with a few manuscripts and the Syriac version. Alternatively, Qohelet may seek to add emphasis through the repetitive style.
[523] Fox (1999), p. 295, follows LXX and reads "according to your strength" instead of the Masoretic text which means something like "with your full strength". The change away from the Masoretic text is unnecessary.
[524] Alternatively "happening" or "mishap." The expression may be read as a hendiadys.
[525] Literally: "his time."

knowledge about our temporal conditions. This is the case in 3:18-21, in which Qohelet corrects his readers' assumptions regarding their temporal reality by comparing the human condition to that of an animal. That passage too centres on the theme of human mortality, arguing that it is misguided to assume that the ultimate fate of the human being differs from the animal's fate.[526] Furthermore, both passages claim an ultimate, divine indifference to the apparent distinctions between his creatures and both emphasize the human ignorance regarding that aspect of time which has to do with their own mortality.

The comparison of the living dog with the dead lion (9:4) was discussed above in chapter 5, section 2.2. There I described the strategy in the comparison as a form of "desperate irony" – Qohelet is willing to praise any and all knowledge above the non-awareness which characterizes death, even if such knowledge takes the form of realizing simply that death is coming. I would add that a metaphorical depiction of human beings as animals seems a highly suitable metaphor for Qohelet's examination of our basic conditions. Qohelet questions what may constitute sufficient awareness, sufficient influence on one's own destiny, and sufficient activity. After all, cognition and well-considered behaviour are two things which animals possess only to a highly limited degree. Qohelet returns to the comparison between human being and animal towards the end of the passage as well (9:11-12). Here one finds, perhaps, a slight change of focus, however, in that the image now focuses mainly on our ignorance regarding death's timing, whereas verses 9:4-6 worked together to depict the total cessation of knowledge in death. In both images,

[526] Commenting on the tension sometimes perceived between this passage and 12:7, Schoors (1985), p. 302, argues that both passages agree regarding the subject of death and what it entails: it is the traditional view that "the spirit, which God has blown into man, returns to Him at the hour of death. This does not mean individual survival, but a return to the source…"

however, human powerlessness in the face of death is stressed, as is also the problem of human ignorance about time.

Commentators have objected to 9:4 that the hope offered by Qohelet in this verse – the knowledge that we are now alive and that we must die – is not really what one would understand by the notion of hope. Surely, it is argued, the text requires emendation because such a hope is no hope at all! This, however, is exactly the point: the hope which Qohelet offers the reader is only a seeming advantage. It is nothing apart from the knowledge that life is *now*, and that it slips through our fingers, even as we observe it and live it.[527] It is his admission that the human understanding of that which is to come amounts to nothing more than the awareness of our own mortality (9:5-6).[528] When the dog dies, it is just a dead dog – and that is no worse or no better than being a dead lion.

9:5-6 sum up Qohelet's depiction of death by listing things on earth in which the dead can have no part: they know nothing, they have no reward, and they have no part in anything that happens, not even via the force of memory as everything past irrevocably must be forgotten. Gordis states perceptively that there "is more than an assonance in זכר and שכר. The dead lack the one reward conceivably open to them, that of being remembered."[529] It is noteworthy that verse 9:10 which resumes Qohelet's discussion of mortality after the exhortation to joy appears to recapitulate the list in 9:5-6 by describing

[527] As noted by Fox (1999), Qohelet's "tone is ironic, perhaps sardonic…"
[528] With a different emphasis, Spieckermann (1998), 327, argues that there is still a hope in this: "Im Anschluß an das Sprichwort, daß ein lebender Hund besser sei als ein toter Löwe, wird als Vorsprung der Lebenden vor den Toten konstatiert, daß die Lebenden darum wissen, daß sie sterben müssen, während die Toten gar nichts wissen (vgl. 9,4-5). Genau diese geringe Differenz zwischen Leben und Tod gilt es zu nutzen und zu gestalten."
[529] Gordis (1968), p. 305.

Sheol negatively, in terms of everything that it cannot be. Then follows, in 9:11-12 yet another list, this one offering examples of unexpected outcomes in human affairs. The implicit argument is either that just as the principle of merit may fail elsewhere in the human sphere, so it does in connection with human mortality – or, alternatively, that the consequences of human mortality run counter to sensible, human expectations to such a degree that it is comparable to a race in which the fastest runner does not win or a battle that is lost by the strongest fighter. Both nuances of the idea recur elsewhere in the book, though the second is more prominent.[530]

In one of his most powerful exhortations to joy, Qohelet urges his reader to make use of enjoyment in the present, 9:7-9. Here, as in the other joy exhortations, Qohelet presents a positive alternative to the viewpoint that the loss of temporal horizons renders the present meaningless too. However, his argument in favour of living as joyfully as possible remains connected to his claim that time is inscrutable from the human perspective.[531] As the concluding section of the passage shows powerfully, we cannot know how long our present joy will last. We do not know if it will be followed by a time of sorrow or even if it is the time of death which will come upon us next.

To sum up, chapter five has argued that the present cannot be comprehended in isolation from the past and the future. The past and the future are unknown. This impacts even our ability to live well in the present. Qohelet attempts continually to engage with the wider

[530] See for instance 8:8 for the latter of these. 8:14 may be an example of the former nuance.
[531] Seow (2001), p. 246, describes enjoyment in Qohelet as "living life with full awareness of its ungraspable nature (...) Synonymous expressions for enjoyment in the book are suggestive; the expressions "see good" (2:24), "do well" (3:12), "be in good" (7:14), and "see life" (9:9) all mean "enjoy."

temporal horizons, but the limitations which he perceives on human cognition makes this an impossible task. As well as looking at two strategies for engaging with the unknown past and future – establishing them negatively and portraying the individuals in terms of isolation from those of their relationships which should have been mediated in time – this chapter looked in detail at three passages. All three of these show that the establishment of a joyful, wise, and meaningful life in the present is problematized by the wider temporal realities.

# Chapter 6: Story-Telling As a Means of Protest

*Le temps est un grand maître, dit-on; le malheur est qu'il soit un maître inhumain qui tue ses élèves.* (Hector Berlioz, from a letter published in *Correspondance générale*, vol. 5, p. 390.)

As seen in the previous two chapters, it is difficult for Qohelet even to *describe* reality which he perceives to be temporally structured in such a way as to disallow human continuity. Qohelet claims that the world's temporal structure renders impossible human knowledge about past or future, and even precludes a trustworthy understanding of the present. Successfully describing it therefore requires an understanding of that which one cannot grasp. This epistemological problem is only exacerbated by the author's choice at several points in the book to make use of a *narrative* form.

Chapters 4 and 5 discussed ways in which Qohelet engages with temporal structures which he considers, on the one hand, to be essential to our establishment of a meaningful framework for daily life and, on the other hand, fundamentally inaccessible to the human mind. It was argued in chapter 5 that Qohelet investigates the wider temporal horizons of past and future primarily by establishing them negatively, correcting traditional assumptions about both past and future, but offering no alternative framework. This chapter discusses more specifically the three narratives in the book of Qohelet which purport to present and discuss the stories of people from the past, namely 1:12-2:20, 4:13-16, and 9:13-15. I will argue that Qohelet engages with the wider horizons of time in these narratives through a rhetorical double-move, and that awareness of this strategy may allow us to approach key facets which are often overlooked in the three stories.

Undertaking the analysis from the perspective of the book's discourse on time furthermore shows that it makes sense to examine all three stories together and discuss their *shared* strategies – something which has only been done to a very limited extent in biblical scholarship.[532]

Firstly, Qohelet challenges the world-view established initially in the poem in 1:4-11 and reinforced in texts such as 3:9-11, 14-15, 6:7-12, 7:10, 8:6-8, 8:17-19, and 9:11-12. He engages in a narrative communication of insights about time- and world-order – despite the poem's warning that this cannot be done, and numerous such warnings later in the book. From the viewpoint of such passages, the entire book is a vain enterprise; the wisdom presented uncertain and deceptive and the subject area chosen inaccessible to humanity. Even so, Qohelet continues to write it. Furthermore, he chooses as his main narrator an impossible figure: a legendary king of the lost past whose testimony should have been lost in time.

Secondly, however, through his challenge of the world-view in 1:4-11 Qohelet foregrounds and emphasizes exactly those limitations that he refuses to accept. For instance, the kingly fiction is couched in between statements about the impotency of memory with the result that the enterprise of the king is rendered relative and without lasting value. Recurrent statements about Qohelet's own knowledge and observations are subverted, as he also repeatedly admits that human beings cannot gain any such

[532] Several scholars examine the two shorter narratives together, however. Berger (2001) does this particularly well. Berger (2001), p. 149, also mentions the royal fiction during the course of his analysis of the absurd elements in the book. However, even he does not approach the three fictions together on a structural level or discuss whether their shared genre and form may suggest also a shared project.

knowledge. Any conclusion or observation relating to the temporal conditions of human life made by the narrator – who himself is situated *within* the temporal framework – must be drawn into doubt. The result is a tension, much like the one observed in chapter 5 between the attempt to investigate past and future and the conviction that both of these dimensions are inaccessible. In the narratives, however, the resultant tension takes an even stronger form, partly because all three stories are situated in the inaccessible *past* and partly due to genre-characteristics of narrative. Before turning in more detail to the ways in which this tension appears in Qohelet's stories, it may therefore be useful briefly to look at *narrative* more generally in order in order to consider why this genre especially challenges Qohelet's engagement with temporal reality.

**1. Time in Narrative**

If *narrative* can be defined as "...the representation of real or fictive events or situations in a time sequence",[533] the prerequisite first step for any narrative endeavour is to connect events and actions in time so as to form a story. Thus, Mills states regarding narrative form: "Ordering a story involves setting short sequences into a broader frame (…) This structuring involves stating a relationship between particular states and changes of state, which relies not on real time, but on a linear verbal representation of time."[534] Similarly, Christianson notes that events can only be "meaningful in relation to at least one other event in the relation of time. (…) This shows that the event in question has *functionality*."[535]

[533] Prince (1982), p. 1. Christianson (1998), p. 21, also quotes and uses Prince's definition of narrative.
[534] Mills (2003), p. 63. Mills, p. 65, goes on to state about the book of Qohelet specifically that "the concept of time plays a major role in the structuring of thought in Ecclesiastes."
[535] Christianson (1998), p. 25.

Stated slightly differently, events in a narrative context involve some form of *change* of situation.[536] In itself, change, understood as the change from one situation or state of being to another, requires time to pass. Consequently, time too becomes an important, foundational feature for narrative already on the basic level of establishing the story.[537] As argued by Bal, any event, as a process, "is a change, a development, and presupposes therefore a *succession in time* or a *chronology*. The events themselves happen during a certain period of time and they occur in a certain order."[538]

The relationship between the *reader's* present, the present of the *narrative*, and the past and future of both the reader and the narrative moment is complex, however. Thus Currie argues in a recent monograph about narrative and the philosophy of time that: "Narrative is understood as retrospection more readily than it is understood as anticipation, but it cannot really be one without also being the other. If, in order to look back at what has happened, we tell a story, we must also know that the present is a story yet to be told."[539]

Currie states further about fictional narrative that "in the relationship between a text and its reading it offers a kind of model of time. The reading of a novel, for example, (…) involves the passage of events from a world of future possibilities into the actuality of the

[536] See for instance Bal (1985), p. 14.
[537] Thus for example also Ricoeur to whom the notion of *emplotment* is central; the idea that the narrative draws "together disparate and somehow discordant elements into the concordant unity of a plot that has a temporal span." So Dauenhauer/Pellauer (2011). Through the narrative's emplotment disjointed instances of time are woven together.
[538] Bal (1985), pp. 37-38. This does not mean that a narrative has to be told according to its logical chronology. However, it is possible on "the basis of the information offered in the text (…) to find the chronology of the fabula even if the order is not sequential." (P. 42.)
[539] Currie (2007), p. 5.

reader's present, and onwards into the reader's memory."[540] This process is at work in Ecclesiastes, too, when Qohelet offers three stories about past characters as part of his investigation of human life-conditions in the present – his own as well as the reader's. In addition, a text-internal movement through time happens in the book, given that the narrator is depicted at the very beginning of the book as looking back upon the central events of his life and his process of reflection.[541] As stated by Mills: "Qohelet's self-presentation as an 'I' who engages in thought stands at the end of a long process of living and so holds together the lifetime's development of character in a single line…"[542] So far the narrative elements in the book work well for Qohelet: they support his philosophical endeavour by offering the narrator-figure as a constant; a person with a history to whom the reader can relate, as well as a unifying presence that promises some level of coherence in the book.[543]

Ricoeur offers an explicitly temporal framework for narrative theory as he addresses what he sees as the aporia between the "brevity of human life in comparison with the immensity of time. There is the real paradox: on a cosmic scale our life span is insignificant, yet this brief period of time when we appear in the world is the moment during which all meaningful questions arise."[544] Ricoeur suggests that it is *narrative* specifically which is able to stride the divide between these two kinds of time: cosmic

[540] Currie (2007), p. 16.
[541] For a detailed study of the author's use of prolepsis as a technique, see Christianson (1998) pp. 30-33.
[542] Mills (2003), p. 19. And on p. 20: "Qohelet, the older sage, waits at the end of the story for his younger self to develop and achieve that breadth of vision which will produce the final moral vision of the narration."
[543] Christianson emphasizes this very strongly, but even scholars who do not define the whole of the book as a narrative have stressed the unifying function of the narrator conscience, for instance Koh (2006) and Salyer (2001). See also the discussion of genre in this thesis' chapter 2, section 1.
[544] Ricoeur (1991), p. 343.

time and lived time.[545] He states: "Time becomes human time to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode…"[546]

It is Ricoeur's contention that historical and fictional narratives both address the discordance between human, lived time and cosmic time. Like "a bridge thrown over the chasm which separates cosmic time from lived time…"[547] the historical narrative refigures time, Ricoeur argues, and establishes a connection between mortal time and the immensity of cosmic time.[548] He suggests that the fictional text accomplishes something similar: "Can we not just say that history and fiction bring two different but complementary responses to the discordance between mortal and cosmic time? The response of history was the reinscription of the former upon the latter by means of specific connectors… Would not the response of fiction be to invent imaginative variations with respect to the cosmic reinscription effected by history, imaginative variations on the theme of the fault which separates the two perspectives on time?"[549] Thus, the fictional narrative too points beyond itself to a possible, temporal world. This

[545] According to Villela-Petit, paragraphs 3-4, Ricoeur defines our lived, human time neither as cosmic time nor as "the inner time of each consciousness", but as the time of human action and suffering. "Only in and through the act of telling a story can this time acquire a figure and, in so doing, be preserved from oblivion 'as time passes by'."

[546] Ricoeur, (1990), p. 52. Ricoeur goes on to suggest that a narrative attains its full potential when, in some sense, creating time. See also Ricoeur (1991), p. 19.

[547] Ricoeur (1991), p. 343.

[548] Ricoeur (1991), p. 344. Ricoeur suggests, pp. 343-344, that historical narrative refigures time in three ways. It happens, firstly, through *calendar time* which on the one hand "is an offshoot of astronomy. On the other, it is an institution in the political sense of the word. Under this double heading, it harmonizes work with days and festivals with the seasons and the years." Secondly, p. 344, it is effected via the sequence of generations where "biological time underlies lived time…" Since different generations can occupy the same lived time, "the chain of individual and collective memories" is supported – such as when I was a little girl and my grandmother told me about her memories of the time before the world war, long before I was alive. Thirdly, it happens through the documents and monuments left behind. These traces are remnants of the past, but at the same time they remain a physical entity in the present. About such remnants or traces Ricoeur states, p. 345: "A trace, then, is a present thing which stands for (…) an absent past. (…) The temporal implication is considerable: to follow a trace is to effect the mediation between the *no-longer* of the passage and the *still* of the mark."

[549] Ricoeur (1991), p. 351.

world is textual (i.e. the world of the text),[550] yet it is indirectly aimed at the real world to which it has a mimetic relationship.

Whether one considers the genre of Qohelet's narratives closer to fictional narrative or historical narrative,[551] one sees immediately that this "reparative" function of narrative – offering to connect the human experience of temporal life with the larger, cosmic framework – could create difficulties for the author of the book. In view of his statements about the inaccessibility of past and future in the rest of the book, Qohelet may well consider impossible a narrative which reaches beyond the life-span of the individual. In addition, a coherent ordering of our lives' various events in time also seems beyond human capacity.

Of course even a story-teller who questions fundamentally the human ability to perceive patterns and establish continuity in time could, conceivably, set that scepticism aside when turning to *the time of the story*; a time which may behave according to other rules and place other constraints on its characters than we experience real time doing. As will be argued below, however, the author of Ecclesiastes does not seem to allow even the

[550] Ricoeur thus distinguishes between historical and fictional narrative. See also Laughery (2003), p. 356: "while Ricoeur has emphasized the literary aspect of historical discourse, he forcefully critiques a postmodern declassification of historical discourse into fictional literature. He maintains a distinction between the two on the grounds of an historical intentionality of representation that targets real people, events, and situations."

[551] To some degree, the royal fiction stands at the threshold of the genre boundaries between fiction and history. Within the narrative framework of the book, king Qohelet is posited as a real voice from the past with wisdom to dispense. However, the account of the king is heavily fictionalized: the words of the king have been projected into the past by the author, and the account has been anonymized to the extent of lacking most identifiable "traces" of the past. This high degree of fictionalization assists the author in making his dual point – that the story of the king defies the framework presented in 1:4-11 and that it is defeated by that framework.

possibility of establishing coherently a *fictional* depiction of human time.[552] Instead, Qohelet has imported his worries regarding the temporal set-up into his stories as well. It appears that Qohelet's stories play a central role in the author's demonstration of the fundamental problems which he perceives regarding time and cognition.

In his monograph, Currie states that "all novels should be viewed as tales about time. If time experiment in the novel is an exploration of the theme of time, or the nature of time, through the temporal logic of storytelling, it is only so because the temporal logic is unconventional. If we say that a narrative which obeys a more conventional temporal logic is not about time, we are merely succumbing to its naturalisation."[553] Viewed through this lens, Qohelet's stories are about time simply by virtue of being narrative texts.[554] However, these are also narratives of the first type mentioned by Currie, insofar as they reflect specifically on time as a theme. Their author manipulates and disturbs elements of the *time of the story* in order to engage with and reflect on the *time of reality*.

Thus, whilst their respective plots at an initial glance may seem quite different from each other, Qohelet's three stories all attempt a narrative representation of part of our existence's temporal dimension. In the royal fiction this happens most explicitly in the conclusion, 2:11ff. The issue of time and existence is never entirely off stage in this story,

[552] Given his restrictive view of reality and its time, as well as his desire to tell his stories in a way which correspond to the constraints of real time, the author of Ecclesiastes might have sympathized with the assumption of many structuralists that "the series of events that is presented in a story must answer to the same rules as those controlling human behaviour, since a narrative text would otherwise be impossible to understand." So summarized by Bal (1985), p. 6. One particular element which Bal emphasizes in this context is exactly the *time* of the story: "An event, no matter how insignificant, always take up time…"
[553] Currie (2007), p. 4.
[554] A problem of definition remains here, however, as Qohelet's stories are not novels and not even, strictly speaking, short stories according to modern, literary definitions.

however, given the narrator's identity as a king of the past, as well as the persistent focus on temporal themes in the story's immediate context of 1:4-11 and 3:1ff. Both of the shorter narratives are set in the past and they conclude with reflective statements about memory and oblivion in 4:16 and 9:15, respectively.

The fact that Qohelet's stories are all narratives about the past makes things particularly difficult for the narrator: this forces him to engage in a type of story-telling which he emphatically considers to be impossible.[555] Simultaneously, however, it may be a conscious strategy of the author to have Qohelet launch into a story which it is impossible to tell, thus illustrating forcefully that the human intellect *must* fail when trying to comprehend our wider temporal framework.[556]

To discuss more specifically Qohelet's narrative strategy, the following sections offer a reading of each of the book's three stories, focusing especially on the ways in which Qohelet's thinking on time interacts with their basic themes, the portrayal of their

[555] Here it is worth referring to Perdue (1994), p. 211: "Ultimately, for Qoheleth, history has no value. Not only are notable deeds forgotten due to increasing attenuation of collective memory, but also history, like the movements of the physical forces in the cosmos, is a cyclical and wearisome repetition of acts that do not cohere into a meaningful construct." Perdue even goes a little way towards realizing that the royal fiction is a problematic story, following as it does this claim of Qohelet's in 1:10-11, when he states, p. 212, that also "the great achievements of Solomon will eventually lose, like his grave, their place in human memory." Unfortunately, however, he does not reflect further on the ways in which this might impact Qohelet's narrative endeavour.

[556] The peculiar manipulation of temporal dimensions which happens in the reading of fiction is relevant here too: a connection is established through the reading between our present and the present of the narrative's characters: "The present for a reader in a fictional narrative is not really the present at all but the past. (…) Though it seems like the present, because it is new to us, it is tensed as the past (…) But because it is the past tense we know that there is a future present, in relation to which the present of the narrative is past." So Currie (2007), p. 5.

characters, and some of their key-structural elements. Initially, let us turn to the royal fiction – the book's first, longest, and only sustained first-person narrative.[557]

## 2. Qohelet's Launch into Narrative Form

The author's launch into story-telling is often remarked upon.[558] Some researchers argue that a narrative is set in motion at 1:12 which carries on to the end, or almost to the end, of the book and which gives the work its cohesive force. Thus, for example, Christianson who states that Ecclesiastes "can be viewed with confidence as a narrative text…"[559] To a lesser extent Koh too suggests a similar reading of the book's genre, stating that "Qoheleth's narrative is written in the form of a royal autobiography…" She argues in favour of the view that Qohelet retains the Solomonic guise throughout the work.[560] Koh, however, is doubtful of Christianson's claim that the whole book can be read as a narrative text, noting for instance "the conspicuous lack of actors in the 'story'…" She further notes that, in addition, "one is hard-pressed to detect any kind of "dynamic

[557] Christianson (1998) argues that the whole book can be read as an autobiographical narrative with a frame. Thus on p. 36-37: "The autobiographical form lends stable integrity to a narrative, for autobiography is concerned with the self of the narrator (…) Without a constant 'I', Qoheleth's narration would lack the cohesive power that enables us to speak of Qoheleth as a unified, although multifaceted, persona."

[558] Salyer (2001), p. 186: "The major task confronting the reader in 1.12-2.26 is to recognize the various textual clues which signal to the reader that a fiction is in progress." Amongst these clues are, pp. 187-8, the lack of specificity regarding the identity of the king and his activities. See also Loretz, (1964), p. 148.

[559] Christianson (1998), p. 50. In his introductory chapter (especially pp. 24.50) he investigates key-features of narrative which are present in Ecclesiastes, such as the presence of functional events, a (proleptic) plot, the autobiographical form of the text, and the presence of literary motifs as a stylistic feature in the book. Cf. also Fox (1977) for a reading of the whole book as a framed narrative.

[560] Koh (2006), p. 18. Koh states further on the same page that "the author's use of the motif (…) is deliberate and affirms an essential continuity with a past tradition where wisdom was once associated with the king and court." Regarding the passages in the book which are traditionally viewed as anti-royal, Koh argues, pp. 69-70, that "it is unnecessary to view the (…) passages as reflecting Qoheleth's subversion of royal wealth and power (…) Rather, Qoheleth's narrative is didactic in nature."

narrative motion" in the collections of didactic sayings which are located towards the end of the book…"[561]

Others have suggested that the author merely interjects here a short narrative which lasts only until the end of chapter two. For instance, Schubert finds that: "Während sich 1,12-2,26 einigermassen um die Aufrechterhaltung des Königsanspruches bemühen, zeugt von da ab nichts mehr von einer solcher Verfasserschaft."[562] Similarly, Salyer does not consider the book of Qohelet as a whole a narrative text as it "contains no story per se (though it contains references to life's vignettes, it has no plot)…"[563]

The present reading claims that a central feature of the stories in Ecclesiastes is their conscious use of narrative form to say something about the reality of the human relationship to time. Against such an understanding one could argue, however, that the launch into narrative form in 1:12ff is simply an expression of the variations in style and modes of presentation found in other wisdom literature as well. The book of Proverbs, for instance, interjects first-person monologues and didactic narratives into its exhortative material – material which itself makes use of several forms and genres.[564] Similarly, Qohelet's introduction of narrative could be an inconsequential move from one genre to another. I suggest, however, that the royal fiction as a narrative contains too many problematic and awkward elements to function well as a simple continuation, in a new

[561] Koh (2006), p. 47.
[562] Schubert (1989), p. 69. Contrary to Mills (2003) who reads the book as an autobiographical work.
[563] Salyer (2001), p. 128. Instead, he argues, this book must be read as an argumentative text: "In an argumentative text, the flow of the argument in its logical progression replaces the plot."
[564] Loader (1986), pp. 5-7 lists the large number of genres identifiable in Ecclesiastes – by his count 12, one of which is the biographical narrative.

genre, of the author's thoughts in the previous section. Three peculiarities in particular suggest themselves.

The difference of opinion regarding both extent and purpose of the royal fiction is telling and may help reveal the first peculiarity of this narrative: it would seem that *the author has not demarcated the ending of the story in a particularly careful way.* One might even ask if the royal fiction ever comes to a satisfactory conclusion. The king's story is caged in between two passages on the impotency of memory. After the point has been made rather forcefully at the end of the royal fiction that all and everything will be forgotten, the author never explicitly resumes his story as Qohelet the king. Has the story ended, then, with the reference to oblivion? If so, it is necessary to ask: Why does Qohelet choose to abandon his narrative and that explicit narrative identity which he has spent quite some energy establishing in this section, returning instead to an argumentative and somewhat more impersonal exploration of human life in time in chapter three?

The most common reading of the royal fiction, which sees it as underscoring the authority of the narrator, offers little help here. According to this reading, Qohelet casts himself as the wise king par excellence by taking on the Solomonic persona. His conclusions must be beyond reproach if they can be said to belong to a sage king of the past.[565] Crenshaw is representative for this view when arguing that Qohelet assumes the royal guise in order to speak authoritatively, a move made possible by the ancient

[565] Longman (1998), p. 80, further notes that while speaking as the king, Qohelet underlines the universality of his search (1:13). He argues that the extensive scope of Qohelet's enterprise implies that his conclusions bear no exceptions or possibility of reversal.

tradition that the king dispenses wisdom.[566] But if this narrative is supposed to add authority to Qohelet's further exposition why does it end with this non-conclusion? Why allow the king's story to be usurped by a reflection on the lacking prowess of human memory? Furthermore, as noted by Kamano and Seow, in the course of the royal fiction Qohelet has deconstructed the very authority that was assumed at the beginning of the fiction.[567] One might say that if the author wished to present the narrator as an authoritative figure whose words can be trusted, this is not a very well-thought out authorial strategy.[568]

The next problematic element has to do with *the narrator himself*. Who is he? Why does he remain unnamed?[569] There seems to be something highly ambiguous going on regarding his identity, as if the author wished both to indicate quite strongly who this unnamed king might be and at the same time wanted to keep this identification uncertain.

[566] Crenshaw (1987), p. 70.

[567] Kamano (2002), pp. 90-91. Seow (2008a), p. 98, notes: "The language of kingship in 1:12-2:11 (…) may be part of a fictional royal autobiography employed to show that even kings can have no real control over matters that are beyond human grasp…" Perdue (1994) goes even further, stating that Qohelet offers a biting criticism of both the earthly monarchy whose theological basis he undermines (p. 220), and the divine power which he describes as oppressive and tyrannical (pp. 221-224), and that this is the underlying message in the book's passages on kingship (p. 221).

[568] A more common objection to understanding the royal fiction as a guarantor of authorial authority is the presence of anti-royal passages in the book. However, this particular issue is really only problematic if one believes that the royal fiction extends beyond chapter 2, and even so such an objection can be preempted by arguing that a royal autobiography *can* very well encompass criticism of failed leadership (so for instance Perdue (1994), esp. p. 220).

[569] I have already referred to the scholarly tendency to equate the narrator Qohelet with the unknown author of the book (see chapter 2, section 2). However, even on the level of working out who the *narrator* could be on a purely fictional level, the ambiguities and the vagueness of the depiction sometimes cause scholars to get slightly ahead of themselves as they construct elaborate back-stories on the basis of what remains largely unclear signals in the text. So for instance Mills (2003), p. 17: "The references to 'making money' (as in Eccles. 4:7) imply a commercial background whether through trade or agriculture. The narrator is male and an older man, evidenced by references to having seen, that is experienced, much of life. He is probably a family man…" Undeniably, we are on safer ground constructing a "Qohelet-fiction" about the book's elusive narrating voice if we realise that this figure is fictional than if we equate him – and our Qohelet-fiction – with the actual author. However, even when it comes to the *character* Qohelet the descriptors are few and predominantly vague.

Ingram, who puts a lot of emphasis on the king never being named, describes the narrator's identity as a puzzle and draws attention to the well-known problems surrounding the designation "Qohelet" – a feminine participle, of a verb which is nowhere else witnessed in qal, taking a feminine verb once in the book and functioning once as a definite masculine noun. He states: "Either mistakes have crept into the text, as is usually suggested, or this is another literary ploy to draw a veil of mystery over the main character of Ecclesiastes."[570] To make matters worse, even the *general identity* of the narrator – a great king from the past – seems to be at odds with what was said about the inaccessibility of the past in 1:11.

Thirdly, the fiction is oddly placed, especially if one assumes that it is supposed to bolster the authority of the narrator. *Why postpone it until after the poem in 1:4-11*? What is the relationship supposed to be between these two passages?[571]

In order to discuss these elements of the royal fiction, and suggest how this narrative might respond to Qohelet's presentation of temporal reality in the preceding passage, the following section of this chapter will go through the royal fiction in some detail before returning to each of the three points raised above – the story's narrator, its situatedness in the work as a whole and its ending. Thereafter it will be considered whether Qohelet uses a strategy similar to that of the royal fiction in the other instances of narrative in the book.

[570] Ingram (2006), p. 84-85. See also Salyer (2001), p. 244: "By giving the narrator such an ambiguous name the text gets the reader to focus on the problem of just who is addressing them…"
[571] Several researchers claim that 1:12 must have been the original beginning – Loretz (1964), p. 144, Longman (1998), p. 21. Koh (2006), p. 20, also suggests that a later re-organization of the text may have taken place, moving Qohelet's self-introduction (now 1:12) away from the beginning of the text.

### 2.1. The Royal Fiction

The self-identification of the king in 1:12 – which, as often noted, does not provide us with the name of the monarch – and the object of his search (1:13a) introduce the royal fiction.[572] Immediately hereafter, the narrator presents an anticipatory conclusion which evaluates in general terms the type of search that he has carried out. Attempting to understand "what is done under the sun"[573] is judged to be an evil business by the narrator, even before his search has begun in earnest. This indictment on intellectual endeavour aims perhaps to make Qohelet's conclusion appear self-evident and inescapable: quite obviously human beings are unable to make straight that which God has made crooked, or count that which is not there (1:13b-15). A second anticipatory conclusion follows in 1:16-18, this time concluding more specifically on Qohelet's search: Qohelet's superlative wisdom simply showed him that if somebody's understanding of their life increases, so does their pain – given Qohelet's judgment of wisdom later in this passage, and elsewhere, it is reasonable to assume that this pain should be associated not only with the possibility of knowing too much for one's own good (as also in 5:19). Rather, searching for wisdom is painful also because of the

[572] The demarcation lines of the royal narrative are blurred. The first-person account ends after 2:20, but many researchers treat 2:24-26 as the concluding verses of the royal fiction, and it is certainly possible to understand the narrative that way. Alternatively, these verses can be read in connection with the book's other joy-exhortations, rather than as an integral part of the royal fiction, which is the choice made here. My exegesis will constrain itself to the first-person account. Verse 2:21 will also be briefly considered, however, because this mini-narrative stands closely connected to the royal fiction, whether or not strictly part of it.

[573] The text is, perhaps purposefully, ambiguous: both the wisdom search and that which is done under the sun could be the intended subject for the predicate "evil". The verse is sufficiently vague for both interpretations to be possible, allowing Qohelet to problematize elegantly humanity's inherently problematic attempts to engage intellectually with his life-conditions.

limitations placed upon the human intellect which doom the wisdom search to fail (3:11, 6:10-12, and 8:16-17).[574]

After summing up his test of enjoyment in verses 2:1-2, Qohelet begins his depiction of activities undertaken during his search, presenting in 2:3-11 a test of enjoyment: drinking wine in order to gladden the heart and achieving the most extravagant earthly delights. The statements in 2:9-10, that Qohelet both became wise *and* allowed himself to experience every possible joy, suggest that these verses describe not only Qohelet's test of enjoyment, as is often argued, but also a significant part of his wisdom search.[575] Furthermore, if I am right in understanding 1:16-18 as an anticipatory, concluding remark, verses 2:3-11 contain the story's only detailed depiction of the king's wisdom search.

The statement in 2:10, that Qohelet withholds nothing from his eyes, is the first of a series of expressions in chapter 2 to suggest connections between Qohelet's royal search and the initial poem on time. It is possible that Qohelet here alludes to 1:8 where it is stated that the eyes of human beings will never be sated from seeing, thus anticipating a negative conclusion to the test of enjoyment. The presence of other key-words from 1:8-11 in the royal fiction increases the likelihood of the author consciously establishing a

[574] In connection with the evaluations undertaken during Qohelet's royal fiction, Mills notes that in Hebrew "something of the juxtaposition of times can be traced in the move from completed action to incomplete action and back to finished act (…) The final word, according to Qohelet, lies with a completed act, indicating the possibility of evaluating events across time." However, as has already been seen, this is not the case in any unproblematic manner for the author of our book. Rather, evaluating events across time may prove fundamentally impossible – this seems to be indicated through the conclusion of the royal fictions and through the other narratives.

[575] Krüger (2004), p. 65, sensibly argues that Qohelet here tries out a combination of attitudes, joining together enjoyment, wisdom and activity.

connection between 2:10 and the initial poem. Thus, 2:12 speaks about the one who comes *after* the king (cf. 1:11), and 2:16 reuses the phrase אין זכרון from 1:11, as well as כבר and עולם from 1:10.[576]

In 2:11 Qohelet turns from the detailed description of his search back to his conclusion, the underlying argument of which he now finally expounds. Initially he sums up this argument in a somewhat enigmatic proverb (2:12).[577] However one interprets the proverb-like saying, it serves to direct the reader's attention towards the following discussion of the coming generations. Furthermore, the proverb hints at the depiction in 1:9-11 of constant repetition and lack of newness, as it essentially restates this unchanging order of things.

After interrupting himself in 2:13 to stress the worth of wisdom (2:13-14),[578] Qohelet presents his main argument in 2:14-20: it is because there is no remembrance of anybody

[576] A plural form is used in 1:10, however.

[577] This proverb is not made any easier to understand by its text-critical problems: the text as it stands *is* potentially meaningful, and could be translated: "What (is) the man who comes after the king – what he has already been made" (thus Goldman (2004), p. 72-73). Especially the second half of this translation would work well with other statements in the book on the temporal existence of the individual vis-à-vis the supra-generational framework (cf. 3:14, 6:10), but so would the solution preferred by many other interpreters - an insertion of a form of עשׂה which would allow the translation: "for what can the person do who comes after the king? What he has already done!" For this translation, see Crenshaw (1987), p. 69 and 83.

[578] Gordis (1968) considers this a quotation and therefore he translates, p, 150 "I have heard it said: 'Wisdom excels folly as the light is better than darkness'; 'The wise man has his eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. But *I* know that one fate overtakes them both!" See also p. 221: "Following the presentation of the conventional teaching, Koheleth's own position is introduced by the emphatic (…) "but *I* know." Gordis outlines his general view on Qohelet's use of quotations on pp. 95-108. The main problem with Gordis' understanding of this textual dimension is that Qohelet does not indicate it if he does indeed quote the views or texts of his opponents. Thus, it is nigh impossible to identify possible quotations. Furthermore, Gordis suggests that Qohelet sometimes quotes traditional proverbs because he agrees with them (for instance in 7:13 and 10:18) and sometimes to disagree (see for instance 8:11b-12 and 9:4 and the use of contrasting proverbs in 4:5-6 and 9:16.). Such a varied use of traditional material, should it be present in the book, is even more difficult to detect, as it undermines many possible content-criteria for identifying quotations in the book – for instance that of contradiction with the main tenor of the author's argument.

that his work and wisdom-search are הבל. Because Qohelet will be forgotten, neither his wise achievements, nor the joy that he has experienced ultimately constitutes a יתרון. The narrator uses forceful language to hammer home this important point:

*2:16: For in the long run*[579] *there is as little remembrance of the wise as of the fool.*[580] *Since already*[581] *in the days to come it will all be forgotten. Oh, how the wise dies like the fool!*
*2:17: And I hated life, for what is done under the sun was evil for me, because it is all הבל and a pursuit of wind.*

A further consequence of the lack of remembrance is that the doer is divorced from his accomplishments, so that he can neither know nor influence whether his successor will be a wise man:

*2:18: And I hated all my work, which I have toiled with under the sun, which I must leave to the man who comes after me.*
*2:19: And who knows if he will be a wise man or a fool? And he shall become master over all my work with which I have toiled and dealt wisely*[582] *under the sun. This too is a הבל.*

This double focus on Qohelet being forgotten *and* being prevented from knowing who will follow him is strongly reminiscent of the argument in 1:9-11 which emphasized both the future generations' forgetting the present and the present ignorance about the future. These verses, tying the royal fiction to the introductory poem, are important for an

[579] Literally: for ever (לעולם). Krüger (2004), p. 57, translates "in the distant future."
[580] Understanding עם comparatively is suggested by Schoors (2004), p. 17 and p. 168, and Krüger (2004), p. 57-58.
[581] Gordis (1968), p. 222, notes that the construction בשכבר is unusual. I follow his translation of it: "Since already…"
[582] Gordis (1968), p. 223, reads the expression as a hendiadys, producing the following translation: "I toiled wisely."

understanding of how the royal fiction works: here, Qohelet subtly reminds the reader of the impossibility of his narrator, as well as his narrator's enterprise.

As would be expected, most interpreters agree that 1:12-20 is about the transience of human accomplishment, or some related problem – such as that of inheritance. Many, however, appear uneasy about the conclusion of the narrator.[583] Some state that Qohelet's dejection in these verses is temporary and should be understood as belonging to an early step in his introspective search.[584] Others suggest that there is, in addition, something fundamentally wrong with Qohelet's quest: the king is perhaps too self-reliant![585] It is troubling to the reader if the worth of the king's accomplishments – no matter how ideal – is to be completely negated by the dual fact of transience and oblivion. Yet it is difficult to escape this conclusion of the narrator. The royal fiction is framed by statements about memory's impotency, 1:10-11 and 2:12.14-20, to allow the narrator to state that the gain resulting from the king's search is, in fact, no יתרון at all because of its transient nature.

[583] Note the additional problem that this conclusion contradicts point-blank the king's experience during his search, 2:10 (modified, however, already in 2:11). Salyer (2001), p. 283, would connect this swift change in opinion to the character of the narrator's discourse: "Qoheleth flatly denies that there is anything to be gained under the sun. That such an important question could be answered so negatively and emphatically immediately following the self-absorbed pursuit of pleasure (…) does not communicate to the reader the sort of mature philosophical reflection that the speaker intended…" This does not, however, appear the strongest explanation of the contradiction between 2:10 and the following verses, especially given the presence in 2:11ff of reflections on temporality and mortality which could necessitate the change of heart undergone by the narrator.

[584] For instance Fox (1999), p. 184: "For a moment he came to detest life. But this is Qohelet looking back. As his account moves forward, he tempers his frustration with discoveries of good things…"

[585] Often it is argued that the king's works are too selfish, for instance. Longman (1998) p. 86 and 90 and Fox (1999), p. 176. Focused, as he is throughout the book, on the effects of the first-person presentation in Ecclesiastes, Salyer (2001), p. 273, argues that "the perceptive reader cannot but help detecting a bit of hubris in Qoheleth's summary of his experiences (…) The narrator claims more than he should given the limitations of a first-person reading contract (…) Common sense and basic literary competency suggest to the reader that an individual 'I' cannot see everything…"

In 2:21 Qohelet abandons his first-person discourse and tells a very short, very general story about "a man" or "man" who toils, but must leave everything to another. It is impossible to establish with certainty whether this story strictly speaking is part of the royal fiction. Yet it has significance for the interpretation of this narrative, as it finishes off – or carries on from – the royal fiction by retelling it without any markers of identification whatsoever. Longman notes the general tone of this story and argues that this tone somewhat ruins its narrative power.[586] At least two things are achieved by this generality, however. Firstly, Qohelet underscores the universality of the destiny discovered by the king to be the destiny of humankind. Secondly, these verses retell the story of the king, taking seriously the consequences of oblivion. All remembrance of the individual disappears, and only the general contours of humanity's continued conditions of life remain.

It is worth noting that Qohelet never explicitly takes up the royal fiction again after having reduced it to this generalized account. The attempt made by the author in the royal fiction to confront and challenge the limitations of human experience in time – and perhaps even to assert some degree of human control regarding the temporal reality of humankind – has collapsed. There is no returning to an autobiographical account of the past after it has been asserted that its narrator and all of his achievements are destined only for oblivion. However, the author will revisit the theme of memory and kingship in narrative form in two later fictions, in 4:13-16 and 9:13-15.

[586] Longman (1998) p. 104.

### 2.2. Elements of Conflict in the Royal Fiction

Let us now return to the three problematic elements of the royal fiction outlined above. The narrator's mysterious identity is a good place to start: who is this king in 1:12-2:20? It is generally assumed that he must be Solomon – indeed, some interpreters are so sure of this identification that they feel moved to put forward detailed speculations about particulars in the fiction based upon the assumption that the narrator obviously is Solomon.[587] For instance, explaining why the building of the temple is not mentioned – or noting Solomon's famed sexual exploits in connection with the difficult hapax שׁדה in 2:8.[588]

However, such interpretations will struggle to explain why the narrator never explicitly says that he is Solomon. This omission seems somewhat to undermine the idea that the author aims to identify his narrator *unambiguously* with this famous sage-king.[589] Instead, I suspect, it is very much on purpose that the author has omitted a direct identification with any past king, fictional or real. This may be an eminently effective stylistic choice. Keeping the king nameless strengthens king Qohelet's conclusion in 2:12ff about ultimate oblivion, and creates an insurmountable distance between the reader and this

[587] Thus, while noting that the narrative calls the activities of Solomon to mind only in a general way, Seow (1995), p. 278, still states that "several of the items on the list in Qoh. 2:4-11 may refer to landmarks around Jerusalem that had been associated with Solomon. Thus, the vineyards (2:4) may be an allusion to Solomon's vineyards. (…) By the same token, the gardens (2:5) may refer to "the King's Garden" (Jer 39:4; 52:7; 2 Kgs 25:4; Neh 3;3:15)…" Seow's further observations are more convincing, namely that Qohelet's language is typical of royal inscriptions of West Semitic and Akkadian origin, including, for instance, the comparison with his predecessors and the depiction of his achievements (pp. 279-283).
[588] Longman (1998), p. 92. Koh (2006), p. 33, states more sensibly that "most scholars today are well aware that the Solomonic association is carried out with considerable freedom."
[589] As Ingram (2006), p. 82, has noted on the basis of the ambiguous presentation of the royal narrator, doubt can certainly be raised as to whether Qohelet is Solomon. Ingram's discussion of the ambiguities connected to Qohelet's name/title can be found in Ingram (2006) p. 76-85.

unknown, past authority.[590] He is, of course forgotten, as he must be, and inaccessible to the memory of the author's contemporaries.

Perhaps this can go some way towards explaining why the author has made the identification with Solomon both such an obvious and such an impossible choice: the king cannot be Solomon. Apart from the fact that he is referred to by a different name elsewhere in the book, it is also stated that several kings ruled in Jerusalem before him. At the same time, however, he *has* to be Solomon, if only because this king was the wisest of all the kings of Israel. In an elegant balancing act the author manages to emphasize his point about the unreliability of memory, while also making use of the legendary reputation of Solomon. The inclusion of this legendary king in the text accentuates Qohelet's tragic message about memory and oblivion: even this king, whose memory, we expect, has survived the ravages of time better than most, could not find anything worthwhile in life. Even kings are forgotten and even the wisest among men cannot make sense of the world in which he lives.[591]

Such an implicit conclusion fits well not only with the content of the royal fiction itself, but also with the concluding remarks in 1:10-11 on the consequences of the temporal order for human continuity and remembrance. Simultaneously, however, Qohelet's choice of narrator establishes a tension between the royal fiction and 1:10-11: Qohelet

[590] Here it is worth mentioning Longman (1998), p. 83, who notes that by never directly saying that he is Solomon the narrator retains a vagueness which signals a distance between himself and the historical king.

[591] A possible objection to this reading would argue that king Solomon is an especially poor contender for a narrator who must be forgotten. After all, people do remember this particular king! However, as mentioned above, Qohelet refrains from naming his legendary king directly. If he uses the legendary reputation of Solomon, he does so in a vague, indirect way, which allows him to press his point about universal oblivion in a very forceful manner: even Solomon can be anonymized, and his person used to illustrate the inevitability of oblivion.

has made use of what would, according to the viewpoint of these verses, be an impossible narrator. In the concluding verses of the introductory poem it was emphasised that there is a lack of human continuity and that human beings are not intellectually able to grapple with this reality. Immediately after this conclusion, the royal fiction begins. It presents the results of an intellectual search, carried out by a great king of the past, who examined everything which happened under the heavens. It appears totally to contradict every single part of the thesis in 1:10-11. It seems paradoxical that Qohelet would choose a narrator speaking with the authority of a legendary king just after having rejected the possibility that human beings have real access to the past.[592] Yet the choice of this problematic narrator allows Qohelet both to challenge his conclusion from the introductory poem – and to further demonstrate it.

Observing this highly effective juxtaposition of the introductory poem and the royal fiction, I would also suggest that it makes sense for the fiction to be situated where it is. The switch to a narrative genre allows Qohelet to "personalize" the consequences of what has gone before in 1:9-11 – the person of the king rebels against the limitations sketched in 1:9-11 by his very *identity* as well as through his endeavour.[593]

[592] Salyer (2001) also considers the implications of the chosen narrator, although taking a completely different route. Thus he notes, p. 236, that an argument conveyed by an I-narrator is dependent on the suasive power of this narrator. Given this, Qohelet needs outside endorsement to remain credible as a narrator. This the author begins giving him in this passage: "the sort of rhetorical bolstering which Qoheleth needed from a sponsor begins far earlier than the epilogue (…) The implied author's task of reinforcing Qoheleth's ethos-related qualities was initiated early in the discourse by his use of the Royal Fiction to color his protagonist's visage with the aura of royal Wisdom and wealth." Salyer's argument will be discussed in more detail in this chapter's section 2.3.

[593] Ingram (2006), p. 72, also suggests a connection between the (Solomonic) king Qohelet and 1:11. He does not, however, take this idea further, stating simply about the relationship between 1:11 and 1:12ff that "again it is difficult to see how the passages bear on each other: How does 1:1-3 affect 1:4-11 and how does it in turn affect 1:12-2:3?"

To sum up on these two points, Qohelet is not willing to accept those limitations for human cognition that have already been established in the book's introductory poem. Throughout the entire work he attempts to overcome them to describe human, temporal existence and create that existential coherence from which he is cut off, according to his initial conclusions. This is very much the case in the ostensibly Solomonic fiction: here Qohelet works *against* his basic thesis about the way in which the time-order conditions human existence and limits our ability to establish meaningful, human continuity. However, even as the royal fiction challenges the temporal realities identified in the introductory poem, it also comes to *exemplify* exactly those limitations which the author attempts to overcome. Denying the existence of remembrance, Qohelet sows doubt about the credibility of any human discourse that claims to base itself on the wisdom of sages past. In the process, the author's own thesis is unavoidably destabilized as this is exactly what he claims to do.[594] By delaying the royal fiction until after 1:10-11 Qohelet thus manages to subtly undermine the credibility of his own narrative voice.

This brings us back to the first peculiarity of the royal fiction noted above: the odd non-conclusion to the story of the king and the author's choice not to tell this story to an obvious, clearly demarcated end. Any suggestion as to why the author has chosen this compositional solution must remain conjectural, and even more so because of the vagueness, the contradictions, and the broken structure which characterize this passage as well as the book as a whole. Advantages of the present proposal, however, include that it

[594] Ingram (2006), p. 72, notes that there is an irony in the transition between 1:11 and 1:12, as the former describes the oblivion of former generations using the same words that 2 Chr. 9:29 employs to describe Solomon's deeds. For this to be true, however, one must assume that the author of Ecclesiastes both knew the text of 2 Chr. and made conscious use of its language, an assumption for which there is not much evidence.

takes seriously the connections and tensions between the poem in chapter one and the royal fiction, and that it suggests a reason for Qohelet's abrupt abandonment of his narrative mode of presentation, returning in 3:1ff to a poetic, discursive exploration of human life.

As has been argued above, the royal fiction can be read as a sort of narrative rebellion against the constraints of the world-order, explored first in 1:4-11. By placing the fiction immediately after the introductory poem and by choosing a narrator whose story should be inaccessible to the present-day of the author, Qohelet attempts to get past the limitations placed on human life and cognition in time. However, according to the world-view sketched by Qohelet this type of narrative rebellion is doomed to failure: humanity's story cannot be told, simply because any notion of a human continuity to match that of nature is an illusion.

The rebellion in the form of a story therefore simultaneously becomes an illustration of those very constraints that Qohelet wishes to rebel against: he tells a story which moves to its inevitable end – namely a restatement of the reality of oblivion. He chooses a narrator who should have been – who is – forgotten, and who is consequently swallowed up in his own story. History simply cannot be evoked in a meaningful way, because it belongs to the forgotten past to which we in the present have no access. Berger remarks perceptively: "It is as though the kingship, and with it Israel's history, and the person of Solomon are invoked only to be erased by silence. (…) This feature of the book

powerfully underscores Qohelet's anxiety about memory and his apparent belief that there is no gain to be had for the human…"[595]

Qohelet tries to establish a narrative about the past that makes sense as a story and a narrative about the past which can be connected to (his) present existence. He fails on both counts. In connection herewith, let us keep in mind the brief discussion of the relationship between narrative and time in the beginning of this chapter. It would seem that, given the epistemological framework of Qohelet, it proves problematic even within a narrative context to describe the temporal reality in a way which requires continuity and coherence.

Qohelet's narrative strategy may be illustrated in his own depiction of the king's failed experiments with wisdom and enjoyment which take the form of a creative enterprise – the building of houses and planting of gardens – and the failure of these works to produce meaning. I suspect that we find here a piece of narrative brilliance, speaking directly to the story's implicit struggle with humanity's inability to make sense of temporal existence.

As noted by Verheij, the depiction of Qohelet's garden in 2:4-6 shares to some degree its vocabulary with the Genesis 2 account of God's planting of paradise. Verheij argues on the basis of these similarities that the royal fiction may depict a human attempt to match

[595] Berger (2001), p. 149.

that divine creativity – Qohelet's attempt to rebuild paradise.[596] Even though I am not entirely convinced by Verheij's linguistic argument – mainly because the shared vocabulary between Qohelet 2:4-6 and Genesis 2 consists of words that are very common indeed in the Hebrew Bible – his interpretation remains fruitful. Whether or not inter-textually linked to the Genesis 2 account, Qohelet is engaged with building a "human cosmos" and as such Qohelet 2:4-8 forms a remarkable contrast to the depiction of the cosmos in 1:4-11. Whereas the poem described a divinely ordered world which was shown as actively hindering humanity's search for coherence and meaning, Qohelet attempts in 2:4-8 to create a "human" world as part of his wisdom search.[597]

The king's grandiose building project could thus represent Qohelet's (literary) attempt to recreate, and humanize the impersonal cosmos of chapter 1. Should such a human, literary creation prove sustainable, it could also be a venue for finding meaning. Qohelet's attempt, however, collapses when faced with the oppressive, temporal realities explored in the book's first chapter. Especially those limitations for human meaning that pertain to human oblivion will not allow an ordering of the world according to human wishes and ambitions. Thus, the story of the king is discontinued and the reality of oblivion restated. Qohelet abandons his narrative and returns to a poetic depiction of the way that the temporal structures condition human life in 3:1-15.

[596] Verheij (1991), pp. 113-115. Perdue (1994), p. 214, notes that the works of Qohelet naturally breaks down into seven parts, "perhaps suggesting to the audience the seven days of creation in Genesis 1:1-2:4*a*." As mentioned in the excursus after chapter 3, Forman (1960), pp. 256-263, has also considered Qohelet's use of Genesis.

[597] Perdue (1994), p. 215, notes similarly that when Ecclesiastes was written "Solomon's magnificent palace and Temple had been destroyed, his possessions and wealth were gone…"

### 2.3. An Alternative Solution: Suasive Problems of First-Person Discourse

Salyer's reading of Ecclesiastes offers a very different perspective on the presentational issues in Qohelet's kingly fiction from the one suggested above. Arguing on the basis of the work as a whole rather than focusing exclusively on the royal fiction, Salyer discusses the rhetorical characteristics of first-person narration. Salyer focuses primarily on the suasive problems and possibilities intrinsic to any first-person discourse and how these manifest themselves in Ecclesiastes, given the particular ethos and character of the narrator figure.[598] However, he does not discuss in any sustained manner those specific claims of Qohelet's which suggest the impossibility of establishing a universally valid discourse on such themes as time and cognition.

Thus, Salyer presents a highly detailed analysis of the rhetorical strengths and weaknesses of Ecclesiastes' first-person discourse, yet he does not dedicate much attention to the ways in which the specificities of Qohelet's discussion may contribute to the sense of instability in the narrated text.[599] He does, however, set aside a whole chapter to the use of ambiguity in the book of Qohelet. The deliberate use of ambiguity in the work suggests, I would argue, that a conscious authorial strategy is at play, aiming to accomplish something specific by introducing problematic elements into the text. I would therefore be hesitant to evaluate the challenges connected to the perspective of the book's narrator figure as being simply inherent weaknesses of first-person narration.

[598] Salyer (2001), p. 13: "the suasion problem which nearly every reader has experienced in Ecclesiastes (…) is a literary problem that is endemic and inherent to all first-person discourses…" He argues further, p. 15, that "first-person discourse literally begs to be debated with, and only rarely creates unconditional rhetorical consensus between speaker and audience. (…) it is the book's radical dependency on I-discourse that has generated the problems which have created its mixed reception."

[599] Salyer does offer a detailed commentary on the whole of the text, but it is focused on the narrator-figure and his rhetorical situation throughout.

In Salyer's reading the intra-textual dialogue between the third-person narrator in the frame composition and the main protagonist is a central feature as "*both* Qoheleth and the frame narrator are literary creations whose roles dissent because they represent two epistemological poles which were perceived as conflicting by the implied author."[600] Good reasons exist for this rhetorical choice, Salyer argues, as it helps overcome some of the suasive problems of the first-person narration: "The use of a frame-narrator gives a public signature to an 'I'-discourse."[601] Similarly, Sharp suggests an interpretative framework within which the wisdom endeavour of the protagonist Qohelet is evaluated by the frame-narrator and epilogist. In her view, however, the dialogue between the two narrator-figures does not amount to an endorsement of the narrator, as his basic perspective is drawn fundamentally into doubt by the frame-narrator.[602] Sharp's interpretation requires, in addition to a synchronic approach to the book, a strained reading of the epilogist's contribution. It is difficult to defend her view that the frame-narrator opposes empirical wisdom, as well as her thesis that Qohelet's mistake lies in seeking to live autonomously, away from God.[603]

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[600] Salyer (2001), p. 215-16. Salyer argues, p. 211-212, regarding the Epilogist that his function "is to control and shape the reader's attitude toward the main character and to set a certain distance between him or her and the implied author." Come the epilogue, however, p. 375, "there is a sense of respect and warmth that marks the implied author's evaluation of Qoheleth as a sage."

[601] Salyer (2001), p. 218. And on p. 219 he elaborates: "By 'signing off' on the discourse of the narrator in this fashion, the implied author has given an endorsement to the narrator."

[602] Sharp (2004), p. 65. Mills (2003), p. 27, too has pointed out that the narrating figure Qohelet carries limitations or elements of unreliability: "It could seem, at the opening of the story, that Qohelet will be a thoroughly reliable commentator since his views have been personally synthesized and his search has constantly been for a unitive meaning to human existence. (…) But the reader then comes to passages where this viewpoint appears to be challenged by a second line, which encourages readers to engage more optimistically with events. (…) The second narrative voice undermines the first and shows it to be less than totally reliable."

[603] Sharp (2004), p. 65-66. One may also question whether it is warranted to see Genesis 3 as an inter-textual background for the author of Ecclesiastes to the extent which is required by Sharp's reading.

Salyer and Sharp rightly emphasize that the use of a first-person narrator throughout the book produces a certain rhetorical effect.[604] As Salyer has argued, when "a narrator becomes embodied or fleshed out, the incarnation of the narrator's function into a human personality results in predictable strengths and weaknesses."[605] Therefore, it would be unsurprising, were we to find the inherent strengths and weaknesses of this narrative mode in an exacerbated form within a narrative context, such as 1:12-2:20. However, as section 3 of this chapter will show, both of the third-person stories in 4:13-16 and 9:13-15 suffer from similar tensions and uncertainties as does the royal fiction – for instance regarding their conclusion and the identity of their protagonists.[606] These problems reappear, I would argue, because Qohelet is pressing a related point in all three stories, despite using different narrative forms. The potential issues connected to the authority of first-person discourse cannot on their own account for what is going on in the book's story-telling.

### 3. The Two Third-Person Narratives

Twice during the course of the book the author of Qohelet resumes his discussion of time within a narrative setting. In both cases the attempt to tell a story about human beings in the past fails in a similar way to what happened in the royal fiction. The first of these two narratives is the story about the poor boy who became king in 4:13-16. After comparing a poor, but wise youth favourably to an old, but foolish king in a *Tob-Spruch* in 4:13, 4:14-

[604] Perdue (1994), p. 203, is worth referring to here as well: "First person narratives, real or fictional, represent an attempt at self-justification – that is, to find something redeeming in the storyteller's life and experiences and to declare its meaning, It is a way of reconciling the self of the narrator to the world and to affirm that one has not lived in vain."
[605] Salyer (2001), p. 122.
[606] One could argue, of course, that both of these third-person narratives are embedded within the first-person context and therefore dependent on the authority of the main narrator.

16 tells the story of a young man who rose to kingship, despite being born in poverty and having been incarcerated. He ruled successfully, but was not remembered properly by those who came after him: they did not rejoice in him.

*4:13: Better a poor and wise lad than an old and foolish king who will not be warned any longer.*
*4:14: For he came forth from prison[607] to rule,[608] though he was born poor in his kingdom.[609]*
*4:15: I saw all the living who were walking about under the sun following the second lad[610] who would stand up[611] in his stead.*
*4:16: There was no end to all the people, all whom he led;[612] yet the later ones shall not rejoice in him. Certainly this too is a הבל and a pursuit of wind.*

Commonly interpreters seek a historical background for 4:13-16.[613] There has, however, been no agreement regarding which particular events the historical allusions may call to mind. Some researchers have sought in these verses references to the historical context of the book's author. For instance, Schunk argues that 4:14-16 refer to the Seleucid rulers of

[607] The aleph has probably disappeared in elision from an original האסורים, see for instance Krüger (2004), p. 102, and Crenshaw (1987), p. 113.
[608] Rudman (1997), p. 65, suggests translating "counselor" instead of "king" which seems unnecessary. Fox (1999), p. 225, finds that Rudman's reading is an overreading, and I would agree.
[609] I understand כי גם as concessive here. Krüger (2004), p. 102, suggests the very different translation: "Even if someone came out of prison and unto the throne, poor people would still be born under his rule."
[610] As Gordis (1968), p. 245, notes השני occurs in all the versions and so should not be deleted. Gordis reads "the second one" as an apposition, as does also the present study.
[611] In favour of his interpretation that this verse refers to another youth than the one in the previous verses Fox (1999), 226, argues that Qohelet never uses the jiqtol about the simple past. If the youth had been the same as in the preceding verses, a simple past would have been required, because there would have been no change in the temporal perspective. The change in verbal tense suggests a change in time too, Fox argues.
[612] Similarly, Fox (1999), p. 224. Alternatively, Gordis (1968), p. 162, suggests persuasively: "Yet there is no end to the people who lived before them both, nor will later generations find joy in the youth…" and notes, p. 246, the similarities of this argument with 1:10-11.
[613] For instance, Barbour (2010) takes this approach, presenting a careful analysis of the possible historical allusions in 4:13-16, pp. 117-125. She finds that Solomon and Jeroboam are the figures evoked most clearly, but argues that the vagueness of the text invites multiple identifications and that echoes of the Saul and David story and the story of David and his sons are present too. As will be argued below, the story's lack of telicity is a problem for an allusive reading. Given the lack of telicity and the vagueness of the story I would also argue that its anonymity encourages the reader not to identify the characters with *anybody*, rather than with multiple figures from Israel's history.

the author's own time.[614] Relating instead the text to the national history of Israel, Ogden "suggests the presence of historical allusion in Qoheleth, oblique references to past events or persons honoured by the wisdom tradition."[615] Because of the generalised format, however, historical allusions are present only as hints in the text. Yet, Ogden argues, to the reader immersed in the same historical tradition as Qohelet, the use of a keyword would sufficiently indicate the historical background.[616]

Longman, conversely, finds it wrongheaded to try to identify the historical context of 4:13-16 and 9:13-15.[617] He argues that Qohelet's goal is telling a fictional story with a didactic point, whether making use of historical material or not.[618] I find this approach to the two narratives more persuasive. The vagueness and generality of the depiction, as well as the structural similarities between 4:13-16 and 9:13-15, are additional arguments against Qohelet's presenting historical allusions that the reader is meant to pick up. While this "vagueness" of the stories fits poorly with a supposed authorial intent to refer to historical events, it fits well with the conclusions of the narratives, stressing the oblivion of the protagonists.

4:13-16 is fraught with linguistic difficulties, some of which must be discussed before an interpretation can be offered – mainly because the obscure language makes it uncertain

[614] Schunck (1959), pp. 192-201.
[615] Ogden (1980), p. 309.
[616] Ogden (1980), p. 310. Regarding 4:14a Ogden finds that: "On the basis of general correspondence with the motif, Joseph presents us with a most likely candidate should there be any specific historical memory lying behind this verse.", while he suggests that 4:14b describes David (p. 312).
[617] Note also Gordis (1968), p. 243: "What we have here, as in 9:13ff, is probably not a historical reference, but a typical incident, invented by Koheleth to illustrate his point."
[618] Longman (1998), p. 144.

what is actually taking place in the narrative.[619] Two issues are particularly problematic. The first is of syntactic character: technically the suffix in 4:14 can refer to both the old king and the youth, as can also the finite verbs. While admitting that it is not impossible that the text refers to the old king when describing the one who came out of prison, interpreters of this passage almost unanimously understand 4:14 as dealing with the youth, and I agree with this understanding.[620] The other problem is the mention of the second youth in 4:15. Does the story have two characters – or three?[621] Because of the contrast established in 4:13 between the boy and the king, it seems most likely that only two people are compared in the story which develops further the point made in this proverbial saying. Furthermore, 4:15-16 makes best sense if they work together to contrast the achievements and the lack of remembrance of that one young man who became king despite overwhelming odds.[622]

The surprising conclusion in 4:16 should guide the interpretation of this enigmatic story. No explanation is given for the young king's fate. His rule has been successful and

[619] Bühlmann (2000), pp. 101-108, has suggested that Greek influence on the author's language is to blame for both ambiguities.

[620] For instance Whybray (1989), p. 88-89, Gordis (1968), p. 244, and Crenshaw (1987), p. 113. The suffix would then most naturally refer to the old king. Ogden (1980), p. 314, understands the finite verbs in 4:14 as referring to the old king, but he is an exception. Fox (1999) also departs from majority opinion when arguing in favour of translating the verse: "for he came forth from prison to rule, while in his rule too a poor man was born." Translated in this manner, another youth – sometimes suggested in connection with 4:15 to make sense of the mysterious "second youth" mentioned here – would be introduced already in this verse.

[621] The interpretation offered in the present context works well regardless of whether one identifies two or three characters in the story: in either case Qohelet emphasizes oblivion of that which is past – if there are two characters only the seeming contrast between the old king and the young king who end up receiving the same fate has a stronger effect. If there are three characters, it allows for a more pronounced concomitant attention to the cyclical character of temporal reality and the sameness of events across time.

[622] Crenshaw (1987), p. 113-114 argues differently that the "second youth" is best understood as a solemn reminder that even the young king will one day be succeeded by somebody else: "The passage then illustrates the endless recurrence of events." Longman (1998), p. 146-147, also suggests that there are three characters in this story.

unproblematic.[623] Yet Qohelet seems to have chosen a conclusion that negates the entire story: the achievement of the youth is held up against the irresistible force of time – and it is found to have been so transitory that it has ceased to exist even as a memory. This creates tension with the usual purpose of a didactic tale, which should not end with the conclusion that nobody remembered the wise protagonist. Rather, the moral of such a story should be hammered home in the conclusion to be committed to memory, imitated, and incorporated into the reader's own approach to life.

Berger too draws attention to the story's conclusion, arguing that "in a much neglected aspect, the story ends with the loss of appreciation, or memory, for the poor wise boy."[624] Also worth mentioning is the interpretation of Brown, according to whom the story shows that "one's legacy or remembrance, even established in wisdom, is wasted, subjected to the whims of future generations."[625] In the light of Qohelet's other statements about remembrance (for instance 1:10-11, 6:12, and 7:10) the latter part of Brown's conclusion seems less convincing, however. Qohelet's view on the impotency of human memory makes it improbable that the future generations have any choice in the matter. However, some ambiguity remains in this particular section, partly because of the choice of שמח to describe the future generations' mental state. By using זכר instead Qohelet avoids this ambiguity in 9:13-15.

[623] Differently, Krüger (2004), p. 104, argues on the basis of an adversative understanding of כי גם in 1:14 that the public abandons the king because he has not effected the necessary social changes. He concludes that this story presents a fundamental criticism of the monarchial system as an unpromising cycle: "every previous ruler has failed to live up to the hopes placed in him." Krüger's translation creates unnecessary contradiction between 4:14 and the proverb statement in 4:13, however.
[624] Berger (2001) p. 148.
[625] Brown (2000), p. 54. Here Fox (1999), p. 226, would largely agree with Brown: "*everyone*'s loyalties attach themselves to whatever ruler comes along and are thus very erratic."

It should be considered briefly in this connection whether שמח connotes rejoicing in 4:16 – the problem being that the people did not value him as they should have – or whether it is an indirect way of stating that the king was in effect forgotten?[626] The parallels in content with the narratives in 1:12-2:23 and 9:13-15 suggest the latter. Against this one could argue that disenchantment with political power is a theme in Qohelet and therefore likely to be present here too. Even if this option is preferred, however, the moral still cannot be that the youth simply happened to lose the public's fickle favour. Rather, those not rejoicing in him are the later ones (אחרונים – cf. 1:11). The issue at stake is not of the youth's contemporaries turning from him, in real or conceited realisation of his flaws, but posterity not remembering him as one would have expected. The future generations are either shown to misremember the boy who became king, or to forget him completely. This conclusion necessitates the story's vague language and the anonymity of the protagonist. It is also a serious blow to wisdom which, even if effective here and now, is staggeringly powerless against the onslaught of time and the oblivion which passing time effects.

*9:13: This too I have seen as wisdom under the sun and it seemed important to me.*
*9:14: There was a small city and the men in it were few, and a great king came against it, and he surrounded it and he built great bulwarks against it.*
*9:15: But there was found[627] a poor, wise man in it and he delivered[628] the city by his wisdom; yet nobody remembered[629] this poor man.*

[626] Seow (2008a), p. 192, helpfully notes that the idiom "rejoice in" may indicate *acceptance* of the king's rule. Seow's interpretation of the passage has a high degree of temporal focus as well, as he argues that the passage describes historical events as occurring in cycles, as did the events in the natural world, 1:3-11: a youth who replaces an old king becomes in time an old king himself, to be replaced by a new youth…
[627] In favour of the indefinite, impersonal translation, Whybray (1989), p. 148, refers to GK paragraph 144d. Fox (1999), p. 299, and Krüger (2004), p. 176, both understand the king as the subject of "found", rather than reading it as an impersonal construction.
[628] On content-grounds Gordis (1968), p. 311, excludes a hypothetical translation "he could have saved" as he argues that this translation makes the rest of the verse meaningless. Differently, Crenshaw (1987), p.

Interpreters have attempted to identify a historical background for 9:13-15, as they have for 4:13-16. However, as pointed out by Seow: "Attempts to locate the story in history have not been successful; and they are not necessary." [630] The story describes a wise man who saves a small town in dire need, and who is subsequently forgotten.

The main interpretative disagreement regarding 9:13-15 stems from a linguistic ambiguity: due to the possibility of understanding the perfect of מלט in 9:15 modally, it is not entirely clear whether the story presents a hypothetical point or not. Did the wise man save the city only to be forgotten, or could he have saved the city if remembered? While some maintain that the language cannot very well support the second, hypothetical understanding,[631] others disagree. For instance, Brown favours this understanding and understands the narrative to say that without "sufficient social capital... the exercise of wisdom is all for naught."[632]

In accordance with Berger I would argue that 9:13-15 present the same moral as 4:13-16, namely that wise, human achievements and their authors come to nothing because they can never be remembered: "These stories are the paradigms of forgetfulness in which the

166, argues that a potential sense works best in this context, and that זכר (if translated "give thought to", as in 12:1) is not a problematic continuation of this hypothetical thought.

[629] Krüger (2004), p. 176, translates differently "but no one had thought about the poor man."

[630] Seow (2008a) p. 322. Although arguing that the passages 4:13-16 and 9:13-15 and 10:16-17 together create a historical feeling, p. 190, Seow notes that 9:13-15 can very well be understood without knowing this factual background.

[631] Longman (1998), p. 235, for instance, notes – as did also Gordis (1968), p. 311, that זכר works best with a real event of the past. Fox (1999), p. 300, argues that the point of the story has to be that "wisdom is powerful enough to save a city", the problem being that people forgot the wise man afterwards because of his poverty.

[632] Brown (2000), p. 97.

achievements of their respective heroes are wiped out by a lack of memory."[633] Even successful endeavours which appear to confirm the value of wisdom are helpless against the workings of time. They too are completely transient, seeing as not even their memory remains. Longman similarly states that even though the wise man saved the city, his actions "in the long run... disappeared in the oblivion of passing time."[634] Longman goes on to conclude that wisdom is ultimately meaningless, even if it appears fine in a short-term perspective.[635] It is worth emphasizing the magnitude of the genre manipulation happening here: Qohelet forces the genre of the didactic story to comply with his understanding of humanity's situation in time by removing its key-element: its ending and conclusion. As Morgan states regarding the genre of exemplary stories saying that they "have a strong sense of an ending is to understate the case. (…) generally the point is at the end, and the rest of the story is simply there to 'prove' it."[636]

Verses 9:13-15 revisit the theme of remembrance, this time without mentioning explicitly death or the coming generations. The subject remains, however, the same as in 1:12-20 and 4:13-16. In addition, mortality has not long been off stage as an explicit theme of discussion: verses 9:11-12 were discussed in chapter 5 as part of the passage 9:1-12 which discusses the devastating and equalising effects of death, and the viewpoint of the author that these eliminate any apparent advantages of individuals.

[633] Berger (2001), p. 149.
[634] Longman (1998), p. 234.
[635] Longman (1998), p. 235.
[636] Morgan (2007), p. 255. And earlier on the same page: "Being human is a choice between life in a chaotic, inconclusive world, or annihilation. It is no wonder that stories, which reduce the world to some kind of order, are so important to us, and part of the charm of stories is that they end…"

**4. Shared Elements in the Structure of 1:12-2:20, 4:13-16, and 9:13-15**

The two short narratives describe their anonymous protagonists' accomplishment of an impressive feat, the value of which is, however, immediately written off because of the nullifying effects of time: the generations to follow will not remember these heroes, and their achievements are fated to disappear. The royal fiction follows a similar pattern and presents the same conclusion, but does so from a first-person perspective – thus allowing the narrator to portray the internal agonising of the protagonist as he realises the inevitability of oblivion. In their turn, the short fictions reinforce the conclusion of the royal fiction. It is furthermore possible that they too play a role in destabilizing not only wisdom, but also Qohelet's own discourse, as they describe the oblivion of a king and a sage – the two figures with which Qohelet identifies himself at various point in the text.

The three fictions thus share a general, structural pattern with several notable features: firstly, they introduce their protagonist in a way that does not allow for clear-cut identification with any historical person. Secondly, this protagonist proceeds to do something wholly acceptable, even commendable, whether this be testing the limits of wisdom and creating spectacular works in a search for meaning (1:12-2:20), unexpectedly assuming the rule of a country and governing wisely (4:13-16) or saving a city in dire need (9:13-15).

Thirdly, all three stories prove to be non-telic. They conclude in an unexpected matter that does not seem to finish in any proper way their story-line. As the conclusions emphasise only the non-existence of remembrance, regarding both the characters

themselves and their work, they actively undermine the points made in the course of the narratives. By pressing his thesis regarding the inevitability of oblivion and the impotency of memory through a shared structural pattern in all three stories, the author places this thesis at the forefront of their narrative discourse. Qohelet concludes simply that all human undertakings are truly transient, since the temporal order of the world does not allow for any real remembrance of human beings or their deeds. Whatever the achievements of the protagonists, their fate remains to be forgotten – and as all three protagonists are figures of the past, *we* are the ones who have forgotten them. Even if they had wisdom to share, we cannot access it.

**5. Part Conclusion**

In this study of the theme of time in Qohelet, I have argued that Qohelet does not present time as a neutral reality, but depicts it as intensely problematic for human attempts to fashion a meaningful existence. I have emphasized that in this book the discussion of time and temporal reality is closely connected to a concurrent discussion of humanity's cognitive abilities. Qohelet demonstrates that there is a lacking correspondence between, on the one hand, the temporal reality as it manifests itself in the cosmos and, on the other, the human experience of time. Cosmic temporal reality is something ongoing, repetitive, and continuous. The individual's life is limited in time – with no real connection to either past or future.

The inaccessibility of past and future means that we are unable to establish a human continuity to match that of the cosmic. The sameness in time – the regular repetitions and

continuity on a cosmic level – does not provide the individual with a reliable understanding of the temporal order and its shaping of our lives. On the contrary, it makes blind.

The only temporal dimension left somewhat accessible is the present. If meaning is to be found anywhere, Qohelet concedes, it must be here. However, the lost temporal horizons of past and future eat away at the edges of the present too, threatening severely the establishment of a meaningful life in our day-to-day existence. In addition, Qohelet questions our ability to understand the temporal dimension of the present, even as it shapes and conditions our lives right now. For instance, it is beyond human, cognitive ability to formulate any schemes of temporal regularity which would place the events and activities of our life within a reliable framework.

The exegetical chapters have also considered how Qohelet's own presentation and philosophical endeavour are affected by the problematic, temporal situation which he identifies. Although Qohelet considers the wider horizons of past and future inaccessible to the human mind, he continually attempts to engage with them. This results in an ongoing conflict between statements of knowledge and statements of ignorance; between wanting to investigate the temporal dimension of human life and being unable to do so. Stark tensions appear in the text as Qohelet attempts to negotiate the problem of investigating the inaccessible. Nowhere is this as clearly apparent as in the book's three narratives.

# Chapter 7: Qohelet and 1 Enoch

*"I see the Past, Present & Future, existing all at once*

*Before me…"* (William Blake, Jerusalem, Plate 15, lines 8-9.)

The analysis of the time theme in the book of Qohelet thus far provides a valuable springboard to compare treatments of time in literature from the same period. One such book is 1 Enoch, the oldest layers of which are thought to be roughly contemporary with Qohelet.[637] Like the book of Qohelet, 1 Enoch evidences a passionate interest in time and human knowledge about time, making it an interesting candidate for a comparative analysis. Though the books offer their reader differing conclusions regarding the time-problem, both literary works engage with similar questions in relation to human and cosmic temporal reality. Belonging to the later trajectories of biblical wisdom literature and early apocalyptic literature, respectively, both books also respond to earlier, Israelite traditions within prophecy and wisdom. Accordingly, a comparative analysis will elucidate more clearly not only the particular viewpoint of each literary work. Rather, in addition to gaining a fuller understanding of the individual book one may be able to sketch some contours of the broad intellectual landscape within which they were written.

## 1. Qohelet's Wider Thought-World

Aware of the need to situate the book of Qohelet in a broader literary and intellectual context, other scholars have brought the book into conversation with a variety of literary,

[637] See Milik (1976), pp. 4-69 (and especially pp. 5-7 regarding the Qumran fragments) for a discussion of the dating and relative chronology of the Aramaic Enoch material. See also Isaac, pp. 6-7, in Charlesworth (1983).

philosophical, and religious material. Comparisons with older, Ancient Near Eastern material have been popular.[638] Within the framework of the Israelite thought-world scholars have frequently compared Qohelet with other works of wisdom literature.[639] Of interest in the present context is also an article by Talstra which discusses the cognitive dimensions of Deutero-Isaiah's claims regarding the "new things", comparing them explicitly with Qohelet's statements on newness and constancy.[640]

In terms of literature which is more contemporary with the book of Qohelet, several scholars have drawn attention to the possibility that Qohelet may be responding to early apocalyptic thinking.[641] Furthermore, many interpreters have compared Qohelet with different strands within the Greek, philosophical tradition, sometimes suggesting a degree of direct dependence on Greek schools of thought.[642] Less concerned about contemporariness, Hayman compares Qohelet to the fourth century CE Book of Creation (Sefer Yeṣira) which quotes Qohelet,[643] and which seems to subscribe to similar epistemological ideas.[644]

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[638] Specifically, it has been suggested that the Standard Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh and the Dialogue of Pessimism offer parallels to the book of Qohelet. See George (2003) for the Gilgamesh-text and Brown (2000), pp. 2-7, for the suggestion that the author of Qohelet knew and made use of Gilgamesh. Greenstein (2007), pp. 55-65, compares Qohelet with the Dialogue of Pessimism. In connection with the theme of time, the Gilgamesh Epic seems the more interesting parallel of the two.

[639] See for instance Frydrych (2002) on Proverbs and Qohelet, as well as Hatton's work on contradictions in the book of Proverbs (2008) which repeatedly compares compositional strategies of Proverbs and Qohelet.

[640] Talstra (2002), pp. 225-236. I am also intrigued by an article by Köchert (2009), pp. 155-185, which analyses Psalm 90, discussing in detail the psalm's temporal presentation in a manner which would also be relevant to the study of time in Qohelet.

[641] This scholarship is particularly relevant to my analysis and will be discussed in detail in section 2 of this chapter.

[642] Examples include Hengel (1974), and Braun (1973).

[643] The cited passage is Qohelet 7:13-14, but Hayman (1991), p. 97, argues that Sefer Yeṣira §60 "could be regarded as a good commentary on both the content and the chiastic structure of Qohelet's famous poem on time in 3.1-9."

[644] Hayman (1991), esp. pp. 98-103. Hayman, p. 107, argues that Sefer Yeṣira is perhaps the clearest example of a "more universalist trajectory of the Jewish wisdom tradition."

As the very short survey above demonstrates, a variety of comparative work has been done by Qohelet-researches. Even so, however, 1 Enoch remains a highly unusual choice for a comparative analysis with Qohelet. In fact, I am not aware of any scholarly work which offers a sustained comparison of the two. I would argue, however, that an analysis comparing 1 Enoch and Qohelet is not only a possible, but also a highly fruitful endeavour – perhaps especially when one makes the discourse on time in the two books the starting point and main perspective of the analysis.[645]

It may, however, be worthwhile here to address briefly the issue of genre: 1 Enoch is evidently not of the same genre as Qohelet, even if the wisdom tradition can reasonably be considered one of the influences on the apocalyptic genre.[646] The book of Qohelet is not an apocalypse, nor does it concern itself with a potential End-Zeit. In addition, it is universally accepted that the book of 1 Enoch is a composite piece of literature with a complicated compositional history[647] – while Aramaic versions of large parts of the Enochic corpus have been found at Qumran, the later Ethiopic version is the only full

[645] It does not seem likely, however, that one would be able to point to any direct, inter-textual connections between the two works. The present analysis will not attempt to do so. Furthermore, it should be noted that the present analysis will focus primarily on what is considered to be the oldest sections in Enoch, discussing only the younger parts of the book when they have relevance as a further perspective on the earlier material.

[646] The scholarly discussion regarding the possibility that some roots of apocalypticism are to be found in the wisdom tradition, as well as in the prophetic tradition, is summed up below. It should be noted that defining the genre of apocalyptic has been notoriously difficult. See Collins (1993), pp. 165-181, for a summary and evaluation of that discussion. Various approaches have been attempted by the researchers in the field: for instance, Rowland (2002), p. 21-22, focuses his definition on the claim made in apocalyptic literature that it presents knowledge received through revelation – see for instance pp. 21-22 or the whole section pp. 9-72, summed up on pp. 70-72.

[647] For an overview of the textual situation and the presumed compositional history, see Nickelsburg (2001), pp. 9-28.

version which survives.[648] Despite these reservations, however, it seems reasonable to suggest that the books of Qohelet and 1 Enoch share a cultural and intellectual setting, at least to the extent of Qohelet being aware of some contours of early apocalyptic theology.[649] An increase in the interest in a certain thematic, such as that of time, could well manifest itself across genre boundaries within this broad, intellectual environment.

Genre considerations should certainly make us cautious when comparing theological statements, as well as specific aspects of literary presentation, in 1 Enoch and Qohelet – and this would be the case even more if one were to suggest direct links or inter-textual dialogue between the two works. Yet it is equally important to emphasise that those literary works which we designate as "apocalypses" offer continuities with earlier wisdom and prophetical material, as well as constituting innovations. Nickelsburg's comments on the genre problem are pertinent: "Terms such as sapiential, apocalyptical and eschatological are useful and, indeed necessary, but they must be seen for what they are: windows into another world. (…) It is imperative that the means be not construed as the end, or the window confused with the landscape."[650]

Finally, I am intrigued that the book of Qohelet, while patently not an apocalypse, does occasionally use literary forms and tropes which we know primarily from apocalyptic material. One may note the initial depiction of a cosmos characterized by constancy and

[648] This obviously creates complications for discussions of specifics that may well impact the overall interpretation of the literary work, such as determining phraseology of the original texts vis-à-vis the version(s) to which we have access or sorting out redactor influences and intentions in various parts of the book.
[649] Section 2 of this chapter will outline concretely what connections may exist between Qohelet and apocalyptic thinking, as well as how various scholarly approaches have attempted to identify polemic dialogue between Qohelet and early apocalypticism.
[650] Nickelsburg (2006), p. 36.

regular repetition and the subsequent extension of that reflection to the existential situation of humankind; this strategy resembles the depictions of cosmos and human existence in 1 Enoch 2-5 and in 1 Enoch's Astronomical Book chapters 72-80. As mentioned above in chapter 3, Qohelet's final poem mimics apocalyptic-style depictions of the end time in which even the cosmos passes away. While not narrated by a primordial figure as is the book of 1 Enoch, Qohelet does make use of a pseudonymous narrator from the distant past.[651] These elements serve, however, more or less opposite purposes to what they would in a piece of apocalyptic literature. To the extent, then, that they are present and dialoguing with apocalyptic theology one might characterize this aspect of the book of Qohelet as a kind of anti-apocalypse.[652] Thus, while I would not suggest that the book of Qohelet as a whole aims mainly at addressing in a critical fashion apocalyptic ideas, a degree of dialogue with apocalyptic may well take place at various places in the book.

## 2. Qohelet and the Apocalypticists

Scholarly discussions of the book of Qohelet increasingly consider the possibility that its author engages polemically not only with traditional wisdom, but also with apocalyptic ideas gaining prominence in his time. Among the Qohelet-commentators suggesting that Qohelet to some degree responds to early instances of apocalyptic theology is Krüger. He finds that through its emphasis on human ignorance regarding the end of world and time

[651] Furthermore, Qohelet displays an interest in some of the same themes as do the apocalyptic authors. For instance: what are the effects of temporality and mortality? What happens to the individual after death? Can human beings access divine wisdom either through their life and observations in the world or alternatively through privileged revelation?

[652] See Sherwood (2002), pp. 94-116, for an illuminating reading of the apocalyptic-style imagery in Qohelet 12.

"the book of Qoheleth makes skeptical and critical reference to the corresponding theological developments of its time."[653] For instance, he argues that "1:9-11 can be understood as an ironic rereading of the expectation of an eschatological new creation…"[654] He understands the final poem in Qohelet 12 in a similar vein, suggesting that it contains a "comparable, ironically broken interpretation of late prophetic eschatology (…) If the world comes to an end, human beings must die – no more, no less."[655]

Commenting on the final poem, Seow too stresses its eschatological overtones, albeit with a different emphasis: "The text is not about the demise of an individual, but the end of humanity."[656] He argues that "Qohelet points ominously to an end-time, when life as humanity knows it will cease altogether."[657] Fox similarly suggests that this poem uses imagery which recalls an eschatological disaster: "Behind the surface, looming in the background, is a disaster of cosmic magnitude." To him the scene is particularly reminiscent of prophetic depictions of "the national and universal desolation awaiting Israel and all humanity at the end of this age."[658] Picking up on the contributions in this

[653] Krüger (2004), p. 25.
[654] Krüger (2004), p. 25.
[655] Krüger (2004), p. 26. All hopes for an individual existence after death are rejected by Qohelet too (cf. here Schoors (1985), p. 302, regarding the view of death in Qohelet: "when Koheleth asks his doubtful question of 3,21, he does not turn against tradition, but rather against new ideas of his time…")
[656] Seow (2008a), p. 53-54.
[657] Seow (2008a), p. 56. On p. 376 he states flat out about the final poem in Qohelet: "The imagery is eschatological."
[658] Fox (1999), p. 339. Fox, however, does not refer to this imagery explicitly as reminiscent of apocalyptic and he emphasizes, p. 342, that what Qohelet envisages is the extinction of the individual's universe in his death: "Every individual is a microcosm and every death the end of a world."

debate of Seow and Fox, Janzen suggests that Qohelet engages with contemporary, eschatological ideas regarding the rule of the sun.[659]

Perdue addresses the polemical tone in other parts of the book of Qohelet and finds it plausible that Qohelet's opponents "were primarily apocalyptic sages who (…) combined apocalyptic language and thought with traditional wisdom and the Torah." Their successors, he argues, were present in communities like that of Qumran.[660] Characterising the theology of these opponents, Perdue notes that they stressed "a final judgment of the righteous and wicked, the immortality of the righteous, the knowledge of God and divine action, and the holistic structure of time and events."[661] Among the differences which he finds to be present between these thinkers and the author of the book of Qohelet, it is significant for our current purposes that against them "Qohelet opposed (…) the understanding of the correlation of time and event for a successful outcome."[662] Perdue uses especially the passage 7:1-10 to argue in favour of Qohelet engaging in discussion with an apocalyptic type of wisdom which was pessimistic regarding life in the present,

[659] Janzen (2008), p. 474. Janzen theorizes quite specifically regarding the nature of the author's relationship with the apocalypticists of his day, suggesting, p. 478, that the author of Qohelet came to be "quickened for a time by acquaintance with visionary, eschatological scenarios likewise current in his day; and thereafter, owing perhaps indeed to a stubbornly empirical temper in the face of unchanging conditions "under the sun," was unable to sustain that intense but brief flirtation with the flights of visionary enthusiasm of some of his acquaintances." This argument mixes up the narrator, or the implied author, with the actual author quite spectacularly. If Janzen is actually aiming to present a hypothesis about the author of the work, apart from the persona of Qohelet in his work, his appears an over-interpretation of the sparse information we have about this writer.
[660] Perdue (2003), p, 245.
[661] One may add to Perdue's identifying features that apocalyptic-style thinkers often give priority to a figure from the past as an intermediary of revelation. Given the discussion in chapter 6, one may note that there is a highly interesting tension between the function of the ostensibly Solomonic, royal narrator in the book of Qohelet and this particular trait of apocalyptic thinking.
[662] Perdue (2003), p. 247.

and which argued that a cosmic decline was happening. He also refers to 3:10-15 and 3:16.18-22 as key texts for identifying Qohelet's opponents.[663]

Michel too states that, alongside his engagement with traditional wisdom, the author of Qohelet critically addressed a type of wisdom which was moving towards the apocalyptic.[664] As did Perdue, he emphasises 7:1-10 in this context. Michel's thesis regarding the book as a whole – a thesis which underlies his reading of this specific passage as well – is that "Qohelet hat eine genau beschreibbare theologische (philosophische?) Position und von ihr aus setzt er sich mit anderen zeitgenössischen Ansichten auseinander, die er zitiert und wiederlegt."[665] Thus the contradiction in 7:1-6 with the following verses, as with many of the book's other statements on joy, is a problem that Michel seeks to solve by arguing that these verses quote opponents who found the past to be better than the present (see 7:10) and who considered it folly to take any joy in the world – opponents who championed a wisdom influenced by apocalypticism.[666]

In opposition to readings such as these, Fischer promotes a more sceptical viewpoint. Examining individual passages often brought up in this type of scholarly suggestion, he suggests that these "hinaus keine Hinweise enhalten, die eine Gruppe externer und

[663] Perdue (2003), p. 246. It is worth noting that Perdue refers, p. 245, to Michel's idea that the sudden, negative assessment of joy in 7:1-6 stems from Qohelet "citing and then arguing against a theology of despair over current human existence that derives from oppression and injustice."
[664] Michel, (1993), p. 415.
[665] Michel (1993), p. 416.
[666] Michel (1993), p. 416-418. Michel also mentions 3:19-22 as a possible example of dialogue with this type of wisdom, the focus here being on the possible differences between the fate of humankind and animal in death, p. 419-420.

apokalyptisch gesinnter Gegner Kohelets zu erkennen geben."[667] It may be useful to provide an example of how he approaches the material in Ecclesiastes: for instance, he notes, regarding the passage 3:16-21, that it has long been considered in the interpretation history of these verses whether "sich Kohelet hier gegen eine zu seiner Zeit aufkommende neue Lehre wende…" Fischer argues, however, that the passage has very much been read in the light of what he considers the secondarily added material.[668] If the gradual, compositional development of the passage is taken into account and one consequently were to read 3:21 on its own, it would not be possible to point to a specific apocalyptic background for this verse, or to the teachings of a specific group contemporary with Qohelet from which this teaching would derive.[669]

I would agree with Fischer that we cannot readily identify Qohelet's opponents and neatly categorise their views, deciding which, and how many, such opposing groups Qohelet engaged with. Two things, especially, make me wary of such an exercise. Firstly, our identification of these groups is entirely dependent on *Qohelet's* discussion of the human condition: even if Qohelet quotes opponents, as has sometimes been suggested,[670] he does not indicate this clearly, but weaves the viewpoints of others into the fabric of his

[667] Fischer (1998), p. 340, here regarding the passages 5:9-6:9; 7:1-22; and 9:1-12.
[668] Fischer (1998), p. 345, considers 3:17 to be a later addition, as well as the infinitive construction in v. 18, so that the original text sounded something like: "Ich überlegte mir, was die Menschen betrifft: damit Gott sie aussondere und sie erkennen müssen: Dem Vieh sind sie gleich."
[669] While not arguing in favour of there being a dialogue between Qohelet and a particular apocalyptic grouping in 3:21, Collins (1993), p. 172, states differently to Fischer that "it is quite possible that he is polemicizing against the apocalyptic claims of life beyond death."
[670] Above I have referred to Gordis' attempt to identify Qohelet's quotations of traditional, proverbial wisdom for a variety of purposes. A comprehensive list of types of quotation in the book, as Gordis reads it, can be found in Gordis (1968), pp. 95-108.

own discourse. In fact, it is a rarity for this author to refer directly to other people's ideas, or to the erroneous conclusions that the reader might reach if misreading his own book.[671]

Secondly, had Qohelet's mode of presentation been logically stringent or even reasonably non-contradictory, it might have been feasible to separate his own position from polemical elements in the work and so to reconstruct the opposing viewpoint(s) with which the author engaged. However, as is well known, the book's layout is confusing and dominated by contradiction. Regardless of how one envisages the compositional history responsible for the contradictory nature of the finished book – and here I part ways with researchers such as Fischer and Michel in that I consider most of the work a unity[672] – it remains true that the book of Qohelet in its final form does not consist of neat and consistent propositions regarding human life. Qohelet does not in a sustained manner support one "theory of wisdom" over another. It might be possible in each of Qohelet's criticisms to construe a – real or imaginary – opponent with whom the author is dialoguing, but then it becomes all too easy to suggest a plethora of opponents, simply because of the contradictory nature of the work. One may also want to question the assumption that Qohelet's goal is always – or even primarily – polemical.[673]

However, Fischer's willingness to dismiss so readily the thesis that Qohelet responds to some form of early apocalyptic thought seems equally unconvincing. As is evidenced, for

[671] But see 1:10 and 7:10 for a possible exception.
[672] See chapter 2, section 1.
[673] Additional questions also beckon: are the opponents real or imaginary? How sure can we be that there is only one group of opponents, or that there are multiple? Are our definitions of such groupings, including our genre qualifications, too narrow and artificial to accommodate a situation in which an author writing within the framework of a general, intellectual climate refers only indirectly to strands of philosophy common in his day? Finally, if Qohelet does indeed engage with opponents, does he represent them in a fair way which allows us to reconstruct their theology?

instance, by the presence of early versions of Enochic material at Qumran, apocalyptic ideas were a part of the intellectual environment close to the time when the book of Qohelet was written. It is true that any reconstruction of such an environment must remain conjectural. However, I would argue that it is warranted to assume that author and reader both may have associated some of Qohelet's statements regarding, for instance, death, as well as parts of his imagery, with apocalyptic ideas.

### 3. Time in the Book of 1 Enoch

In his definition of the apocalyptic genre, Collins touches directly upon the temporal aspect of apocalyptic literature, characterizing it as "a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality *which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation***,** and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world. [My emphasis]"[674] Understood in this manner, a degree of focus on the theme of time is constitutive of the genre of apocalyptic literature. The visions of eschatological judgement found in this type of literature have obvious temporal ramifications:[675] the eschatological event radically changes and upsets the temporal and historical order, it brings to an end human mortality and disturbs fundamentally the stability of natural order, including the regular movement of the phenomena. Furthermore, as an event the

[674] The definition is quoted and discussed by Kvanvig (2007), p. 143. In The Apocalyptic Imagination (1998), p. 5, Collins defends this definition, further arguing that it "is constitutive of all apocalypses and indicates the common core of the genre. More important, it constitutes a coherent structure, based on the systematic analysis of form and content."

[675] Some researchers have suggested, however, that the focus on eschatology should not be emphasized as a genre characteristic as this element may be lacking in some apocalyptic works – see for instance Rowland (2002), especially pp. 25-27 and 48. Even in apocalyptic works of this type, however, the reality of time – especially seen through the lenses of human and divine history and/or the structured cosmos – remains an area of interest.

eschatological judgement can be placed in time. One may, for instance, speculate about its placement in time in relation to the past or the present moment, and perhaps even calculate its temporal position.

In the book of 1 Enoch, the theme of time connects prominently to the theme of eschatological judgement, but it is also considered through the book's reflections on creation and more specifically on the cosmic structural set-up and its relationship with human existence. Some of the strategies used in the discussion of this thematic are not dissimilar to those employed by Qohelet in his reflections on human life lived within the constraints of the cosmic order, even if the conclusions and the theological implications drawn by the authors are very different. Looking more closely at the parallels and divergences in strategy and goals, the rest of this chapter will compare 1 Enoch's interest in structured time – cosmic as well as historical – with Qohelet's treatment of the same theme. In addition, the Enochic authors use the theme of time creatively in their attempts to convey the visionary experience of the protagonist. This aspect of the book's interest in time has not been given much attention, and so it will be useful to sketch its contours as well. Finally, a brief appraisal of 1 Enoch's view on knowledge and time will be given: as is also the case in later apocalyptic literature, 1 Enoch persistently focuses on the privileged knowledge which the seer gains through his revelation – and this view on knowledge and how it is attained is relevant too in relation to Enochic discussions of time, history and calendar.

**4. The Enochic Approaches to the Theme of Time**

Helpful in understanding the treatment of time in 1 Enoch specifically, as well as in apocalyptic literature in general, is the suggestion of Dailey that the apocalyptic authors conceive of the temporal scheme in a less one-dimensional way than often assumed. She questions the usual assumption in scholarship that time in apocalyptic literature is perceived as heading "towards its pre-ordained, eschatological climax", thus being "linear, steadily marching towards its *telos*."[676]

Noting that one finds also in the apocalyptic material a tendency towards depicting time in cyclical terms "whether from the standpoint of sacred history or as experienced by the apocalyptic seer", she suggests that one could view time in the apocalyptic literature as "a non-linear, cyclical progression of sacred events and activities, i.e., as a spiral of time…"[677] Her focus is the book of Fourth Ezra, but her description of the apocalyptic seer as he is situated in time is pertinent to 1 Enoch as well: "The seer is privy, through apocalyptic dreams and visions, to the *experience* of multiple points in sacred time, which are meaningfully present for him. Although time in Fourth Ezra ultimately moves towards the *eschaton*, the model of spiral time may best capture time as Ezra experiences it: as the convergence of past, present and future."[678]

[676] Dailey (1999), p. 231
[677] Dailey (1999), p. 231.
[678] Dailey (1999), p. 236.

Dailey's argument ties in closely with the classic, scholarly discussion regarding biblical conceptions of time which was evaluated in chapter 1.[679] Therefore one encounters also some of the same methodological problems as in that discussion. For instance, Dailey argues: "Although the apocalyptic division of history into periods such as hours, weeks, years, and jubilees may at first appear to convey the notion of "chronological time," these periods are made to coincide with events in the sacred history of Israel…"[680] Dailey seeks to argue that the apocalyptic perception of time focuses on content rather than chronology so that she can demonstrate the "undercurrents of complex cyclical temporal events, in addition to the overarching march towards the *eschaton*."[681]

I would argue somewhat differently that the apocalyptic authors' conscious attempt to connect a chronological schematization with typological events in Israel's sacred history demonstrates their ability to conceive of time both in chronological terms and in terms of content. The either/or distinction between these types of time, imposed by modern scholarship on the text, is somewhat artificial, corresponding poorly with the textual evidence. Furthermore, I would be more comfortable with a viewpoint which simply notes the co-existence of several perspectives on time and the temporal order within the text corpus – sometimes even within a single layer[682] – than with an attempt to harmonize the different approaches to temporal issues into one, theoretical scheme which supposedly encompasses the whole apocalyptic thinking on the subject of time.

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[679] Dailey (1999), p. 231. For instance, while agreeing with Barr that Marsh underestimates the Bible's interest in chronology, she supports, however, Marsh's emphasis that time in the Bible is perceived in terms of its *content*.
[680] Dailey (1999), p. 233.
[681] Dailey, ibid.
[682] As noted regarding the Apocalypse of Weeks by Henze (2005); see further below.

Despite such issues, however, Dailey's emphasis on the non-linear aspect of apocalyptic time-conception remains highly helpful. Similarly, I wish to approach the discussion of themes relating to time in the book of 1 Enoch by examining it through two fairly distinct modes of presentation that the authors of the book use. Firstly, the book of 1 Enoch often examines time as it is *chronologically structured*. The authors of the book attempt to forge the individual historical events and epochs, as well as the cosmic movements and the carefully calculated calendar system, into a meaningful whole which constitutes or exemplifies the divine plan. Secondly, however, I suggest that the Enochic authors also use time as part of their strategy for conveying the visionary *experience* of the protagonist. They do this by investigating and describing time also as a *collapse* of different times into the one moment of the apocalyptic vision.

To a significant degree, the two ways of approaching the phenomenon of time work on different premises, and have different goals. They can even to a large extent be related to different *visionary modes* which are explored within the apocalyptic book; one which is focused on the experience of vision qua vision, and one which focuses on vision as a mode of instruction.[683] Even so, talking about a split into two distinct "modes" or "strategies" remains a somewhat artificial division of the material in the Enochic texts. The texts in 1 Enoch do not distinguish rigidly between the different realms of the visionary experience and the content of, or lesson learned from, this vision. Furthermore,

[683] The term "visionary mode" has been borrowed from Lieb (1991) whose monograph investigates exactly the visionary mode of the seer, aiming to trace the history of the visionary traditions from Ezekiel which he considers a model vision – an inauguration of a tradition which he traces all the way "to its delineation as a poetic event in the later Middle Ages." (p. 1) Especially worth noting in this connection Lieb's emphasis on the experiential roots of the visionary mode.

most of the investigation of temporal phenomena does not happen explicitly under the heading of time, and this may be one of the reasons why not a lot of careful distinctions are drawn between the different spheres of interest within this broad topic.

The distinction suggested here between the collapse of time and the interest in chronology and structure is somewhat parallel to Collins' distinction between two sub-genres within apocalyptic literature. He divides the material differently, however, distinguishing between historical apocalypses and apocalypses which consist of otherworldly journeys.[684] He writes: "It would seem that there are two strands of tradition in the Jewish apocalypses, one of which is characterized by visions, with an interest in the development of history, while the other is marked by otherworldly journeys with a stronger interest in cosmological speculation."[685] In 1 Enoch, though, these two strands are interwoven as the book contains both kinds. Furthermore, the book's historical apocalypses, such as the Animal Apocalypse and the Apocalypse of Weeks, may presuppose some sort of implied narrative of Enoch's otherworldly journey.[686]

### 4.1. The Interest in Chronology and the Stability of Time

As is often observed, apocalyptic literature has an intense interest in chronology. The authors seek to render meaningful the structured movement of time, as well as the

[684] A central difference between Collins' project and mine is that his distinction focuses to a high degree on *content*, whereas my distinction between the two visionary modes is primarily an argument about form.
[685] Collins (1998), p. 6.
[686] With a somewhat different focus, Kvanvig (2007), pp. 139-158, also notes two different emphases or slants on the story-telling in the Enochic traditions, as he argues that these writings have two different beginnings: one found in the Astronomical Book with its scientifically focused drive to discover laws of cosmos, and one which is evident in the Watchers' Story, presenting instead a radical vision of a world in chaos, outside divine control. Kvanvig suggests that one of several ways in which the Enoch tradition held together these two basic notions can be found in the Apocalypse of Weeks where history is presented as the scene of the rivalry between the two visions of cosmos.

chronology of history. This mode of investigating time is found in many 1 Enoch-layers, in the so-called historical apocalypses as well as in sections exploring cosmology. It thematizes principally the divinely planned temporal structure and the connections between seemingly disparate events in time.

Traditionally, the scholarly focus when investigating this interest in history and time has been especially the eschatological hope of the authors. Thus Charles, examining the hope-motif in the apocalyptic literature, stated that it will "be realized that the Apocalyptic Literature is almost wholly concerned with the future…" The references to the current history of the authors' time "are only made with a view to comforting the oppressed and afflicted. (…) every reference to the present is merely a position taken up from where to point to the future."[687] Several authors have questioned whether eschatology should be so privileged above other genre-defining aspects of apocalyptic, however – some arguing this element is far from always a principal feature in apocalyptic literature, and that the theme of eschatology is not, in fact, a constitutive element of a clearly definable apocalyptic genre.[688]

A prominent proponent of such a view is Rowland who finds that "we ought not to think of apocalyptic as being primarily a matter of either a particular literary type or a distinctive subject-matter, though common literary elements and ideas may be ascertained. Rather, the common factor is the belief that God's will can be discerned by

[687] Charles (2007, original 1917), p. ix.
[688] It could also be argued that the definition of apocalyptic may perhaps also encompass literature where the eschatological event is envisaged on the level of the individual. This may, for instance, be the case in Qohelet 12:1-7 and would then lend strength to my suggestion above that parts of Qohelet can be read as a kind of anti-apocalypse.

means of a mode of revelation which unfolds directly the hidden things of God."[689] He argues regarding apocalyptic and eschatology that "we are dealing with two separate issues in Jewish religion. The first concerns a way of apprehending the divine will and the second the character of Jewish hopes for the future. They come together precisely because the task of understanding God's will was particularly difficult as far as eschatology was concerned."[690] A balanced view is that of Collins who notes that "the scholarly literature has been preoccupied with eschatology to a disproportionate degree…"[691] while also stating that: "All the apocalypses, however, involve a transcendent eschatology that looks for retribution beyond the bounds of history."[692]

It is important to emphasise that although the stress is on the divine recreation the temporal interest of the Enoch-authors is broader: the issue is to render meaningful and to connect periods in time, historical and mythological events.[693] History, as well as the cosmic structures, is placed in a temporal scheme which reaches from creation (and original, paradigmatic transgression) to the end of history and time.

In several sections of 1 Enoch,[694] reflection on creation and cosmos forms the centre of the discussion of temporal themes. In these texts, the structures of creation and their

[689] Rowland (2002), p. 14.
[690] Rowland (2002), p. 48. While Rowland considers eschatology an important feature in the apocalypses, he emphasizes, p. 26, that "its presence in them is not their most distinctive feature, nor does it deserve to become the focus of attention in the study of apocalyptic literature to the exclusion of the other secrets which the apocalypses claim to reveal." For instance, he states specifically regarding the early chapters of Enoch that here "didactic legends and cosmology play the decisive role which eschatology and history play in Daniel."
[691] Collins (1998), p. 10.
[692] Collins (1998), p. 11.
[693] Rowland (2002), p. 22, suggests that the apocalyptic material provide "men and women with a way of looking at the world and God's involvement in it. This then gives coherence and significance to existence in the present when historical circumstances offered only perplexity and despair."
[694] Especially the Astronomical Book and the introduction's chapters 2-5 will be examined here.

stability are emphasized; with the natural phenomena, their courses and unchangeable movements being accorded a central position. It is this regular, cosmic time which the visionary perceives as being interrupted, either through the divine agency as the structures of the temporal world are unmade along with those of the spatial world, or through human sin which disrupts fatally the equilibrium of the temporal world structure. Thus, the cosmic stability comes to be tied to issues of morality and fulfillment – the fact that the world works well on a structural plane, for instance, is explained via a notion of its obedience.[695] The fate of the unjust can be illustrated through images of cosmic structures coming apart at the seams.[696] An obvious example is found in the book's introduction, in 2:1-5:3, which "contrasts nature's constancy with the disobedience and perversion of sinners…"[697] Nickelsburg states regarding this passage, and especially verse 5:4 that: "Nature's regular, faithful obedience to God has been cited as a foil to the human perversion and disobedience that will be punished in the judgment."[698]

[695] An interesting perspective is that of Morgan (2007), p. 239-40, who notes regarding notions of time and morality in the early Roman Empire that the "tension between these two phenomena – the stability of the world and the one-way development of human lives – lies at the heart of the relationship between morality and time. (…) If human lives were as stable as the world around them, perhaps no-one would transgress the allotted role, anymore than the stars err from their courses."

[696] Stone (1987), p. 300, comments on Enoch 2-5 that "the regularity of nature is invoked in a paraenetic passage which is reproving mankind for lacking those very characteristics of faithfulness and regularity that nature epitomizes." See also Himmelfarb's view (1993), p. 77, that in 1 Enoch 1-5 "Enoch appeals to the regularity of the luminaries in heaven and to the season changes of the waters, trees, and heat on earth as examples of faithfulness to God in contrast to human unfaithfulness."

[697] Nickelsburg, (1999), p. 214. Nickelsburg, p. 215, emphasizes the unusual nature of this juxtaposition: "To my knowledge, with the exception of the Testament of Napthali 3, which is dependent on 1 Enoch, this juxtaposing of wisdom observations on the constancy of nature and prophetic indictment for human inconstancy is not paralleled in the wisdom literature." I agree that especially Naphtali 3:2 provides an excellent parallel – "Sun, moon, and stars do not alter their order; thus you should not alter the Law of God by the disorder of your action." Outside of the wisdom corpus proper, one may refer to the contrast established, for instance, in Isaiah (see Is. 1:3) between animal behaviour and human disobedience.

[698] Nickelsburg, (2001), p. 129, connects the passage mainly with the prophetic literature and suggests that the chapters are "a special development of prophetic tradition. (…) An appeal to the realm of nature is not unknown in the prophets, but the long citation in 2:1-5:3 is without analogy…"

The stability of the created structures shows the power and glory of God. At the same time, though, there is a tension present regarding this positive aspect of creation, as its unmaking is anticipated throughout. Cosmic stability is also the basis of Qohelet's initial argument, Qohelet 1:4-11, though his conclusions are very different. Rather than pointing to the sinfulness of humankind as the cause of the perceived tension between world order and human existence – though the author in later passages sporadically explores the potential of this as an explanation for human suffering[699] – Qohelet suggests that it is the divinely established order itself which is to blame. To an extent, Qohelet 1:4-11 here provides a "negative" parallel to 1 Enoch 2-5,[700] juxtaposing as the passage does the constancy of nature with the divinely willed inconstancy and cognitive isolation of humankind.[701]

The cosmic order is overwhelmingly the central interest in the oldest section of 1 Enoch – the Astronomical Book – the Aramaic manuscript of which found at Qumran can be dated to the end of the third or the beginning of the second century.[702] The main aim of

[699] Qohelet 7:29 is particularly interesting. 8:6 and 9:2 may also be mentioned, if one chooses – differently than I have done in this thesis – to understand the evil referred to in these verses as a moral indictment.
[700] In his reading of the Astronomical Book, Albani (1994) provides a short excursus on Qohelet's use of the expression "under the sun", stating, p. 153, that: "Besonders im ewigen Kreislauf der solaren Zyklen scheint Kohelet seine pessimistische Welt-und-Existenzauffassung bestätigt zu sehen." While the cyclical continuity of the sun's movement reinforces positive ideas about order and constancy, in Qohelet the same image is used to show the world "als eines sinnlosen Kreislaufes von Werden und Vergehen..:", p. 154.
[701] It is perhaps possible that both Qohelet and the apocalypticists here build a tradition within psalms and wisdom writings in which nature and its activity exemplify, for instance, the greatness of God and is seen as an active participant in maintaining creation. In that connection, one may note with Himmelfarb (1993), p. 77, that the notion of nature's obedience which appears in several sections of Enoch implies a certain degree of personification of the phenomena. Himmelfarb follows Stone (1987), pp. 298-300, however, in finding this "a development with little precedent in biblical tradition…" Differently, I note the presence of this kind of idea in, for instance, Psalm 19:2-3, as well as – in a negative guise – in Qohelet 1:4-7.
[702] The problematic textual situation pertaining to the Astronomical Book is summed up by Nickelsburg, (1999), p. 203-4: "Internal analysis of the Ethiopic text of chapters 72-82, as well as a comparison of that text with the Qumran Aramaic fragments, reveal real difficulties in the content and order of the texts and partial duplication of sections, and they indicate a history of ongoing compositional and editorial activity. Of necessity, this perplexing situation qualifies many of the statements and claims one makes about AB."

this work is to promote the 364-day solar-year calendar.[703] It also thematizes the relationship between sun and moon and other natural phenomena. Nickelsburg sums up the central claim of the book in its emphasis that: "cosmos and its component parts are governed by immutable, divinely ordained laws… The times and places in which the luminaries rise and set and their trajectories across the heavens are ever the same."[704]

The Astronomical Book underlines strongly the stability of the phenomena and their movement. As noted by Collins, "The lengthy descriptions of the heavenly bodies are in part a celebration of the order of the universe."[705] In addition, it is emphasised that the stable regularity of the cosmos is firmly grounded in the divine will and plan. For instance, the author writes emphatically about the sun in 72:36: "It is that very (luminary) which manifests itself in its appearance as God has commanded that it shall come out and go in, in this manner." In chapter 80, however, this stability is unsettled as the natural phenomena are held up against human behaviour and life-conditions: the sinners' days follow another pattern.[706] "In respect to their days, the sinners and the winter are cut

[703] Consistent with his wider argument which is evaluated at length elsewhere – that antique Judaism does not operate with a concept of time – Stern (2003), p. 103, argues regarding the Astronomical Book that it "describes in detail the courses of the sun and the moon and their calendrical implications, but these are clearly only astronomical processes, not representations of time *per se*."

[704] Nickelsburg, (1999), p. 206. Interestingly, Nickelsburg also notes that: "More often than not, Enoch's allegedly revealed cosmology does not agree with empirical reality, but conforms to a priori schemes." See also Albani (1994), p. 98: "Dem AB ist jedoch offenbar alles am Erweis der Unveränderlichkeit der astralen Bewegungsabläufe gelegen." The sun in particular, with its regular , daily passage across the sky exemplifies this extremely well which he suggests may in part account for its dominant role in the astronomy of the Astronomical Book. Commenting on the "theological" character of the presentation in the Astronomical Book, Albani states further that "Das Postulat der ewigen Unveränderlichkeit der Gestirnbewegungen in Hen 72,1 ist in der Tat als »Glaubensartikel« anzusehen…"

[705] Collins (1998), p. 60.

[706] Regarding the Astronomical Book, Albani (1994), p. 99, notes: "Der Ordnungsgedanke is offenbar der Schlüssel zum Verständnis des AB." Interestingly he notes, p. 105, that the basic idea of order is accompanied in the Astronomical Book by the notion of righteousness: "Der zweite wichtige theologische Gedanke ist der einer Entsprechung des Menschen zu dieser unveränderlichen Himmelsordnung…" For instance, the stars in 1 Enoch 74:12 and 74:17 "werden also als bewußte Wesen vorgestellt, die ihren Lauf entscprechend dem göttlichen Gesetz vollziehen, und daher als "gerecht" gelten."

short. (…) He will turn and appear in their time, and withhold rain; and the sky shall stand still at that time" (80:2).[707]

Enoch *sees* the order and movement of the phenomena, and he is guided in interpreting these, the background for the knowledge transmitted to the reader being a vision in which the seer is transported to heaven and guided by an angel.[708] Thus for instance 74:1-2: "Furthermore, I saw another system of rotation with its own regulation whereby the system fulfils its monthly course of movement. All these things (…) Uriel, the holy angel who is the guide of them all, showed to me." Knowledge about the seasons and the natural phenomena has here become the preserve of special revelation. Examining the author's claim that he passes on information received through revelation, Nickelsburg states that this revelation "is visual and not simply conceptual. (…) Enoch often sees physical phenomenon (sic), e.g., the gates on the perimeter of earth's disc, or in the canopy above it (72:3; 74:9; 75:4, 76:1). Thus, although chapters 72-82 do not contain a single verb of motion, the reader must suppose that Enoch traveled to these uttermost reaches of the cosmos…"[709]

[707] For an overview of different interpretative possibilities in connection with the sinners mentioned in chapter 80, see Albani (1994), pp. 113-129. It is also worth noting with Albani, p. 129-134, that there is some discussion regarding chapter 80's originality. I agree with Kvanvig (1988), p. 59, that content-wise nothing in Uriel's speech in chapter 80 indicates that it was not originally part of the text. As noted further by Kvanvig, chapter 81 stands out in a more problematic manner, due to the absence of "the astronomical or cosmological teaching in the rest of the book." Similarly, Albani, p. 129, is right to attack the thesis that 1 Enoch 72-79 can be read as purely scientific (which would, if true, create quite a contrast with the theological perspective of 1 Enoch 80:2ff).
[708] Like the Apocalypse of Weeks, the astronomical book contains, as noted by Collins (1998), p. 60, "the content of a revelation rather than a report of the revelation itself." Even so, a heavenly tour is implied.
[709] Nickelsburg (1999), p. 206.

One finds in the introduction to the Book of the Watchers, in the chapters 2-5 which were mentioned briefly above, a more fully developed argument regarding the temporal set-up of the world and the interplay between this and human conditions of life.[710] The view on time presented here makes for a particularly interesting perspective on that which is found in Qohelet. As did the Astronomical Book, the author of the introduction to the Book of the Watchers appeals to the regularity of the cosmic phenomena.[711] He encourages his reader to examine and observe these, tying together the study of the temporal order with a human process of reflection that can lead to knowledge about God and human conditions of life. 2:2: "And look at the earth and turn in your mind concerning the action which is taking place in her from the beginning to the end: how all the work of God as being manifested does not change." In addition to the regularity of the phenomena, the changelessness of the temporal and spatial set-up is very strongly underlined – thus already in 2:1: "Examine all the activit(ies which take place) in the sky and how they do not alter their ways, (and examine) the luminaries of heaven, how each one of them rises and sets; each one is systematic according to its respective season; and they do not depart from their appointed order."

As in Qohelet, nature and its regularity say something about cosmos and its relationship with the divine, as well as functioning as an image to be extended to and held up against human existence in the world. The first extension of the nature imagery to the human situation happens in chapter 4 where the uncomfortable heat of summer is underlined:

[710] Kvanvig (1988), p. 102, suggests interestingly that "En 1-5 is strongly influenced by cultic language and rooted in a cultic conception."
[711] Nickelsburg (1999), p. 216 "in 101:1-3, he appeals to sinners, in language similar to chapters 2-5, to contemplate the heaven and its work and to fear God"

"and the earth shall burn with scorching heat, and you are not able to walk on the earth or on the rock on account of the heat."[712] Then, in a much more extended fashion, chapter five contrasts the progress and prosperity which nature enjoys because of its obedience with the rebellious attitude of the wicked.[713] As was also the case in Qohelet, the human being is placed in a tense relationship with the world order. Differently than in Qohelet, however, humanity is here held to be solely responsible for their predicament. The emphasis on the relationship between world order and humanity underlines forcefully that what threatens the harmonic creation is the lack of human obedience.

An interesting difference between this cosmic depiction and that of the book of Qohelet is the mention in chapter 5 of progress and change in the smaller units of creation, such as the trees and the seasons. "the verdant trees are covered with leaves and they bear fruit. (…) His work proceeds and progresses from year to year" (5:1-2). Even so, this remains a cyclical type of movement, as also characteristic of cosmos and nature in Qohelet, and it is the ceaselessness of this cycle which is important: "all his work prospers and obeys him, and it does not change; but everything functions in the way which God has ordered it" (5:2).

[712] Nickelsburg (1999), p. 214 points to a degree of providence in the natural order: "there is even an element of providence in this paradoxical order. When the sun scorches the earth and people seek shelter and shade from its presence, the trees blossom with the leaves that provide that shelter." See also Nickelsburg (2001), p. 156.

[713] Similarly, in the much later passage 1 Enoch 41:8-9, the overview of the cosmic order is extended to humanity to demonstrate the implications of the former upon the latter: "Surely the many changes of the sun have (both) a blessing and a curse, and the course of the moon's path is light to the righteous (on the one hand) and darkness to the sinners (on the other), in the name of the Lord of the Spirits, who created the distinction between light and darkness and separated the spirits of the people (…) he is the judge." One may here note in particular the stress on the intrinsic relationship between God, cosmos and human being, and how the division of light and darkness becomes a parallel to, or a metaphor for, the divine judgement of righteous and sinner.

The interest in uncovering a well-ordered temporal scheme is also apparent in the pervasive focus on history and human chronology which exists, in the Enoch tradition, side-by-side with the attention towards the cosmic order. Here, the lengths and numbers of eras are calculated, the history of Israel is told and connected to Urzeit and Endzeit, and the symbolic significance of past events teased out through a creative and highly expressive language. The oldest section to thematize these issues is the Apocalypse of Weeks, found in 1 Enoch 93:1-10 + 91:11-17.[714] As Henze puts it: "Even the most casual reader of the Apocalypse of Weeks (…) will notice that the organization of time was of principal concern to the author."[715]

As stated by Collins, the focus on chronology and ongoing, structural stability, including a periodization of history to connect disparate events, functions to give "the impression of an ordered universe where everything proceeds in a predetermined manner."[716] I would argue, however, that the underlying laws and the typology of history are not primarily emphasised in order to demystify them or make it possible to calculate in an exact manner the lengths of eras or the position of the present in relation to past and future event. Rather, it is a much more important motivation to demonstrate that history, like the cosmic order, functions according to the divine plan. I agree with Kvanvig, then, who states that the author of this apocalypse had an urge "to go behind the individual events to find the underlying laws. In many was this approach resembles the mode of thinking in

[714] Kvanvig (2007), p. 147, argues that the Apocalypse of Weeks could well be pre-Maccabean and as such "this is the first time in Judaism when the whole of history is grasped in one comprehensive image, p. 147. Collins (1998), p. 63, suggests a 2nd century date on the basis of Jubilees referring to this apocalypse, and because copies of Jubilees from the Hasmonean period have been found in Qumran.
[715] Henze (2005), p. 207.
[716] Collins (1998), p. 64. Koch (1983), p. 413, makes a similar point, namely that the purpose of the schematization into weeks is to render intelligible to reader and author both their own position within the temporal world.

the Astronomical Book (….) In both cases there is a drive to understand the whole, either cosmos or history, and to find a fixed rhythm in the movements going back to a hidden law…"[717] In the apocalyptic retelling of history, the issue is not so much to render history accurately as to tell the story of the past in a way which emphasizes the connective threads with the present and which allows hope for the future.[718]

Henze interestingly suggests regarding the Apocalypse of Weeks that "this deceptively simplistic architecture of the end time is predicated on more than one view of history. (…) The author (…) is aware of these different perceptions of time, yet does not consider them mutually exclusive but has them converge in his apocalypse."[719] He argues that history understood as a linear progression of time is supplemented in the Apocalypse of Weeks by a "parallel structure" in the presentation of time.[720] Finally, a third understanding of time is evident through the establishment of an alternating pattern of righteousness and deceit.[721]

[717] Kvanvig (2007), p. 147.
[718] This is a motivation known not only from other apocalyptic literature, but also from the later wisdom literature and its presentation of cosmos and the re-writing of Israel's history in, for instance, Jubilees and Chronicles. In his reading of Chronicles, Boer (2010), p. 23, interestingly argues that "It is a text that creates a different memory of the past in order to construct the picture of a different present and hope for future. It challenges, erases, and rewrites the established patterns, providing an appeal to alternative collective memories – embodied particularly in the genealogies – for the hope of the future. (…) It tells a different story of the past in order to open up the possibility of a different and better future – the basic definition of uchronian fiction."
[719] Henze (2005), p. 207.As a comparison for this multi-faceted approach to time and history he offers the Syriac Apocalypse of Baruch which is related to the Apocalypse of Weeks in terms of both form and genre. See p. 208: "The perhaps closest analogy within the apocalyptic corpus to this architecture of time that combines a linear view of history with an alternating pattern of righteousness and sin, is (…) Baruch's vision of the cloud from which bright and dark waters alternately pour in the Syriac Apocalypse of Baruch (2 Bar 56-77)."
[720] Here Henze (2005), p. 208, refers to the suggestions of VanderKam (that the Apocalypse of Weeks is structured in pairs of weeks) and of Boccaccini (that there is a chiastic structure in the Apocalypse), as to Nickelsburg who divides the Apocalypse into two groups of weeks, 1-7 and 8-10.
[721] Henze (2005), p. 208, admits that this last approach towards history is not entirely consonant with the succession of weeks, but states that there is, however, still a "principle of descent and ascent…" Regarding

Other readers have brought another emphasis to the careful, temporal schematization in this apocalypse. For instance, Koch states regarding the scheme of weeks in the Apocalypse of Weeks that the number of weeks is emphasized "to enable the reader to be aware of his own situation and the time remaining before the end of the world."[722] Noting that humanity does not determine the course of the periods listed, he suggests that this apocalypse "…presents an antagonistic field of powers as responsible for the changing development through the ages."[723] Focused too on the temporal schematization, Kvanvig reflects on the possibility that a sweeping overview of history can be brought into contact with a sense of urgency and concern for timing, even if "the eschatology firmly rests in the chronology" as the future "develops in many new steps from the seventh to the tenth week."[724]

A similar presentation of time is found in the Animal Apocalypse which tells the story of the events of the Urzeit, as well as the history of Israel, using animals to represent human actors and human figures to represent heavenly actors. A useful perspective on this apocalypse is the apocalyptic section of the book of Daniel, chapters 7 to 12, which utilizes similar types of imagery in its depiction of Israel's history – even if the interest in the universal history found in the Animal Apocalypse is not reflected very strongly in

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this temporal perspective he also refers to Koch's view re the antagonistic powers in the apocalypse, see below.

[722] Koch (2005), p. 187. Consequently, he states on the same page: "So *shavua'* must refer to a fixed number of years and not to a varying length of weeks."

[723] Koch (2005), p. 191. Koch, p. 190, also notes regarding the apocalypse's summary of times: "Surprisingly no direct divine activity is mentioned in this dramatic summary of the times of the world." Later on the same page, he does state that "the reader ought to suppose that these sentences contain a *passivum divinum*, but the ultimate source of the development remains veiled."

[724] Kvanvig (2007), p. 144.

Daniel. The strategy of Jubilees which weaves the divinely structured time into human and Israelite history, displaying great interest in continuity and ritual exactness, also bears comparison with the Enochic, historical apocalypses.

The establishment of a meaningful history does not find an echo in Qohelet. In Qohelet, continuity, also in the form of history, is almost exclusively established negatively, by stating its impossibility. This makes excellent sense in the context of the book: Qohelet very clearly disavows the endeavour of the apocalypticists – to tie together in a meaningful manner a history fuelled by a divine purpose with the present and with an imminent end. This he must do because of the character of world time as it is experienced in the cosmic, temporal order and the human relationship with this. As argued in the previous chapter, even the narrator's attempts to tell stories about history from the vantage point of the past must be abandoned because of Qohelet's unease about oblivion and human continuity. Qohelet is unable to tell telic stories about human history because the content and meaning of the past are not accessible. Conversely, apocalyptic stories about the past are, above all, telic.

### 4.2. The Suspension of Chronology

The theme of time is also tackled by some Enochic authors in an almost opposite manner, however – namely as a collapse of the different times into the one moment of the apocalyptic vision. It is a mode of approaching time which finds no parallel in the book of Qohelet, both because it depends entirely upon a privileged, visionary experience and because it offers a view of time which suspends the very chronology that Qohelet works

so hard to establish. Even so, it should be surveyed here as it is one of the main strategies which 1 Enoch uses to depict notions of time.

Parallel to the way that space is destabilized and contracted in the visionary experience to transport the seer seamlessly through human world, mythical geography and visions of the heavens, so too the temporal dimension is contracted during the vision in order to allow everything to happen at once. Enoch observes the mythical Urzeit and its central events together with the core-events of the eschatological judgement.[725]

This approach to the phenomenon of time is very closely connected to the overwhelming focus on *space* in the vision.[726] In order to allow the seer to traverse places that exemplify or represent the central events of past and future, the heavenly vision must suspend regular notions of space and distance.[727] However, since some of these places are located in the past and some in the future, regular notions of time must be suspended too. Consequently, in the visionary experience the temporal and the spatial are tangled up

[725] Collins (1998), p. 58: "The comprehensive tour of the cosmos is designed to show that the destiny of humanity is not left to chance but is built into the structure of the universe. (…) It is true that eschatology is only one component in the comprehensive view of the cosmos, but it is an essential component and is fully integrated with the cosmological speculations."

[726] Regarding the importance of the space in these chapters, one may refer to Nickelsburg (1999), p. 213: "Enoch's second journey is filled with references to mythic cosmology. (…) The created structures of the universe and its components guarantee and will facilitate the future judgment that he predicts. Finally, he refers not only to astronomical and geographical matters, but to the living world of plants and trees. (…) he refers to an aspect of the spatial, created world whose products are familiar to him and his audience." Comparing Enoch's travels to the Astronomical Book, he states that the latter "presented an account of a revealed vision of the hidden reaches of the cosmos and its order. Chapters 17-36 allude to these matters but concentrate on mythic geography."

[727] Though working specifically on the book of Revelation, Snyder (1991), p. 445, presents reflections on the transitions in time and space during the apocalyptic vision that may be pertinent to Enoch as well, suggesting perhaps a commonality in the presentation of the apocalyptic visionary's experience of time within the vision itself. Focusing on a particular expression in Revelation, John being "in spirit" (εν πνευματι), she notes that Rev. 4:1-2 presents, alongside an explicit spatial transition, "a change in temporal setting" as John is informed that he will see "the things that must happen after this." The main argument of her article, resting on an examination of the four times this expression occurs, is that every occurrence "reflects a transition in place, and some also reflect a transition in time."

with each other.[728] As the seer is transported from place to place he also travels in time. This journey is described through verbs of movement,[729] as well as through evocative depictions of over-earthly locations, reflecting the movement through the various places seen in the vision. Simultaneously, the description of movement also demonstrates in a subtle way a continual change of focus regarding temporal matters: the seer may move from a harrowing canyon to a garden; but the first is the place of punishment which will be given to the fallen angels, while the second is the primordial Garden of Eden, as happens in chapters 27 and 32. In 24-25 a garden similar to that of Eden is surveyed, but *this* garden is located in the future of the coming world.

Especially chapters 20-36 in the Book of the Watchers focus on presenting the space within which the apocalyptic vision takes place.[730] However, the interest of the seer is not simply, and probably not even primarily, in presenting a kind of "speculative geography." Rather, the places that are mentioned have key-functions in tying the workings of the natural order to the divine and to the apocalyptic vision, and in depicting the fate of human beings and angels on the day of ultimate judgment. The places in which their judgment will take place, and their emotional, sensory and existential qualities, come to represent the divine judgment upon the different groups.

[728] Kvanvig (2007), p. 153 refers to Nickelsburg's suggestion that three types of division or "axis" can be found the book of Enoch, one of which is temporal – the historical axis which separates now from the then of the primordial rebellion. Kvanvig comments on this, however, that the text presents this and other axes more as tensions than as watertight divisions, there being "an overlap between the different worlds, both in time and space. Enoch, in his growing apocalyptic attire, his visionary capacity and his interest in eschatology, moves around in a mythic world, which is explicit and not only implicit in the texts."
[729] However, verbs of movement are lacking in the Similitudes, as discussed below.
[730] For a perceptive reading of the *spatial aspects* in the Enochic vision, especially in its interplay with the visionary attempt to gain knowledge, see Lieb (1991), pp. 49-51.

In the vision, as is often noted, the primeval stories become paradigmatic for human existence. These stories are recalled through the spaces in which they took place or to which their central characters have or will come; cf. 22:6-7 on Cain and Abel, and 32:6 regarding the Genesis 3 narrative. The primeval "geography" is tied to the geography of the future, just like the cosmic order of the world now is tied to that of the coming world.

This move between past, present and future – and even between the current and the coming world – happens continually. Thus, in a sense the normal rules about temporal movement have been suspended, just like the usual assumptions about place are challenged as the seer moves in an elastic space which encompasses real locations as well as historical and mythical settings. As everything can take place at once, chronology becomes unimportant. Instead time takes on existential significance, and normal assumptions about how or when things happen are left behind. The entire history of humanity is invested with a particular kind of unity and meaning. One may refer to Redditt who argues that the heavenly journey functions so as to place the seer "at a vantage point form which he can see beyond time to the ultimate destiny of human beings."[731]

Thus, in the depiction of the visionary experience time is considered from a viewpoint located beyond the cosmic, and historical, temporal scheme. Here the present of the reader and the actual author is brought together with the primeval, catalyst events *and* the expected, future judgement in one, extraordinary moment. Events at different points of

[731] Redditt (2001), p. 368.

this timeline are presented as a series of tableaux between which the seer navigates, suspended from the constraints of chronology.

This is a very different way of making sense of passing time than the establishment of chronology surveyed above. Establishing a story-line allows for an emphasis on the typology of events and the presence of overarching divine plans which connect our present to the wider temporal horizons of past and future and render it meaningful. As suggested, this is what happens in the historical apocalypses which make disparate events fit meaningfully within the divinely controlled scheme and which thereby show necessary connections between mythical events/the divine realm and historical events/the human realm. In the visionary experience, however, because the seer is situated "above" the temporal scheme, the various events can be presented in a manner which suggests a kind of simultaneity. Possibly, then, the visionary experience demonstrates even more forcefully than did the typological surveys of history the divine purpose behind and the cohesion of events within human history, as well as within the wider sphere of divine and supernatural activity.

If only this type of depiction of time could be found in 1 Enoch, one might come to suspect that the authors were basically uninterested in *when* an event took place, their main concern being to depict those visions of symbolic space which characterise the various events. However, as has been seen, the contraction of time to one, tense moment of creation, fall, judgement and fulfilment is accompanied by an intense interest in history, in chronology and in the regular movements of natural phenomena such as sun,

wind and moon. If anything, it is intriguing that visions with a suspended chronology occur in the same literary work as passages displaying a very keen interest in history and the continuity between human generations.

Nickelsburg comments perceptively that the ways in which the Enochic authors present the cosmological realities "tend to qualify the temporary character of the book's eschatology. In a real sense, time stands still, or collapses. The places and instruments of judgment have already been 'prepared,' established, and institutionalized in the cosmos that has already been created. In some instances, judgment is already being effected. (…) The reality of these facts is mediated through the *apokalysis* [sic] of the primordial seer now made present on the written page. Thus, in the midst of suffering, one can take courage *now*, because God's will is already being done in heaven and in the far reaches of the cosmos."[732]

While Nickelsburg's focus is not on the way in which the chronology of the temporal scheme collapses in the visionary experience, his observations are still highly pertinent. As he presents it, the temporal collapse is not simply a literary strategy to elucidate part of the visionary experience – rather, real-life consequences can be drawn from the vision's highly flexible presentation of the temporal scheme and this impacts very much the temporal reality occupied by author and reader both.

[732] Nickelsburg, (1999), p. 218. See also p. 219: "Time is, indeed, important for these apocalyptic authors, but the cosmological framing of the temporal dimension makes the counting of time less critical and obvious that we have been led to expect by traditional, scholarly expositions of apocalyptic literature."

A useful, if rather late, perspective on the depiction in the Book of the Watchers within the Enochic corpus itself is the Enochic parables, usually dated to the first century AD. This text has been described as "a pastiche of traditions",[733] drawing according to several scholars in particular on the Book of the Watchers.[734] With Nickelsburg and Knibb, Stuckenbruck emphasizes that "this dependence is not to be construed as static borrowing of motifs and ideas, but rather involves a creative reuse of tradition, both in structure and in how the motifs and smaller details are recast."[735] The parables place spatiality at the forefront. In the first parable Enoch travels to heaven and to the various places of the natural phenomena. In the second, Enoch is shown the earthly locations "that will be the loci of eschatological punishment (52:1-56:4)."[736] Yet, the stress on the spatial is repeatedly mixed with an attention toward a somewhat suspended temporality. Thus, in Enoch's vision in chapter 39 he is taken "in those days" (verse 3) from the earth and placed at the ends of the earth by the dwelling place of the righteous (verses 3-4) and by the Elect One (verse 6) whose rule is yet to come. Even though it should be noted that the parables are generally thought to be a highly composite document, the reader encounters in the final text once again an astonishing temporal flexibility: the final judgement (51-

[733] Nickelsburg (2007), p. 23.
[734] Thus Nickelsburg (2007), p. 25, argues that the author "has drawn on and reshaped material from the Enochic Book of the Watchers (chaps. 1-36)." Knibb (2007), p. 49, writes that "Enoch's journey around the heavenly regions and the cosmos is effectively presented as a continuation of the journey described in the second half of the Book of the Watchers (chaps. 17-36). Thus the literary form of the Book of Parables continues that of the Book of the Watchers." Yet, Stuckenbruck (2007) states, p. 69: "No amount of dependence on the Book of Watchers should vitiate the likelihood that the author and the redactors – if they were active after the other compositions were in place – knew and were influenced by the Animal Apocalypse (85:1-90:42), the Epistle of Enoch (92:1-5; 94:1-105:2), the Apocalypse of Weeks (93:1-10; 91:12-17), the story of the birth of Noah (chaps. 106-107), and perhaps even the Exhortation about the Eschatological Judgement (chap. 108)."
[735] Stuckenbruck (2007), p. 66.
[736] Nickelsburg (2007), p. 31.

53) is presented together with the Flood (55), tied together, perhaps, by the description of the punishment of the fallen angels in 54.[737]

Comparing the depiction of space and spatial movement in the Book of the Watchers with that found in the Enochic Parables, Knibb notes that as opposed to the Book of the Watchers the Parables contain virtually no "explicit references (…) to Enoch moving from one place to another." He connects this to the Book of the Watchers having "a definite narrative thread" whereas "in the latter, or at least in the core material, there is little movement (in the literary sense), and the material consists of a series of descriptions of scenes that present essentially the same events and the same themes…"[738]

As mentioned above, the collapse of the temporal structures does not find a counterpart in Qohelet, except in the final vision of death in chapter 12. This poem may respond to elements of the apocalyptic thought-world in something of a polemic move. To Qohelet, the transgression of temporal boundaries happens only in death and leads to nothing but annihilation. It is hardly surprising, however, that we find in Qohelet no real counterpoint to this way of treating the problem of time. Qohelet vehemently opposes the idea that God would provide human beings with visions, just as he rejects the idea that real and

[737] See also chapters 50 and 51 which describe the final judgement in temporal terms, though with more of a chronological focus: "In those days, there will be a change for the holy and the righteous ones and the light of days shall rest upon them..:" (50:1) and "In those days, Sheol will return all the deposits which she had received" (51:1). "In those days, mountains shall dance like rams; and the hills shall leap like kids satiated with milk. (…) And the earth shall rejoice…" (51:4-5)

[738] Knibb, (2007), p. 50. One may also quote Venter (2007), p. 403, who argues that: "The spatial representations found in the text are much more exhaustive than the depiction of events. Visionary literature, as found in the Parables, is well-known for its portrayal of space to articulate the author's ideological point of view." In a foot-note on the same page, Venter notes the frequent references to the visionary aspect, expressed through terms of observing: seeing, being shown, my eyes saw and so on. Venter further argues, p. 408, that all three parables depict space in cosmic terns, and that "Characterization is (…) used above all to present the narrator's ideological space." Not much information is given about the appearance of the surroundings, conversely.

sufficient knowledge about temporal matters can be reached through more traditional wisdom practice. Furthermore, Qohelet is not interested in suspending chronology – his concern is simply with establishing the continuity which a (chronological) human history would provide, and here he fails. While there are no indications that Qohelet responds to apocalyptically inspired ideas in 3:14-15 when stating that God alone can transgress the temporal order, he does here indicate his belief that God is not limited to or by the temporal order as is humankind. What Qohelet would object to, however, is the notion that God would ever share his knowledge or temporal perspective with human beings.

**5. The Human Understanding of Time**

In the exegetical analysis of Qohelet, the relationship between the themes of knowledge and time was discussed in depth, and a few comments specifically on the exploration of this dual thematic in 1 Enoch may be useful too. A comparative survey of the theme of knowledge in Qohelet and 1 Enoch cannot but have connective threads to the ongoing scholarly discussion regarding the potential links between apocalypticism and the earlier biblical material, however. Initially, therefore, this more general discussion will be summarized briefly.

The assumption that the domestic roots of apocalypticism were to be found primarily in Israel's prophetic tradition was challenged initially by von Rad who suggested instead wisdom as a precursor to apocalyptic thought.[739] As summed up by Collins, "Von Rad's argument was based on the discontinuity he perceived between the apocalyptic view of

[739] Von Rad (1965), p. 306-308. One notes especially on p. 307: "Can we not interpret this interest in time and in the secrets of the future shown by the apocalyptic writers in the light of Wisdom teachings that everything has its time, and that it is the part of Wisdom to know about these times (Ecc. III. 1ff.)?"

history and that of the prophets, but he also noted the enormous erudition of Enoch and Daniel, the interest in nature exemplified in the 'Astronomical Book' of Enoch, and the fact that the putative apocalypticists were described as wise men and scribes."[740] However, Collins argues, von Rad failed to define his terms with enough care and therefore distinguished insufficiently between the different kinds of wisdom and apocalyptic material.[741] While von Rad's suggestion did not win over the majority of scholars, it did open up for an investigation of the connections between apocalypticism and other "genres" of biblical literature than prophecy. For instance, Müller has suggested that there may be links between apocalyptic literature and mantic wisdom.[742]

Nickelsburg revisits the possibility of there being close connections between wisdom and apocalyptic literature. While displaying some sympathy towards the idea, he does note that whereas wisdom tends to tie claims of revelation to traditional texts the apocalypticists believe that they present new revelation.[743]

In relation to the knowledge-claim of the apocalypticists I have a lot of sympathy with Lieb's conclusion that: "Visionary history is interpretative history: to attend to one is to

[740] Collins (1993), p. 167.
[741] Collins (1993), p. 167. He argues further on pp. 168-169: "To say that apocalypticism is an example of wisdom by revelation (…) or is influenced by mantic wisdom (…) does not imply any necessary connection between apocalypticism and the experiential wisdom of Proverbs. It is also necessary to distinguish between the literary forms of wisdom and a sapiential worldview…"
[742] Müller (1972), pp. 268-293.
[743] Nickelsburg (2006), p. 27. This may be a more apt description of traditional wisdom as found in Proverbs, for instance, than of wisdom's later trajectories. Admittedly, Qohelet builds on traditional wisdom assumptions, sometimes to challenge them, and considers that which he presents as wisdom about the world to be generally true. Yet, he remains very skeptical about basing one's search for wisdom on transmitted knowledge.

attend to the other."[744] One cannot escape the biblical origin of apocalypticism. Lieb assigns a particularly privileged position to the inaugural visionary experience of Ezekiel as model vision and "as part of a network of corresponding visionary reenactments that have their sources in a multiplicity of biblical texts, prophetic and nonprophetic alike."[745] Referring to Ezekiel's vision as *ma'aseh merkabah*, he notes that as "narrative, the apocalyptic dimension portrays the encounter with the Chariot through a reformulation of the biblical origin. The purpose of this reformulation is to transform the biblical original into a new text, one that embodies its own myth, its own story."[746] Similarly, I would argue that even when new knowledge is claimed on the basis of the visionary experience of the apocalyptic seer, the author would have expected his audience to recognize biblical echoes in both the form and genre of his text, and to consider the knowledge presented consistent with the biblical tradition. Perhaps this notion brings into focus the ties between apocalypticism and biblical prophecy more sharply than those between apocalypticism and wisdom. However, it is worth noting that in some cases, including the book of Qohelet, late wisdom literature is comfortable with questioning traditional wisdom *and* basing their criticisms on what is presented as the sage's own, new insights or his personal observations.

In a direct response to Nickelsburg's article, Tanzer notes the problematic surrounding the definition of wisdom literature, claiming that "wisdom literature as a literary genre has eluded identification." The diversity of the wisdom material which "has no single

[744] Lieb (1991), p. 352.
[745] Lieb (199), p. 42.
[746] Lieb (1991), p. 45.

large genre (such as an apocalypse)…" especially complicates matters. However, Tanzer also states that "genre definitions are scholarly constructs and limited."[747]

It is readily apparent that the Enochic corpus displays a keen interest in the theme of knowledge. Nickelsburg notes that within the apocalyptic material Enoch is especially "remarkable for its wisdom components." And further: "The heart of the opening oracle is an appeal to observe the created world (2:1-5:4). Much of the content of Enoch's journey is paralleled in wisdom texts like Job."[748] It is often suggested that the wisdom focus of 1 Enoch should be understood in connection with the eschatological interest of the authors. Nickelsburg is representative for this view when stating that "the message of 1 Enoch as a whole is related to the final judgment, and the revelatory form in which its knowledge is cast serves the purpose of underscoring the certainty of the judgment…"[749]

Both the apocalypticists and the book of Qohelet assign importance specifically to knowledge about *time*. While the apocalyptic literature occasionally appeals to the observable order of the world, unsurprisingly, most knowledge about temporal matters is presented through the seer's privileged vision.[750] For example, one may note 1 Enoch 91:1: "the spirit is poured over me so that I may show you everything that shall happen to

[747] Tanzer (2006), p. 41.
[748] Nickelsburg (2006), p. 24. In another article Nickelsburg (1999), p. 221, observes that "through the use of verbs like "see, hear, know" and "say, speak, tell, make known, show" the Enochic authors focus on the receipt, possession and transmission of knowledge."
[749] Nickelsburg (1999), p. 223. See also Collins (1998), p. 49, who states regarding the introduction to the Book of the Watchers: "Wisdom here is a gift that is given only through supernatural revelation. The attainment of such wisdom is a recurring goal of apocalyptic literature."
[750] For instance, Collins (1993), p. 173, notes about 1 Enoch 5 that "The natural wisdom does not finally determine the worldview. The most important wisdom imparted by Enoch is derived from what he has seen on the heavenly tablets and is shown by angels." Indeed, one of the differences between traditional (non-mantic) wisdom and apocalypticism may be the latter's appeal to privileged revelation for knowledge which the former would generally consider to be available via the sage's observation of the world and application of common sense.

you forever." In connection herewith attention should be drawn to the basic conceptual framework of the apocalypticists; that "the world is mysterious and revelation must be transmitted from a supernatural source" and that "human life is bounded in the present by the supernatural world of angels and demons and in the future by the inevitability of a final judgment."[751]

A few examples from the Animal Apocalypse may further demonstrate the emphasis on the visionary's privileged knowledge about time and history. Enoch is placed at a vantage point from which the whole scheme of history can be surveyed: "Those ones (…) seized me by my hand and took me from the generations of the earth, lifted me up into a high place… (One of them) said to me, 'Stay here until you see everything that will happen to those elephants, camels, and donkeys, as well as to the stars and to the bovids – all of them'" (87:3-4).

Throughout this Apocalypse the passing of time is described from the perspective of the visionary who watches history happen before his eyes: "Then I saw in a vision ravens flying above those lambs, and they seized one of those lambs; and then smashing the sheep, they ate them. I kept seeing till those lambs grew horns; but the ravens crushed their horns. Then I kept seeing till one great horn sprouted on one of those sheep, and he opened their eyes…" (90:8-9).

In Qohelet, by contrast, God actively *hinders* the human knowledge about time. The author of Qohelet does not consider an experiential approach to temporal matters to be

[751] Collins (1988), p. 8.

sufficient either, but his reasoning is very different: the human experience of time is presented as fundamentally untrustworthy, but without any real alternative. To Enoch, time is an elastic concept which can be distorted and changed, for instance through human sin.[752] The scepticism of Qohelet takes matters one step further, suggesting that it is in the realm of human cognition that the distortion takes place, divinely willed and wholly destructive.

In one of the late Enochic texts, the Parables of Enoch, the generations are tied together through the medium of knowledge being imparted to them, 37:2: "Listen, you first ones, and look, you last ones, the words of the Holy One, which I teach before the Lord of Spirits." And the author continues in 37:3: "It is good to declare these words to those of former times, but one should not withhold the beginning of wisdom from those of latter days."[753] While this viewpoint is consistent with the presentation in other parts of the Enochic material as well, Qohelet, by contrast, only ties together the human generations through a *negation* of knowledge: the isolation of the present generation from all past and future generations is emphasized. The only thing which connects human generations is their shared inability to establish continuity and inter-generational connections via any form of knowledge or memory.

[752] See for instance the Astronomical Book, 80:2, and the Book of Watchers 5:5, both of which were discussed above.

[753] Regarding the aspect of secrecy and priviliged revelation which dominates the Parables as well, Himmelfarb (1993), p. 81. notes: "The workings of the phenomena of nature, the very sights Enoch sees in the Book of the Watchers in his journey to the ends of the earth, are also secrets." Rather than connecting this to a general emphasis in apocalyptic literature on revealed knowledge – which is the aspect I would emphasise – Himmelfarb, p. 93-94, argues that in a manner fitting for "its pessimism about life in this world, the Similitudes of Enoch treats natural phenomena as secrets available only to the righteous at the eschaton rather than evidence of the creator available to all."

Finally, let us sum up the discussion of this chapter. As mentioned initially, I wished here to use the examination of time in Qohelet as a springboard to analyse the theme of time in other literature, contemporary with Qohelet. The book of 1 Enoch was singled out for the comparative analysis due to the prominence of the themes of time and knowledge in this work. I went on to argue that the perspective on time in the book of Enoch is much less one-dimensional than has often been assumed in scholarly treatments of apocalyptic literature. Two perspectives on the theme were surveyed and compared to what Qohelet establishes regarding time. I noted, firstly, the presentation of time as *chronology*. This view on time presents human history, as well as the natural order, as a whole which progresses according to the divine plan. In terms of the depiction of the natural order, a parallel to Qohelet can be established, as he makes cosmic stability the basis of his initial argument. However, 1 Enoch's corresponding establishment of a meaningful human history does not find an echo in Qohelet. Secondly, some Enochic authors present time as a *suspension of chronology*. This approach to time does not manifest in Qohelet either. Qohelet does not wish to suspend chronology. In addition, he fundamentally opposes the idea that God would provide human beings with visions to give them a privileged understanding of history and the temporal reality more broadly conceived.

# Conclusion

Chapter 1 of this thesis surveyed the state of scholarship on time in the Hebrew Bible on a general level and in the book of Qohelet specifically. The discussion focused on the alleged impossibility of expressing in biblical Hebrew the notion of abstract time or time as a general idea. In addition, the related, but more radical claim that the Hebrew Bible writers had no concept of time at all was presented and evaluated. It was argued that it is erroneous to assume a necessary connection between the lexical layout of a language and the mindset of the language speakers, including their conceptual capacity. In addition it was argued that scholarly evaluations of the Hebrew Bible writers' engagement with the theme of time must take into consideration other factors than the purely linguistic – including for instance genre considerations and literary conventions.

The Whorfian Hypothesis which posits a linguistic relativity in a manner not dissimilar to that found in the scholarship of the proponents of the lexical approach was also discussed. I agreed with the viewpoint of Jakobson that languages differ essentially in terms of what they must express, rather than what they may express. I also noted the useful distinction drawn by Lakoff between conceptualizing capacity and conceptualizing system. It was concluded that it is not possible, on linguistic grounds, to reject the possibility that some Hebrew Bible authors may have reflected on the theme of time. Similarly, it is not warranted to argue that because of certain, linguistic features of Hebrew, reflections on time must have been limited to depictions of time as a concrete, content-linked phenomenon. It was further emphasized that the book of Qohelet contains

exactly the sort of extended discussion of temporal themes which scholars often claim is absent from the Hebrew Bible. A final section in the first chapter surveyed scholarly contributions to the interpretation of the book of Qohelet which engage with the theme of time or related themes.

Chapter 2 surveyed issues of structure, composition, and date in the book of Qohelet, arguing in favour of reading the book as a literary unity – except for a few verses (1:1, 12:9-14, and possibly 7:27.) The contradictory character of the book was considered, along with its structural peculiarities. After defending the viewpoint that positing multiple layers in the book is not the best way of engaging with these compositional features, it was discussed whether the contradictions on the content-level of the book and the brokenness of its form may play a role in relation to the message of the book. Several possibilities were considered. Firstly, I argued in favour of approaching the structure of the book on a macro-level. Such an approach may allow the interpreter to investigate Qohelet's use of various genres, including the possibility that the author exploits the genre expectations of his reader, manipulating these as he moves from genre to genre. Engaging with the structure on the macro-level may also be useful in searching out key-features in Qohelet's repetitive and contradictory line of argumentation. Secondly, it was considered whether the problematic mode(s) of narration might mirror, to some extent, what is happening on the content-level of the book. For instance, the circuitous style of argumentation may reflect Qohelet's experience of structured time as something repetitive and cyclical – as well as his constant returnings to themes of investigation with which he can never successfully grapple. In connection with this specific issue it was

suggested too that the contradictory style of the work may in fact reinforce Qohelet's point that he is investigating elements of human existence which cannot really be comprehended by the human mind. When that which is in reality changeless and constant is examined through the lens of human, imperfect cognition, it suddenly appears mobile, ever-changing, and contradictory.

The second part of the chapter highlighted two compositional features which function to create for the reader a sense of unity in the work – namely the narrator presence and the interpretative wiggle-room afforded by the book's contradictions and broken structure which demand a creative effort on the part of the reader in order to translate into an ordered whole. However, given that this reader-participation is so necessary in the book of Qohelet, I acknowledged too that uncertainty must remain regarding the perceived unity and coherence of the work. The book may be more disparate than the reader experiences it.

Chapter 3 offered a close reading of the book's two framing poems, especially their presentation of the theme of time. This was an essential first part of my exegetical work because it is in the frame that Qohelet develops the basic understanding of time upon which he builds and to which he responds throughout his book. The framing poems reflect explicitly upon the cosmic, temporal structure, describing it as a reality of repetition and continuity. They consider too how the human experience of life in time fits within this temporal framework, focusing in particular on the tensions which exist between the cosmic, temporal reality and the life-experience of the individual.

The framing poems argue that there is no real human continuity in time to match that of the world. Rather, the individual's finite existence, linearly shaped, is on collision course with the cosmic temporal order. In particular, structured world time hinders human *cognition*. Human beings are not able to understand the temporal reality within which they live. Because of their temporally limited existence, individual human beings cannot participate in the continuous repetitions which characterize world time. The temporal world may be characterized by continuity, but the individual human being lacks the ability to relate meaningfully to both past and future. Qohelet argues that the sensory experiences of the individual are not enough to secure points of orientation in this temporal situation. Rather, the temporal set-up of the world renders human impressions insufficient and potentially untrustworthy.

An excursus engaged with the Leitmotif of the book, הבל, and whether this word is best understood as a metaphor or not. It was argued that a metaphorical understanding is necessary in order to retain the multivalence of the word as it is used in Qohelet. Imagery connected to the sun, and to light more broadly, was also considered in this context. It was argued that Qohelet uses imagery related to the semantic sphere of breath/wind, as well as the semantic sphere of light to describe both the constant, natural phenomena and the ephemeral human existence. This usage echoes and reinforces the dichotomy established in the framing poems regarding cyclical, repetitious world time and linear, ephemeral human life.

In chapter 4 the present in Qohelet was discussed. I took my starting point in the scholarly discussion of whether or not the present moment, as understood by Qohelet, provides sufficient meaning and joy. Here I argued that Qohelet's thinking on this dimension of time is best approached by keeping in mind the book's wider discourse on time. Examining Qohelet's characterization of the present, I noted that this dimension of time is depicted as having a degree of extension, large enough to encompass human activity and thinking. Sometimes Qohelet even seems to view the entire current generation of humanity under the heading of some form of present.

Turning to in-depth analyses of specific texts, I approached the poem in 3:2-8. The schematic presentation of events and activities in this poem provides an interpretative framework through which the times of the individual's life can be understood and rendered meaningful despite their impermanence. This framework, consisting of a temporal scheme which orders the individual's life meaningfully in the present, is rejected by the author, however – much like he rejected too the suggestion made implicitly in 1:4-7 that there might be a wider, human continuity in history to match that of the cosmos. Especially 3:11 shows why Qohelet is unable to accept the framework offered in 3:2-8: the establishment of this kind of scheme radically exceeds the human ability to understand and decode their temporal conditions. Accordingly, Qohelet's evaluation of the poem's framework from 3:9 onwards is primarily focused on our cognitive challenges.

I noted that the issue of human non-understanding of time is raised not only in relation to the future, as it is often assumed. Rather, Qohelet makes the radical claim that human beings do not understand their present or their past either. 3:1-15 illustrates this well: here Qohelet describes the human experience of alternating times as preventing them from establishing any reliable patterns of expectations towards time – even when it comes to the present moment and their own every-day existence. The divinity's responsibility for this state of affairs is emphasized strongly by Qohelet. Finally, chapter 4 also surveyed a few verses which are representative for Qohelet's engagement with human, present society in the light of temporal reality (4:1-3 and 5:7).

Chapter 5 of the thesis discussed the relationship between the present and the wider temporal horizons of past and future. Qohelet emphasises that life in the present is lived within the constraints of the cosmic order: the present must be understood in relation to the temporal framework of past and future, and its relationship to these temporal dimensions strongly affects the possibilities of establishing a meaningful existence in the now. Furthermore, humanity's inability to properly understand this wider temporal framework, and indeed the entire temporal dimension of their existence, also bears greatly upon their ability to engage with their life-conditions in the present.

Past and future are almost entirely lost from view in Qohelet's depiction of the human life-experience. As a consequence, these temporal horizons are described mainly by what they are *not* or how they are *not* comprehended by the human mind. Qohelet only establishes *negatively* a wider temporal scheme which reaches beyond the reality of the

extended, present moment in which we live and act. Accordingly, an analysis of the conception of past and future in the book has to unpack the author's highly indirect depiction of these temporal realms. The dichotomy between our ignorance about our temporal conditions and our attempts nonetheless to gain knowledge about these conditions occupies a centre-stage position in the framework of Qohelet's thinking on time.

Chapter 5 also looked in detail at three passages which particularly thematize the relationship between present and past/future. Firstly, I examined 6:1-6. I argued that, while this passage contributes to the development of Qohelet's thinking on joy and its worth, it also serves another purpose: it shows that the present cannot be discussed in isolation from the wider temporal horizons. Especially the last half of the passage suggests that the (ever insufficient) joy in the present cannot diminish the virulence of passing time, and that ultimate oblivion negates all apparent life-benefits. In this manner, verses 6:1-6 function as a summary of Qohelet's basic complaint regarding the human condition.

The passage in 8:1-9 discusses initially the sensible conduct before earthly rulers (8:2-5). Qohelet states that the wise man can act appropriately, because of his understanding of time and judgement. However, after considering the temporal reality of humanity and especially our ability to orientate ourselves in time, Qohelet offers an evaluation of the human cognitive capacity which opposes his initial statement. He deems it impossible to act wisely, even in the present, because of the limitations imposed on humanity by their

inability to understand the wider horizons of time. After having interlocked notions of human and divine rule – and demonstrated how dependent upon the temporal reality our actions are, even within the sphere of earthly power – Qohelet now claims that every relationship of power within the human sphere is problematic. The final passage to be considered in detail was 9:1-12. One of the most remarkable things about this passage is its examination of temporal reality and human engagement therewith almost exclusively from the perspective of mortality. This specific focus reinforces Qohelet's claims regarding the unknowable character of past and future. It also allows him to state with added force that the loss of the wider temporal realities renders problematic and potentially without value the human life in the present.

Chapter 6 discussed specifically what happens to Qohelet's presentation of the wider, temporal horizons when he makes use of a narrative form. The three stories in 1:12-2:20, 3:13-16, and 9:13-15 were considered. It was suggested that even though their respective plots at an initial glance may seem quite different from each other, Qohelet's three stories all attempt a narrative representation of part of our existence's temporal dimension.

An initial, general discussion of *narrative form* suggested that time is an important foundational feature of narrative on the basic level of establishing the story. It was noted that to an extent the narrative form supports Qohelet's philosophical undertaking as it offers a narrator-figure as a constant; somebody to whom the reader can relate, as well as a unifying presence that promises some level of coherence in the book. However, I also suggested that the narrative form in itself might challenge Qohelet. I argued that Qohelet

seems to have imported his worries regarding the inaccessibility of time into his stories. Thus, the stories come to play a central role in his demonstration of the problematic character of the temporal reality.

In my discussion of the royal fiction I asked three questions to clarify problematic features in the story. Firstly, I noted the anonymity of the narrator and protagonist-figure. I argued that the king's namelessness strengthens Qohelet's conclusion in 2:12ff about ultimate oblivion, creating an insurmountable distance between the reader and this unknown, past authority. I noted that this fitted well with the claim in 1:10-11 that the past is inaccessible. However, I also noted that the author's attempt to tell a story from the perspective of the past created a tension with this, Qohelet's first conclusion regarding the temporal order. This observation suggested an answer to my second question which was why the royal fiction does not introduce the book. I argued that Qohelet may use the royal fiction both to challenge his initial conclusion and to exemplify it further. In addition, the launch into narrative form allows the author to personalize the conclusion which he drew in the initial poem: it is not only through that which he does, but also through his very identity that the king challenges the view on temporal reality in 1:4-11. Finally, I engaged with the odd non-conclusion of the royal fiction and its lack of a clearly demarcated end. It was suggested that these compositional features make sense if Qohelet is indeed telling a story that tries in vain to overcome limitations in relation to our temporal existence. Qohelet's "narrative rebellion" then becomes an illustration of the very constraints against which he wishes to rebel: he tells a story which heads nowhere except towards its inevitable end – namely a restatement of

the reality of oblivion. The two shorter fictions were considered next, 4:13-16 and 9:13-15. I noted that all three stories prove to be non-telic. They conclude in an unexpected matter that does not seem to finish their story-line in any real way. Because the conclusions emphasise only the non-existence of remembrance, regarding both the characters themselves and their work, they actively undermine the points made during the course of the narratives.

Chapter 6 thus concluded my exegetical analysis of the book of Qohelet, bringing together essentials of Qohelet's time conception. On the basis of my analysis of the theme of time in Qohelet, chapter 7 presented a comparative analysis, engaging with one particular work roughly contemporary with Qohelet, namely the early layers of 1 Enoch. I singled out Enoch for my comparative analysis due to the prominence of the themes of time and knowledge in this work. I went on to argue that the perspective on time in the book of Enoch is less one-dimensional than has often been assumed in scholarly treatments of apocalyptic literature. The interest in temporal matters is much broader than simple speculation about the eschaton, as Rowland among others has convincingly shown. Rather, several perspectives on time and strategies for using the time thematic co-exist in the book.

I surveyed two such perspectives, comparing them to what Qohelet establishes regarding time. Firstly, I examined the Enochic interest in chronology, both as it appears in the historical apocalypses and in the cosmological sections. Approaching time as chronology allows the authors of 1 Enoch to present it as whole which progresses according to the

divine plan. The present existence of author and reader thus fit into a meaningful whole, both in terms of human history and in terms of the wider cosmic reality. I noted that Qohelet too has made the cosmic, temporal stability the basis of his initial argument. Qohelet argues that it is the divinely established order which is to blame for human suffering. Thus, his conclusions differ substantially from those of the Enochic authors who single out human sinfulness as the cause of tension between world order and human existence. The successful establishment of a meaningful human history in Enoch does not find an echo in Qohelet. In Qohelet, continuity, including in the form of history, is almost exclusively established negatively, by stating its impossibility.

Secondly, some Enochic authors present time as it contracts to one, all-important moment. I suggested that this is done as part of the literary strategy to convey the visionary experience of the seer. Furthermore, this approach to time may also function to demonstrate forcefully the absolute cohesion of events in human and divine history. This approach to time does not manifest in Qohelet. The author of this literary work opposes the notion that God is interested in providing human beings with visions, just as he rejects the idea traditional wisdom practice can secure real and sufficient knowledge about temporal matters. In addition to this, Qohelet does not want to suspend chronology. Rather, he wishes to establish the continuity which a (chronological) human history would provide. As has been shown, this is an ambition which must fail within the temporal framework of Qohelet. I suggested, however, that a form of temporal collapse happens in the final poem, 12:1-7, although it aims to accomplish something very different than the Enochic temporal collapse: Qohelet's temporal scheme does not

collapse into one, visionary moment, pregnant with meaning and existential significance. Rather, the temporal reality as experienced by the human being crumbles into nothingness and breaks in the moment of death.

Viewed as a whole, this thesis has shown that an in-depth understanding of Qohelet's discourse on time provides us with an invaluable lens for engaging with the book. It has been seen that Qohelet offers a coherent thesis regarding the temporal reality of both world and human being – including the human experience of this reality. It has been demonstrated that the human inability to understand and respond meaningfully to their temporal conditions occupies a centre-stage position in Qohelet's thinking on time. He challenges traditional assumptions regarding human access to the wider temporal horizons, arguing not only that past and future are fundamentally inaccessible to the human mind, but also that the loss of these temporal dimensions undermines the establishment of a meaningful existence in the present.

As I have argued repeatedly during the course of the thesis, Qohelet's discussion of time assists in providing a level of coherence in the book and renders meaningful some of the passages which seem otherwise obscure or contradictory. In addition, the time-discourse provides a springboard for engaging with other key themes of the work as well. For instance, I suggest that future work on Qohelet could fruitfully investigate the book's depiction of the societal structure and order through the lens of Qohelet's discourse on time. Finally, the theme of time creates an exciting departure point for a comparative dialogue between Qohelet and other contemporary, textual traditions. 1 Enoch is not the

only interesting candidate for such a comparison. Rather, an in-depth understanding of Qohelet's thinking on time may allow us to approach this theme in several other works which privilege this theme too. The book of Jubilees, Ben Sira, and such Qumranic material as the thanksgiving hymns would be obvious contenders for such an analysis.

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