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A TIME FOR JOY
A Study of the Themes of Time and Joy
in the Book of Qoheleth

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABBREVIATIONS	5
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION.....	7
I. Object of Study and Hypothesis	10
II. State of the Question and Relevance of Research	12
II.1. The Theme of Time in the Book of Qoheleth.....	12
II.2. The Theme of Joy in the Book of Qoheleth.....	15
II.3. Time and Joy: Two Intertwining Themes in Qoheleth	19
II.4. Time and Joy seen through a Theological Lens.....	19
III. Methodology	20
IV. Outline of the Dissertation	22
CHAPTER II: THE DIVINE GIFT OF TIME QOHELETH 2:24 – 3:15.....	25
0. Introduction	25
I. Delimitations.....	25
II. Discussion of its Context within the Book of Qoheleth	26
II.1. The Questions of Purpose	27
II.2. The Parody of the King.....	28
II.3. The Root שמח.....	30
II.4. The Root הביל.....	33
III. Our Text: Qoheleth 2:24 – 3:15	36
III.1. Qoheleth 2:24–26 First text on Joy.....	36
III.1.1. Qoheleth 2:24	38
III.1.2. Qoheleth 2:25	39
III.1.3. Qoheleth 2:26	40
III.2. What God Gives to One Good in his Sight: Wisdom, Knowledge, and Joy	41
III.3. The “task” God Gives to the Sinner	44
III.4. Qoheleth 2:24-26 as Transition between Joy and Time	46
IV. Qoheleth 3:1–8 Poem on Time	48
IV.1. Qoheleth 3:1 Opening Line	48
IV.2. The Word עת as “Proper Time”.....	51
IV.3. Qoheleth 3:2–8	52
IV.4. Time as Gift and Opportunity	56
IV.5. The Times of Qoh 3:2–8 and the Concept of Permanence.....	59
IV.5.1. The Meaning of the Word עולם	62
IV.6. Terms Omitted from the Catalogue of Times	64
IV.7. Qoheleth 3:9 Transitional Question	66
IV.7.1. The Meaning of יתרוק in Qoheleth	66
IV.7.2. The Role of the Question of Purpose after the Poem on Time	69
V. Qoheleth 3:10-15 Theological Commentary on Time	69
V.1. Qoheleth 3 vv. 10–11 and vv. 14–15.....	71
V.2. Qoheleth 3:10–11.....	71
V.3. Qoheleth 3:14–15.....	76
V.3.1. Fearing God or rather “Revering” God	80
V.4. Qoheleth 3:12–13 Second Text on Joy.....	82
V.5. Relationship between Genesis 1–2 and Qoheleth 3:10–15.....	83
V.6. Qoheleth 3:10–15 Conclusions on the Theological Commentary	85

VI. Conclusions on Time and Joy	89
CHAPTER III: FLEETING AND PRECIOUS JOY – EXPERIENCING GOD’S TOUCH	
QOHELETH 5:17–19	91
0. Introduction	91
I. Delimitations.....	91
II. Composition and Unity of 5:17–19 within the Context of Qoh 5 and 6	92
III. The Text Qoheleth 5:17–19.....	95
III.1. Qoheleth 5:17	96
III.2. Qoheleth 5:18	100
III.3. Qoheleth 5:19	101
IV. The Hebrew Root טלש and God’s Gift of Empowerment.....	103
IV.1. The Mirror Passages 5:17–19 and 6:1–2.....	105
IV.2. טלש’s Insights into 5:17–19 and the Interpretation of מענה in 5:19.....	106
IV.3. Conclusions regarding טלש in Qoheleth 5:17–19.....	110
V. Insights into 5:17–19 from the Larger Context of Qoh 5 and 6.....	112
V.1. The Absence of עלם in Qoh 5:17–19	114
VI. Links between Qoh 5:17–19 and 3:10–15	117
VII. Understanding Work in its Relationship with Joy	118
VIII. Implications from the Context of Qoh 5:17–19	121
VIII.1. Human Work and Creation.....	122
VIII.2. Revering God and Wisdom	123
VIII.3. Time and Joy.....	125
CHAPTER IV: THE COMMAND TO JOY, AS TIME REACHES ITS FULFILLMENT IN	
DEATH QOHELETH 8:15 – 9:12	127
0. Introduction	127
I. Delimitations.....	127
II. Discussion of its Context.....	128
III. Qoheleth 8:15 Praise to Joy.....	129
IV. Qoheleth 8:16–17 The human being cannot know God’s work	132
V. Qoheleth 9:1–12	135
V.1. Qoheleth 9:1–6 There is one fate for all	136
V.1.1. Qoheleth 9:1	137
V.1.2. Qoheleth 9:2	139
V.1.3. Qoheleth 9:3	141
V.1.4. Qoheleth 9:4–6	141
V.2. Qoheleth 9:7–10 Knowing that the end is death – Live joyfully!	143
V.2.1. Qoheleth 9:7	144
V.2.2. Qoheleth 9:8	146
V.2.3. Qoheleth 9:9	147
V.2.4. Qoheleth 9:10	148
V.3. Qoheleth 9:11–12.....	150
VI. Conclusions.....	152
VI.1. Transience, Death, and Joy.....	155
VI.2. The Relationship between Qoheleth’s critique of a Retributive God, Revering God and Joy.....	159
VI.3. The Justice of God.....	164

CHAPTER V: JOY AND TIME – THE FOUNDATIONS OF A NEW CREATION	
QOHELETH 11:7 – 12:8.....	165
0. Introduction.....	165
I. Delimitations.....	166
II. Discussion of its Context and Structures.....	166
II.1. Structure Placing God in the Center.....	168
II.2. Structure Placing Joy in the Center.....	170
II.3. Evaluation of the Two Structures.....	172
III. Qoheleth 11:7–10 Joy text.....	173
III.1. Qoheleth 11:7–8.....	174
III.2. Qoheleth 11:9–10.....	176
III.3. The Final Joy Text in Comparison to the Previous Ones.....	179
IV. Qoheleth 12:1–7.....	180
IV.1. Qoheleth 12:1.....	182
IV.2. Qoheleth 12:2.....	185
IV.3. Qoheleth 12:3.....	185
IV.4. Qoheleth 12:4.....	186
IV.5. Qoheleth 12:5.....	187
IV.6. Qoheleth 12:6.....	189
IV.7. Qoheleth 12:7.....	190
IV.8. Qoheleth 12:1–7 as it relates to the opening poem 1:3–11.....	192
V. Qoheleth 12:8.....	194
VI. The Creator God in Qoheleth 11:7 – 12:8.....	195
VI.1. The word רוּח.....	196
VI.2. רוּח in Qoheleth.....	197
VI.3. The Creator God – A God of Justice.....	198
VI.4. Remember your Creator.....	199
VII. Conclusions: The Twilight of Life.....	200
VII.1. The Image of God, Revering God, and Joy.....	204
VII.2. The Themes of Time and Joy.....	205
CHAPTER VI: QOHELETH SEEN THROUGH TIME AND JOY.....	207
0. The Beginning of the End.....	207
I. An Overview of the Rest of Qoheleth.....	208
I.1. Qoheleth 4.....	209
I.1.1. Qoheleth 4:1–8.....	210
I.1.2. Qoheleth 4:9–12.....	212
I.1.3. Qoheleth 4:13–16.....	213
I.2. Qoheleth 7 – 8:14.....	213
I.2.1. Qoheleth 7:1–14.....	214
I.2.2. Qoheleth 7:15–29.....	215
I.2.3. Qoheleth 8:1–14.....	219
I.3. Qoheleth 9:13 – 10:20.....	222
I.3.1. Qoheleth 9:13 – 10:3.....	223
I.3.2. Qoheleth 10:4–20.....	223
II. The Three Poems.....	226
II.1. The Poem on Time 3:1–8 and the Final Poem 12:1–8.....	226
II.2. All Three Poems.....	227
III. Time as it Passes.....	229
III.1. The Present is the Window to God.....	230

III.2. Time Runs Towards Death	230
III.3. The Parallel between “the dead” and “joy”	232
IV. The Theme of Joy	232
IV.1. The Joy Texts	233
IV.2. The Role of Joy	237
IV.2.1. The Joy Texts as a Response to the Question of Purpose	237
IV.2.2. The Joy Texts as a Response to <i>Hebel</i>	240
IV.2.3. The Final Joy Texts and Wisdom	243
IV.3. The Superiority of Joy over Time from a Theological Perspective	244
V. Act-Consequence – Revering God – Joy	246
V.1. The Texts That Mention or Critique the Act-Consequence Principle	246
V.1.1. Qoheleth 2:14–16. 26	246
V.1.2. Qoheleth 3:16–21	247
V.1.3. Qoheleth 7:15–20. 26	248
V.1.4. Qoheleth 8:10–14	250
V.1.5. Qoheleth 9:1–6	251
V.1.6. Qoheleth 11:9	251
V.2. Act-Consequence and Joy	251
V.3. Coming Full Circle from Revering God to Joy	252
VI. Turning away from Pessimism	254
VII. Qoheleth’s Theology and Final Remarks on Joy and Time	257
BIBLIOGRAPHY	259

ABBREVIATIONS

The primary reference for the abbreviations is the *Society of Biblical Literature Handbook of Style*. 2nd ed. Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014. The works not listed in the *SBL Handbook of Style* follow Siegfried M. Schwertner, *Internationales Abkürzungsverzeichnis für Theologie und Grenzgebiete / International Glossary of Abbreviations for Theology and Related Subjects*, 3rd ed. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2014).

AB	Anchor Bible
ABiG	Arbeiten zur Bibel und ihrer Geschichte
ABR	<i>Australian Biblical Review</i>
AJBI	<i>Annual of the Japanese Biblical Institute</i>
ANETS	Ancient Near Eastern Texts and Studies
ASTS	The Art Scroll Tanach Series
Aug	<i>Augustinianum</i>
BBR	Bibliographies for Biblical Research
BDB	Brown, Francis, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs. <i>A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament</i>
BHS	<i>Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia</i> . Edited by Karl Elliger and Wilhelm Rudolph. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1983
BHQ	<i>Biblia Hebraica Quinta: Megilloth: Ruth, Canticles, Qoheleth, Lamentations, Esther</i> . Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1971
Bib	<i>Biblica</i>
BN	<i>Biblische Notizen</i>
BR	<i>Biblical Research</i>
BSac	<i>Bibliotheca sacra</i>
BTB	<i>Biblical Theology Bulletin</i>
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
DCH	<i>Dictionary of Classical Hebrew</i> . Edited by David J. A. Clines. 9 vols. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 1993-2014
DJD	Discoveries in the Judaean Desert
ECarm	<i>Ephemerides Carmeliticae</i>
EstBib	<i>Estudios bíblicos</i>
ETL	<i>Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses</i>
EvQ	<i>Evangelical Quarterly</i>
EvT	<i>Evangelische Theologie</i>
HistTh	<i>History and Theory</i>
HKAT	Handkommentar zum Alten Testament
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
HUCA	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
Int	<i>Interpretation</i>
ITQ	<i>Irish Theological Quarterly</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JNES	<i>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</i>
JNSL	<i>Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages</i>
JSJS	Journal for the Study of Judaism Supplements

<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
<i>JSS</i>	<i>Journal of Semitic Studies</i>
<i>JTS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
LD	Lectio Divina
NAB	New American Bible
<i>NIDOTTE</i>	<i>New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis.</i> Edited by Willem A. VanGemeren. 5 vols. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997
OLA	Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta
<i>OtSt</i>	<i>Oudtestamentische Studien</i>
<i>RB</i>	<i>Revue Biblique</i>
<i>ResQ</i>	<i>Restoration Quarterly</i>
<i>RivB</i>	<i>Rivista biblica italiana</i>
<i>RTL</i>	<i>Revue théologique de Louvain</i>
<i>Salm</i>	<i>Salmanticensis</i>
SBL	Society of Biblical Literature
SBT	Studies in Biblical Theology
<i>Sef</i>	<i>Sefarad</i>
<i>SR</i>	<i>Studies in Religion</i>
<i>StMiss</i>	<i>Studia Missionalia</i>
<i>TDOT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament.</i> Edited by G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren. Translated by John T. Willis et al. 8 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974-2006
<i>TLOT</i>	<i>Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament.</i> Edited by Ernst Jenni, with assistance from Claus Westermann. Translated by Mark E. Biddle. 3 vols. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997
<i>TZ</i>	<i>Theologische Zeitschrift</i>
<i>VT</i>	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
VTSup	Supplements to Vetus Testamentum
WBC	World Biblical Commentary
<i>ZAW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
<i>ZTK</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche</i>

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

*“What then is time?
 Now what about...past and future:
 in what sense do they have real being,
 if the past no longer exists and the future does not yet exist?
 As for present time,
 if that were always present and never slipped away into the past,
 it would not be time at all
 it would be eternity.”*

~ St. Augustine, *Confessions*, Book XI 17

Time is a mystery that the human being has not been able to solve, despite the millions of years of human existence. There is a constant fascination with time, one’s capacity to gain it, lose it, or take hold of it. Today’s western society with its array of inventions, new technology, and increasing advancement seems determined to *control* time in some way or another; as if by finally controlling or possessing time one will find longed-for happiness. Yet, we will continually discover, as did those who have come before us that time is elusive and will slip through our fingers, as sand does through an hourglass; the second we think we have finally grasped hold of it, it escapes. Perhaps we have more to learn from the societies and cultures that have another notion of time, who do not measure it down to the last millisecond, and yet, who seem better able to enjoy life. Nevertheless, this is not a call for all of us to pack up and move to some lost village of a tribal culture, but perhaps to discover in our own bustling and ever-moving city or hub, another way of living in time. For this, the Scripture comes to our aid, constantly inviting us to discover and re-discover God in our own human lives, and in this particular lesson on living in “time,” the sage, Qoheleth has much to teach us.

The book of Qoheleth is a tangible proof of the diversity of “thought-structures” and “theologies” in the Hebrew Scriptures. As one of the later books¹ belonging to the collection

¹ The existence of two Persian loanwords פְּרִדָּס in 2:5 and פְּתִינָם in 8:11 suggests a date no earlier than 450 B.C., since there are no Persian loanwords attested prior to 500 B.C., and furthermore they are all found in texts postdating the second major wave of returnees in the second half of the fifth century. In addition, the frequent use of Aramaisms also points to the post-exilic period when Aramaic became the common language in the Levant used in commerce and administration. Hugo Grotius first argued in the seventeenth century that the language of Qoheleth points to a date long after Solomon. Exegetes, throughout the centuries, from Zierkel to Braun to Lohfink, have regarded Hellenism as the principal source of Qoheleth’s inspiration and the clearest point of encounter with Greek philosophy in the Bible. Gregor Zierkel, *Untersuchungen über den Prediger: nebst kritischen und philologischen Bemerkungen* (Würzburg: Stahel, 1792); Rainer Braun, *Kohelet und die fruhhellenistische Popular-philosophie* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1973); Norbert Lohfink, *Qoheleth* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 26. “If the paleographical dating is accurate, 4QQoh^a provides a terminus ad quem for the book’s composition in about 175 – 150 BCE; 4QQoh^a is somewhat later.” E. Ulrich, *Qumran cave 4. XI, Psalms to Chronicles*, DJD 16 (Oxford: Clarendon, 2000), 221-27; Philip S. Alexander and Stephen Pfann, *Qumran cave 4. XXVI Miscellanea, Part 1*, DJD 36 (Oxford: Clarendon, 2000), XXIX. Therefore, following

of Wisdom literature, it departs from traditional thought in numerous ways and opens yet another, rich and insightful vision of the human being, his/her search for the meaning and purpose of life and his/her relationship with God. As is the case of the other wisdom books, such as Proverbs, Job and Wisdom, there is no explicit mention of the salvation history of the people of Israel central to the rest of the Old Testament literature. Instead, Qoheleth opens a new space of reflection and faith focusing on the present life and our way of approaching it and living it. This does not necessarily mean that Qoheleth is devoid of a sense of history, so vital to the Israelite faith; it is just not in the foreground.² For this reason, Qoheleth never ceases to be actual for those who seek to understand and live with depth their existence on this earth, “under the sun.” Though we can be sure that in agreement with the rest of the ancient Hebrew world, Qoheleth has no specific belief in the afterlife,³ there are hints that this present life is more than just sleeping, waking, eating, working and dying. The existential questions that our Sage repeatedly asks throughout his treatise, questions of purpose and profit, questions of divine retribution and justice, betray a deeper sensitivity to the meaning of human life, pointing to something more than temporal life-existence, but intimating a depth to life. For example, the question: “what advantage does the human being have in all the work done under the sun”⁴ (Qoh 1:3), is a timeless one that human beings have asked themselves for centuries and which they shall continue to ask in ages to come. If human beings are unable to take hold of and possess the transcendent, then they turn within by nurturing immanence and undeniably seeking the divine dimension there. Since the human being cannot understand his/her relationship to God in an abstract existence, then the terrestrial dimension of human reality must be the starting point to this divine search. Therefore, in order to venture deeper, one must begin with the lived experience at the surface. The surface of the waters, at times transparent and at others murky, may reveal or conceal what lies beneath, but the starting point is the same, and in our human lived-experience the common condition by which we are all limited is *time*. When one finds meaning and purpose in one’s limited and transient temporal existence, then one is enabled to find joy and, if only for a moment, the limits of time seem to vanish.

the majority of modern scholars: Crenshaw, Lohfink, Mazzinoghi, Murphy, Schwienhorst-Schönberger, and Vilchez, we conclude that Qoheleth may be dated to the Ptolemaic period in the second half of the third century BCE, with the exception of C. L. Seow who dates it to the earlier Persian period. Choon Leong Seow, "Linguistic Evidence and the Dating of Qoheleth," *JBL* 115, no. 4 (1996): 643-66. For a thorough summary of the different arguments on dating the book of Qoheleth, see: Jean-Jacques Lavoie, "Où en sont les études sur le livre de Qohélet (2012-2018)?," *SR* 48, no. 1 (2019): 40-76.

² For a recent study defending the idea that Qoheleth is embedded in the historical consciousness of Israel, see J. Jennifer Barbour, *The Story of Israel in the Book of Qoheleth: Ecclesiastes as Cultural Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

³ With the conquest of Israel by Alexander the Great in 332 BCE, the Hellenization of the Jewish people began, a process that culminated about 169 BCE under Antiochus. Jewish thought absorbed many Greek theological beliefs, including the one that all people would not be treated equally at death. Some would be rewarded while others were punished. These beliefs are reflected in later books such as: Daniel, Wisdom, and 2 Maccabees.

⁴ New American Bible translation (the 2011 Revised Edition). From now on, unless I indicate that it is my translation, I will use the New American translation throughout this thesis.

The desire for happiness or joy is in fact what orders and directs the human being in his/her search for meaning in this lifetime. Aquinas, following Augustine, would say that it is the last end of the human being.⁵ Qoheleth recognizes that joy belongs to the order established and desired by God, which is why we cannot speak of Qoheleth as an epicurean or hedonist.⁶ Apparently, the Jewish people recognized this emphasis in Qoheleth, which is why they chose it out of all the canonical books of the Hebrew Scriptures to celebrate the liturgy of one of the most joyful feasts of their religious calendar: the feast of the Tents.⁷ This feast remembers Israel's deliverance from Egypt and their subsequent wandering in the wilderness for forty years. The people of Israel lived in tents during this time and worshiped at the Tabernacle, which was also a tent. To commemorate this time the Jews build small tabernacles or booths with walls of plaited branches and thatched roofs as God instructed in Leviticus 23:42. Today the *sekhakh* (booth) is still constructed. It must be made of something that grew from the ground and was cut off, such as tree branches, corn stalks, bamboo reeds, sticks, or two-by-fours and constructed so it will not blow away in the wind. Interestingly this feast accentuates the temporality of a nomadic life that is constantly on the move. It also touches the fragility of life, which can so easily blow away in the wind; nevertheless, these tents are built in such a way as to not blow away. That is why together with this emphasis on joy, in the book of Qoheleth, is the continually accentuated fact that life is fragile, precarious and fleeting הבל (*hebel*). This dimension of passing time coupled with joy makes Qoheleth someone who proclaims with realism the bitter-sweet taste of life. Joy is therefore one of the most frequently mentioned themes of Qoheleth in relation to human existence and according to a handful of scholars, it is key to understanding the book and its message.⁸

⁵ "All human beings have the same nature, that is, the same human essence equipped for normal human operations. Therefore, all men have the same last end, the same ultimate goal. This last end is complete and enduring satisfaction or fulfillment; such fulfillment is called *beatitudo* or happiness." Saint Thomas Aquinas, Brian Leftow, and Brian Davies, *Summa Theologiae* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), Ia, IIae, 1.

⁶ On numerous occasions Qoheleth describes joy as a gift that comes from God. Most specifically in Qoh 2:24; 2:26; 3:13; 5:17,18.

⁷ Robert Gordis, *Koheleth, The Man and his World: A Study of Ecclesiastes* (New York: Schocken, 1973), 131.

⁸ Some examples include: Gordis, *Koheleth*, 131; Roger Norman Whybray, "Qoheleth, Preacher of Joy," *JSOT* 23, no. 7 (1982): 87-98; Norbert Lohfink, "Qoheleth 5:17-19 - Revelation by Joy," *CBQ* 52, no. 4 (1990): 625-35; Ludger Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Nicht im Menschen gründet das Glück (Koh 2,24): Kohelet im Spannungsfeld jüdischer Weisheit und hellenistischer Philosophie* (Freiburg: Herder, 1994); Theodore Anthony Perry, *The Book of Ecclesiastes (Qohelet) and the Path to Joyous Living* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). The fact that joy was a fundamental theme of Qoheleth was clearly recognized by Jewish religious authorities who consequently justified the tradition of reading Qoheleth in the synagogue during the feast of *Sukkot*. This feast remembers the huts Israel lived in during their 40-year sojourn in the desert after the exodus from Egypt and it is a joyful festival.

I. OBJECT OF STUDY AND HYPOTHESIS

The Book of Qoheleth has long perplexed scholars and has provided for a multiplicity of interpretations and understandings. Most scholars generally recognize two extremes: while Qoheleth is constantly repeating that “everything is *hebel*,” often translated as vanity or futility, he also repeatedly emphasizes joy and has even been called a “preacher of joy.” These two elements, that of הבל and that of joy are both clearly fundamental to Qoheleth’s thought, but is it possible to reconcile them? The way one understands the role of the human experience of joy in the book of Qoheleth is dependent on how one interprets the word הבל. The traditional interpretation as “vanity” gives הבל a pejorative sense. However, the word הבל, literally meaning “breath” or “vapor,” instead of being something negative or positive, is more of a neutral term.⁹ For Qoheleth it is deeply linked with the element of the ephemerality of human life and inevitable death, both elements which point to the theme of “time.” While joy is a concept quite different to that of time and is not directly “temporal,” it is interesting to note that the verses and passages that do speak of joy in Qoheleth almost always have a direct connection with time. A comprehensive study that analyses the role and reciprocal relationship of these two themes recurring in Qoheleth’s reflections has never been attempted.¹⁰ Our goal is therefore to establish the connection that exists between time and joy, two fundamental themes in the book of Qoheleth.

As many other scholars have recognized, death is indirectly alluded to throughout the entire book of Qoheleth by means of his talk of the fleeting nature of life and its counted days. This limitation is another way of speaking of death. I, however, have chosen to focus on the relationship of joy with time and in this way, we confront death but within the larger context of life. The focal point is not on the limitation of time or its ending, but on time itself which takes the focus from its boundaries and opens the possibility of seeing time in another dimension; in its depth.

One of the more apparent connections between joy and time is made clear when looking closely at the seven joy texts of Qoheleth (2:24–26; 3:12–13; 3:22; 5:17–19; 8:15; 9:7–10;

⁹ Due to the difficulty of finding a single equivalent term for all occurrences of the term הבל we shall opt for a neutral term and translate according to context. However, the need for an overarching concept linking the usage of the common Hebrew term both in Qoheleth and the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures must necessarily arise out of the literal meaning of the term as “breath” or “vapor.” Dominic Rudman, “The Use of הבל as an Indicator of Chaos,” in *The Language of Qoheleth in its Context* (ed. A. Berlejung and P. van Hecke; Leuven: Peeters, 2007), 121–41, 126.

¹⁰ It is not new to see Qoheleth through the lens of הבל and joy or death and joy. See for example: Matthew S. Rindge, “Mortality and Enjoyment: the Interplay of Death and Possessions in Qoheleth,” *CBQ* 73, no. 2 (2011): 265–80; Tilmann Zimmer, *Zwischen Tod und Lebensglück: eine Untersuchung zur Anthropologie Kohelets* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1999); Timothy Polk, “The Wisdom of Irony: A Study of Hebel and its Relation to Joy and the Fear of God in Ecclesiastes,” *SBT* 6, no. 1 (1976): 3–17.

11:7–10). Though the first joy text (2:24–26) only contains the word הַבֵּל at the very end, it immediately precedes and introduces the central passage on time in Qoheleth 3. The second joy text (3:12–13) forms part of the theological commentary on time after the famous poem in 3:1–8. The third joy text is found amid Qoheleth’s pondering the mystery of what is to become of our life after death. The fourth joy text (5:17–19), another highly theological pericope, emphasizes “the limited days that God gives us” as the *time* to enjoy. The fifth joy text (8:15) notes that joy is what accompanies the human being in his labor during “the days of his life.” The sixth joy text (9:7–10), replete with references to time, poignantly gives the imperative to eat bread with joy and drink wine with a merry heart since it is “now” that God favors your works. The call is to enjoy all the days of this fleeting life, and therefore the association is clear: we can only experience joy within the confines of our human framework of time. Finally, the last joy text (11:7–10) repeats the message Qoheleth has given in the preceding texts, namely that of rejoicing in all the years one has to live, while one is young, while one is alive, *here* and *now*. The call to joy is directly related to the fact that our time in this terrestrial life is limited and counted, therefore we are called to live joy *now*, in this present moment that we have.

Going a step further beyond only the joy texts, we may also take a look at the other verses in Qoheleth which use the root שָׂמַח (joy) and, only with the exception of Qoh 7:4 which is a proverbial phrase, all the other references to joy (2:1–2; 2:10; 4:16; 10:19) are associated in some way to time, even if minimally through the use of the word הַבֵּל in either the same verse or in the immediate context. Qoh 10:17 uses another word for joy: “Happy (אֲשֵׁרִי) are you...when your princes feast at the proper time (עֵת),” nevertheless holding a close connection between joy/happiness and time, with the root שָׂמַח appearing two verses later in 10:19.

The objective of this study is to delve into the concepts of “time” and “joy” which are both central to the book of Qoheleth in order to better understand the message of this book.¹¹ As we shall see, time is the principal theme of the three poems of the book, most especially prominent in Qoh 3, while the theme of joy surfaces primordially in the seven joy texts that we will study closely. In addition, we will see that both themes are in tight relationship with Qoheleth’s faith in God who holds together these two elements of his thought. Qoheleth’s focus on time, which emphasizes the transient nature of human existence, often leads scholars to a negative or pessimistic interpretation, while the focus on joy leads others to an optimistic interpretation. I will argue that Qoheleth’s faith in God brings together these two extremes in a realistic perspective on life. These two elements come together because the “time” that God gives the human being to experience joy is “the present moment.” I will explore the way time and joy

¹¹ Some works that demonstrate the centrality of the theme of time are: Norbert Lohfink, “The Present and Eternity: Time in Qoheleth,” *Theology Digest* 34, no. 3 (1987): 236-40; Michael V. Fox, “Time in Qoheleth’s ‘Catalogue of Times,’” *JNSL* 24, no. 1 (1998): 25-39; Mette Bundvad, *Time in the Book of Ecclesiastes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). The sources that demonstrate the centrality of joy we have already noted above in footnote 8.

are woven together by Qoheleth in the study of a series of passages that show their thematic relationship and the theological perspective that is unique to Qoheleth.

II. STATE OF THE QUESTION AND RELEVANCE OF RESEARCH

II.1. THE THEME OF TIME IN THE BOOK OF QOHELETH

Despite the centrality of time in Qoheleth, especially in connection with the poem on time in Qoh 3, there has been a lack of scholarly attention towards this theme and an exhaustive analysis of Qoheleth's understanding of time has been lacking up until recently. Since biblical references to time in the Bible are predominantly concrete, mainly consisting in the temporal terms linked to actual events or activities, some scholars have argued that the biblical authors would have been unaware of time as a general concept. Most scholars throughout the past century have focused their arguments on whether a concept of time even existed in the Hebrew Bible and if so, what would be its basis, and could it be likened to modern-day notions of time.

Mette Bundvad's D. Phil from Oxford University offers an analysis of the temporal discourse in the book of Qoheleth entitled "Time in the Book of Qoheleth."¹² She discusses Qoheleth's overall conception of time – in terms of the present, past and future in human life as well as in terms of the unchanging, cosmic realities. She first examines the linguistically focused approaches that have been dominant in the field, noting how scholars from the 50s and 60s have suggested that the Hebrew language of biblical writers shaped their understanding of themes related to time.¹³ These scholars distinguished between concrete/abstract or linear/cyclical notions of time, and often compared Hebrew thought to the Greek thought of that time or modern-day Western conceptions of time. Some of the basic assumptions underlying this scholarship have been fundamentally questioned, most especially by James Barr and John R.

¹² Bundvad, *Time in the Book of Ecclesiastes*. Bundvad's study, nevertheless, lacks a thorough presentation that includes contemporary scholars in languages other than English.

¹³ The most well-known scholar of this approach is Cullmann whose thesis was that biblical Judaism conceived time as linear, while Greek mentality understood time as an eternal circle where everything repeats. This sharp distinction between biblical and Greek thinking on time has been attacked and for the most part discarded. Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time: The Primitive Christian Conception of Time and History* (trans. Floyd V. Filson; London: SCM, 1962), 52. Momigliano argues convincingly that cyclical depictions of time are very present in the Hebrew Bible in its depictions of ritual time. Arnaldo Momigliano, "Time in Ancient Historiography," *HistTh* 6.6 (1966): 1-23, 8. Other scholars who argued that the writers of the Hebrew Bible did not have a concept of time at all, since biblical Hebrew lacks a term to describe abstract time include H. Wheeler Robinson, *Inspiration and Revelation in the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946) and John Marsh, *The Fulness of Time: On the Biblical View of Time and History* (London: Nisbet, 1952).

Wilch, back in 1969.¹⁴ In his work, Barr highly critiques the prior attempts to treat the biblical concept of time on a linguistic basis, accusing scholars of imposing later philosophical ideas upon the Hebrew texts or of making generalizations of the meanings and etymologies of certain words instead of studying each word within its context as it is used syntactically. Barr believes that it is unreliable to study the biblical concept of time on a linguistic basis and doubts the possibility of arriving at “a solid biblical view.” John R. Wilch’s deems the linguistic basis for the study of time unreliable since “words normally have several uses.”¹⁵ Wilch states that the word ‘*et*’ “was used in the OT in order to indicate the relationship of juncture of circumstances, primarily in an objective sense and only secondarily in a temporal sense.”¹⁶ He argues that there is a particular Hebrew way of thinking about time which ties time to the concept of ‘occasion.’ Nevertheless, the more contemporary Sacha Stern returns to the line of thought and asserts that the writers of the Hebrew Bible had no general notion of a concept of time.¹⁷ Stern conceives reality as consisting of activities, motions, changes, and events that occurred simultaneously or in a sequence. This process-related worldview is not only attested in Hebrew sources but is also characteristic of the Ancient Near East. Bundvad discusses the linguistic arguments of these different theses and concludes 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.

Most contemporary scholars accept the existence of a time conception in the Hebrew Bible and amongst them, Gershon Brin focuses his work on determining how different temporal ideas are expressed in the Bible by means of a thorough linguistic study which enlists the terms used by biblical authors to describe issues relating to time and calendar.¹⁸ Though he only notes 8 verses in Qoheleth, none of which he discusses at length, his work is nevertheless an important resource for the study of how time and temporality were expressed in the Hebrew Bible and the Dead Sea Scrolls. DeVries offers a lengthy study focusing principally on the Hebrew word for “day” with the objective of offering a comprehensive outlook on the texture and quality of time in Old Testament Tradition.¹⁹ In addition, there is an interesting collection of essays that looks at a variety of texts from the Hebrew Bible and Dead Sea Scrolls, which surprisingly however, does not include a study on the book of Qoheleth. The only chapter in

¹⁴ James Barr, *Biblical Words for Time* (London: SCM, 1969); John R. Wilch, *Time and Event: An Exegetical Study of the Use of ‘*et*’ in the Old Testament in Comparison to Other Temporal Expressions in Clarification of the Concept of Time* (Leiden: Brill, 1969).

¹⁵ Wilch, *Time and Event*, 15.

¹⁶ Wilch, *Time and Event*, 168.

¹⁷ Sacha Stern, *Time and Process in Ancient Judaism* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2003).

¹⁸ Gershon Brin, *The Concept of Time in the Bible and the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Leiden: Brill, 2001).

¹⁹ Simon John DeVries, *Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow: Time and History in the Old Testament* (London: S.P.C.K., 1975).

the section on the Old Testament that may offer us some insight because of the common vocabulary is by Matthias Köckert on time and eternity in Psalm 90.²⁰

All commentaries on the book of Qoheleth highlight the theme of time as important to and often central to the book, especially when studying the poems of the book and most specifically Qoh 3. The commentaries to which I make most reference when studying the theme of time in Qoheleth throughout this thesis are those by Gordis, Whybray, Murphy, Vílchez, Seow, Fox, Krüger, Schwienhorst-Schönberger, Mazzinghi, and Schoors.²¹ In addition, there are various studies, book sections and articles which study the theme of time. The most recent is by Chango who compares the sapiential and philosophical reflections on the theme of time of Ecclesiastes and Chrysippus of Soles, a Greek philosopher from the end of the III century BCE. His study investigates the similarities and differences between these two authors whose works on the theme of ‘time’ are so original in their respective circles.²² Norbert Lohfink offers a thought-provoking article: “The Present and Eternity: Time in Qoheleth,” which opens avenues for reflection on many philosophical and existential themes, while Maurice Gilbert offers some elements on the use and interpretation of the word תָּו in his chapter, “Il concetto di tempo (‘ēt) in Qohelet e Ben Sira,” in *Il libro del Qohelet: tradizione, redazione, teologia*.²³

The poem on time and its commentary in Qoheleth 3 have been widely studied. This chapter of the book is one of the most significant and note-worthy sections, for which the book is famous, and which most expands upon the notion of time. The general questions that arise focus on the origin and meaning of the poem on time, what is meant by the repeated word תָּו , and what sort of time it indicates. In addition, there are numerous studies that focus mainly on vv. 10–15, the theological commentary on the poem, and the interpretation of some challenging

²⁰ Matthias Köckert, "Zeit und Ewigkeit in Psalm 90," in *Zeit und Ewigkeit als Raum göttlichen Handelns: religionsgeschichtliche, theologische und philosophische Perspektiven* (ed. Reinhard Gregor Kratz and Hermann Spieckermann; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2009), 155-85.

²¹ Gordis, *Koheleth*, Roger Norman Whybray, *Ecclesiastes* (Sheffield: Academic Press, 1989), Roland E. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, WBC 23A (ed. D. A. Hubbard and G. W. Barker; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1992), J. Vílchez Líndez, *Ecclesiastes o Qohelet* (Estella: Verbo Divino, 1994), Choon Leong Seow, *Ecclesiastes: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), Michael V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and A Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), Thomas Krüger, *Qoheleth: a Commentary*, Hermeneia (ed. K. Baltzer; Minneapolis: Fortress Press 2004), Ludger Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2004), Luca Mazzinghi, *Ho cercato e ho esplorato: studi sul Qohelet* (Bologna: EDB, 2009), and Antoon Schoors, *Ecclesiastes* (Leuven: Peeters, 2013).

²² Paul-Marie Fidele Chango, *Qohélet et Chrysippe au sujet du temps. Εύκαιρία, αἰών et les lexèmes ‘ēt et ‘ōlām en Qo 3,1-15* (Paris: Gabalda, 2013).

²³ Lohfink, "The Present and Eternity,"; Maurice Gilbert, "Il concetto di tempo (‘ēt) in Qohelet e Ben Sira," in *Il libro del Qohelet: tradizione, redazione, teologia* (ed. Giuseppe Bellia and Angelo Passaro; Milano: Paoline, 2001), 69-89.

words and phrases in the Hebrew.²⁴ Joseph Blenkinsopp develops the hypothesis that the poem on time is the longest of the passages cited from a stoicizing Jewish sage, to which Qoheleth has added a title and commentary.²⁵ He bases his study on the comparison with the ethical teaching of the early Stoics, especially with regards to the concept of *eukairia* (timely action). Oswald Loretz has a chapter on the “Poetry and Prose in the Book of Qoheleth” where he focuses on a new form of Jewish prose expressing wisdom philosophy intertwined with comments in verse.²⁶ The particular sections on Qoheleth comprised in his work include a substantial study of Qoh 3. Finally, Michael V. Fox states that the catalogue speaks about the right times but presents the problem that God has withheld knowledge of the times. He clarifies the notion of time in Qoheleth and the implications of its meaning for Qoh 3:1–9 in his article, “Time in Qohelet's ‘Catalogue of Times.’”²⁷

To conclude, several studies focus mainly on the challenging word עולם in the context of the commentary on time in Qoh 3:10–15. While Mazzinghi offers a creative interpretation and translation of this key term in Qoheleth's concept of time, D'Alario continues the discussion taking into account the Apocalyptic tendencies of the time.²⁸ Finally, Francesco Bianchi focuses primarily on the crux interpretum of Qoh 3:15b, but consequently must offer his take on the poem on time “il tempo e la sua legge” in vv. 1–8 and the consequences of this “law on time” for the human being in vv. 9–15.²⁹

II.2. THE THEME OF JOY IN THE BOOK OF QOHELETH

The majority of scholars over the centuries have minimized the importance of the theme of joy in Qoheleth with the exception of Luther in 1532 and De Pineda in 1619.³⁰ Most often, the book of Qoheleth has been read as pessimistic literature and therefore the theme of joy has

²⁴ Two articles which study Qoheleth 3:10–15 include: Jean-Jacques Lavoie, “Puissance divine et finitude humaine selon Qohélet 3,10–15,” *SR* 31, no. 3-4 (2002): 283-96 and Thomas Esposito, “Observations on God and the Wind (Qoheleth 3,10-15),” *BN* 167 (2015): 79-97.

²⁵ Joseph Blenkinsopp, “Ecclesiastes 3.1-15: Another Interpretation,” *JSOT* 66 (1995): 55-64.

²⁶ Oswald Loretz, “Poetry and Prose in the Book of Qohelet (1:1-3:22; 7:23-8:1; 9:6-10; 12:8-14),” in *Verse in Ancient Near Eastern Prose* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1993), 155-89.

²⁷ Fox, “Time in Qohelet's ‘Catalogue of Times’,”.

²⁸ Luca Mazzinghi, “Il mistero del tempo: sul termine ‘olām in Qo 3,11,” in *Initium Sapientiae* (ed. Rinaldo Fabris; vol. RBSupp 36; Bologna: Dehoniane, 2000), 147-61; Vittoria D'Alario, “Qohelet e l'Apocalittica. Il significato del termine ‘ôlām in Qo 3,11,” in *Tempo ed eternità. In dialogo con Ugo Vanni S.I.* (ed. A. Casalegno; Cinisello Balsamo (MI): San Paolo, 2002), 73-88.

²⁹ Francesco Bianchi, “Ma Dio ricerca ciò che è scomparso? (Qoh 3,15b). La storia, la memoria e il tempo nel libro di Qohelet,” *Rivista Biblica* 42, no. 1 (1994): 59-73.

³⁰ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works: Notes on Ecclesiastes* (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1972); J. A. De Pineda, *In Ecclesiastem. Commentariorum liber unus* (Sevilla: Hispalis, 1619). See Mazzinghi who discovered De Pineda under the suggestion of Alonso Schökel. Mazzinghi, *Ho cercato*, 392.

been typically subordinated to the message of הבל, if not altogether dismissed.³¹ In the best of cases, it is merely considered an anesthetic given by an incomprehensible God so that the human being forget the evil and injustice he must live. Since the concepts of הבל and death fall under the general category of “time,” I aim to study this subsequent relationship of joy with הבל and death. Qoheleth’s attitude about death, at times apparently inconsistent, is an added element to the enigma of time and human ephemerality. The interpretation of the root שמח, however, is not easy to make. Negative passages such as Qoh 4:2 can be easily associated to the idea that connects sensual pleasure with the threat of death. Consequently, this has led scholars such as Fox and Schoors to conclude that Qoheleth actually meant “pleasure” not “joy” by the root שמח, thereby giving Qoheleth a more negative spin, and deeming “pleasure” a distraction from the thought of death – a sort of drug or narcotic.³² Interestingly the passages that describe this theme as pleasure more than as joy, also use the word הבל in their immediate context: Qoh 2:1.2.10 speaks of the search for pleasure by the rich king of Jerusalem who has not found a satisfying or lasting result, and Qoh 4:16 notes that there is no real reason to rejoice with the new king. Only Qoh 7:4, found in the midst of a series of proverbs, where joy is seen in contrast to mourning as the attitude of the foolish,³³ does not use the word הבל, but does use the homophone אָבַל “mourning” which directly reminds us of הבל. In this sense, the temporary fleeting “happiness” is most probably experienced as “pleasure,” whereas the rest of the occurrences of שמח are found in the seven programmatic texts which not only paint joy in a more positive light, but as we shall see are profoundly theological statements. On a similar vein, William H. U. Anderson studies the joy texts of Qoheleth in the light of analogies with the literary forms of skepticism and irony, both of which induce doubt and questions.³⁴ Therefore, for Anderson, the joy texts are analogous to expressions of complex irony while demonstrating the unlikelihood of the “joy reading.”

³¹ William H.U. Anderson has gone as far to say that Qoheleth’s commendations of joy are ultimately invalidated by the final and decisive verdict of הבל. William H. U. Anderson, *Qoheleth and its Pessimistic Theology: Hermeneutical Struggles in Wisdom Literature* (Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 1997), 74.

³² Fox speaks of how the book of Qoheleth “tells us how to make the best of a bad situation, where to find ‘portions’ and ‘good things.’ Qoheleth hardly knows the way to happiness, but he does point to some things that can take us a bit further away from unhappiness.” Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 113. Schoors is also categorically convinced that in Qoheleth, the root שמח indicates only pleasure. Antoon Schoors, *The Preacher Sought to Find Pleasing Words: a Study of the Language of Qoheleth* (vol. II; Leuven: Katholieke Universiteit Leuven. Departement Orientalistik, 1992), 176-180. A very interesting study to keep in mind is Bertrand Pinçon’s monograph, whose point of departure is precisely this debate between authors around the different words for happiness: pleasure or joy. Pinçon argues that the status of happiness evolves throughout the book, and while it is God’s gift to help the human being cope with the transience of life, it is also a way of life that should be taught to future generations. Bertrand Pinçon, *L’énigme du bonheur: étude sur le sujet du bien dans le livre de Qohélet* (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

³³ In a parallel light, laughter is often condemned as negative or as a symbol of foolishness in 2:2; 7:3.6; 10:19.

³⁴ William H. U. Anderson, *Scepticism and Ironic Correlations in the Joy Statements of Qoheleth?* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2010).

It was not until 1934 that Denis Buzy dares to say that Qoheleth believes in joy and holds that it is possible for the human being.³⁵ In the last fifty years or so scholars have offered an increasingly positive turn to the theme of joy as it regards human life and its fundamental importance in the interpretation of Qoheleth. Robert Gordis is one of the first to offer a more positive interpretation of Qoheleth and he claims that joy is the basic theme of the book. His view finds an echo in the subsequent studies by Whybray and Lohfink.³⁶ Whybray considers Qoheleth to be a “preacher of joy” and identifies the seven joy texts that exhibit greater intensity with the progression of the book.³⁷ For Whybray, these punctuating statements about joy serve as the *Leitmotiv* of the book and the respective contexts for these joy statements lead to the conclusion that the ability to enjoy life is a gift from God. The common themes that he gathers from these seven texts are: the brevity of life, the need to accept one’s own fate, and our human ignorance of the future. Nevertheless, these themes are seen under a positive light as he presents joy as a gift from God, and though one cannot change the certain future of one’s own death, one is called to find joy in one’s work. Norbert Lohfink has focused greatly on the theme of joy and insists on it in his article “Revelation by Joy” where his argument relies on his translation of Qoh 5:19 as “God responds to the human being with joy in his heart.”³⁸ Therefore, for Lohfink, joy is seen as a kind of divine revelation to humankind. Lohfink’s theories, however, have not been widely received and have found much criticism.³⁹ The principal danger of these scholars perhaps is the potential to absolutize the theme of joy without taking into account other important themes such as “fearing God” as well as keeping at the forefront the limited and ephemeral quality of life. I hope throughout this thesis to present a more balanced vision of the book, integrating and interweaving the various themes.

There has been a decided turn in scholarship which highlights the importance of the theme of joy in Qoheleth, although not necessarily its centrality. Various scholars recognize the invitation to joy, not as a useless antidote to desperation or as a way of forgetting life’s woes, but as von Rad notes, as the faithful Jew’s attempt to live in harmony with God’s will.⁴⁰ Others such as Vílchez, speak of joy as a practical ideal of life but by no means dare to consider it the most important message of the book.⁴¹ Nevertheless, neither chooses to deepen the theme of joy or dedicate a work to it. Others however do focus more on joy, such as Glasser who

³⁵ Denis Buzy, “La notion du bonheur dans l’Ecclésiaste,” *RB* 43 (1934): 494-512.

³⁶ Gordis, *Koheleth*.

³⁷ Whybray, “Qoheleth, Preacher of Joy,” 87-98.

³⁸ Lohfink, “Qoheleth 5:17-19 - Revelation by Joy,” 625-35. In a similar manner, Antonio Bonora highlights the invitation to joy in Qoheleth’s work. Antonio Bonora, *Qohelet: la gioia e la fatica di vivere* (Brescia: Queriniana, 1987).

³⁹ One of Lohfink’s main critics has been R. E. Murphy who says that given the fact that these joys are ephemeral, “they cannot be a divine ‘answer’ or revelation to the brevity of human life.” Roland E. Murphy, “On Translating Ecclesiastes,” *CBQ* 53, no. 4 (1991): 571-79.

⁴⁰ Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (London: SCM, 1975), 231-233.

⁴¹ Vílchez Líndez, *Ecclesiastes*, 43-44.

uncovers a tight relationship between wisdom and the invitations to joy.⁴² He argues that Qoheleth seeks a way that gives meaning to life and highlights the importance of experiencing joy regardless of the real limitation that the human being has in not knowing and not controlling his outcome, profit, or the end of life. In addition, Johan Yeong-Sik Pakh studies Qoheleth 8:16 – 9:10 in detail and focuses on the theme of joy and how these verses in Qoheleth present a parallel to a section of the Epic of Gilgamesh.⁴³ Although he focuses his study on one specific section of the book and the joy text contained within it, the conclusions to which he arrives with regards to the theme of joy and its relationship to the role of God in Qoheleth is significant.

Ludwig Schwienhorst-Schönberger's contribution helps us to place the theme of joy within Qoheleth's philosophical reflections by questioning what joy means for the human being and the descriptions of the conditions for this joy to become a possibility.⁴⁴ Since this is the main objective of Hellenistic philosophy as well as the main investigation of the Israelite sages, thus comes Qoheleth's double question: what is joy and what is it based upon? To the first question, Qoheleth critiques traditional wisdom beliefs by saying that happiness is not equivalent to riches and a long life, but it is principally an experience. With regards to the second, joy does not come from one's efforts, but instead Qoheleth wants to show that joy is a gift from God and that the human being cannot possess or control this joy. On a similar note, Eunny P. Lee argues that Qoheleth's teaching on pleasure is not hedonistic, but should instead be understood as humanity's religious obligation to God and hence fear of God in Qoheleth does not mean terror before a capricious deity, but a healthy acknowledgement of one's place in the world and before God.⁴⁵

Finally, Marc Faessler perhaps comes closest to the crossroads of the themes that we will delve into in this thesis, as he examines the ideas of the ephemeral and joy.⁴⁶ For Faessler, Qoheleth is a philosophical writing of the third century BCE, at the crossroads of Judaism, Hellenism and currents of thought from Asia. He invites us to weigh his discoveries by following his interpretation of the entire text of which we find at the end of the volume a new translation based on his hypotheses. He translates the famous refrain, *hebel hebalim* as: "Fog of steam, everything is only evanescent fog!"

⁴² Étienne Glasser, *Le procès du bonheur par Qohélet* (Paris: Cerf, 1970).

⁴³ Johan Yeong-Sik Pakh, *Il canto della gioia in Dio: L'itinerario sapienziale espresso dall'unità letteraria in Qohelet 8,16-9,10 e il parallelo di Gilgames Me. iii* (Napoli: Istituto Universitario Orientale, 1996).

⁴⁴ Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Nicht im Menschen gründet das Glück*.

⁴⁵ Eunny P. Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment in Qohelet's Theological Rhetoric* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2005).

⁴⁶ Marc Faessler, *Qohélet philosophe. L'éphémère et la joie* (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 2013).

II.3. TIME AND JOY: TWO INTERTWINING THEMES IN QOHELETH

Up until now, the themes of time and joy have not been studied side by side in a systematic manner. Perhaps, it is because it has already proven daring enough for scholars to focus on the theme of joy and if it has been related to any other theme, it has been the theme of work or death. Also, since the theme of time is so central, it has generally stood alone. This is a big gap in the research on the book of Qoheleth, given the centrality of both themes, and I would like to tackle this argument from Qoheleth's unique theological perspective. Along with the main texts that will be studied in chapters II – IV, I would like to offer an in-depth study of the final joy statement and poem on old age and death in Qoheleth 11:7 – 12:8 in the final exegetical chapter V. With regards to this text, it has been studied in the various commentaries and general studies on the book of Qoheleth but there does not exist yet a study that dedicates particular attention to this text.

II.4. TIME AND JOY SEEN THROUGH A THEOLOGICAL LENS

Biblical Wisdom has been considered worldly, practical philosophy with none of the trademark features of Ancient Israel such as: covenant, providence, Sinai, encompassed in God's great deeds in history. That is why Biblical Wisdom Literature has received so little attention in the history of theology, mainly due to this preoccupation with Salvation History in post-enlightenment theology. The result is that oftentimes books such as Qoheleth remain on the margins of the theological lens and all the richness this perspective can offer to the meaning of the text.⁴⁷

Roland Murphy and Norbert Lohfink argue for substantial theological vision in Qoheleth, as opposed to the prevailing scholarship that emphasizes only the philosophical content of the book of Qoheleth. For Murphy, the reverence, expressed in the biblical idiom "fearing God" along with what God "does" and "gives" in Qoheleth is the substance of Qoheleth's theology. While, for Lohfink, Qoheleth's response of placing himself in God's hands in surrender of control over all aspects of human life is a theological response.

As the historical context of the people of Israel has changed with the tragic events of the Exile in 586 BCE, the religious understanding of God and God's involvement with God's

⁴⁷ Note the studies by Von Rad and Purdue which deal with the theology of the Wisdom Literature. Leo G. Purdue, *Wisdom & Creation: The Theology of Wisdom Literature* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994); von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*.

people must have inevitably gone through a sort of evolution.⁴⁸ Those who believed in YHWH and his power and favor, now needed to reconcile the reality of the trauma of exile while being dominated by a foreign power, and the struggles in returning to their land and rebuilding their place of worship. Interestingly, though the personal name of God, YHWH, is never used by Qoheleth, he employs the generic Elohim 40 times and God is the subject of 18 active verb forms, hence demonstrating that God is extremely present and active throughout the book.

I would therefore like to approach the book of Qoheleth primarily from a theological perspective together with the literary and historical-critical point of view. We shall particularly note how the themes of joy and time come together in God's mysterious involvement with the human being, and how God merges these two realities in Qoheleth. Time and joy essentially come from God and their experience consequently lead the human being to God. Qoheleth's view of joy and time point to a dimension beyond this world, even if always within the confines of time and existence "under the sun," and we will hope to show this through our study of the texts.

God, therefore, is the very glue that brings together the two elements of time and joy. In fact, the joy statements in Qoheleth are indeed the most theological passages within the book of Qoheleth, and as noted earlier, they are in direct relationship with the concept of time. Though the concept of time comes up more generally in Qoheleth, it nevertheless cannot be understood outside of the anthropological experience which in turn Qoheleth constantly puts in reference to God.

III. METHODOLOGY

To encounter God's revelation through Scripture means we are called to discover what message God wants to convey to us, here and now, in our modern-day societies and cultures. Perhaps one of the greatest challenges of reading Scripture is to deduce the actual concepts, worldview, and anthropological and theological understandings that belonged to the Hebrew mindset from the writings that have been passed down to us. My attempt at deciphering this message will be to focus on the text and the reading will be based on a study of the Hebrew text of Qoheleth as it appears in the *Biblia Hebraica Quinta*. The main texts studied in this thesis will be my own translation, done with the assistance of the BDB Hebrew Lexicon, using inclusive language as much as possible, and heavily based on the New American Bible 2011 translation. I have chosen to offer my own translation instead of using the New American translation, amongst other options available, because no one translation makes the same choices or

⁴⁸ Crenshaw speaks of the historical context of the book of Qoheleth from a negative perspective. James L. Crenshaw, "Nuntii Personarum et rerum - Qoheleth in Historical Context," *Bib* 88 (2007): 285-99.

interpretations for the key words in the thesis that I will study and justify throughout the exegetical chapters. For example, as I will explain further on in the thesis, in many places always depending the context I use the terms “joy,”⁴⁹ “work,”⁵⁰ “breath,”⁵¹ and “human beings,” as opposed to “pleasure,” “labor,” “vanity,” and “men” or “mortals” for the key words שמחה, עמל, הבל, and אדם, frequently repeated in the text. In general, my translation is done in a literal manner, considering the possible plays on words, the punctuation of the Hebrew MT, and the relationship of specific Hebrew words with their use in other biblical texts. The notes provided after the translation of each of the main texts in chapters II–V will give the reasoning behind the modifications offered, including the philological analysis of the MT which illuminates it and reference to other ancient versions (the LXX and Vulgate) whenever pertinent. When referring to any other texts from Qoheleth or from the rest of the Bible, I will use the New American Bible, 2011 translation.

The main body of the dissertation will consist in the exegetical analysis of five sections of the book of Qoheleth. I will read the selected texts in the context of the surrounding text, first setting the limits of each section and studying their inner structure(s) in order to better discern the meaning intentioned by the author of the text. I then offer a detailed reading of each text accompanied by commentaries that are mainly of a historical-critical point of view, and articles that deal with verses, words or elements present in the particular texts. This reading, together with the information gleaned from the exercise of translating the texts with lexicons and theological dictionaries, will place a specific focus on the themes that are being studied in this thesis, namely joy and time, and the subsequent derivative themes: work, creation, death, revering God and justice. The main exegetical work is founded on the meaning and significance of the key words and the development of the recurring themes studied throughout the thesis. The exegetical work and its theological interpretation will be based on these literary elements of the text and their function within the whole of the book.

⁴⁹ See section II.3. “The Root שמחה” of Chapter II where I study the root שמחה.

⁵⁰ See section VII “Understanding Work in its Relationship with Joy” of Chapter III where I speak of the interpretation and translation of the root עמל.

⁵¹ See section II.4. “The Root הבל” of Chapter II where I give an in-depth explanation of my interpretation of הבל.

IV. OUTLINE OF THE DISSERTATION

The basic outline of my research will be the following:

Chapter I: Introduction

Chapter II: The Divine Gift of Time Qoheleth 2:24 – 3:15

Chapter III: Fleeting and Precious Joy – Experiencing God’s Touch Qoheleth 5:17–19

Chapter IV: Joy the Culmination to Time’s Fulfillment in Death Qoheleth 8:15 – 9:10

Chapter V: Joy and Time – The Foundations of a New Creation Qoheleth 11:7 – 12:8

Chapter VI: Qoheleth seen through Time and Joy

In *Chapter I*, Introduction, I will offer a presentation of the themes to be studied, hypothesis, *status quaestionis*, the relevance of research, and methodology. To follow this, *Chapters II-V* are a theological-exegetical study of some key passages on time and joy. The texts that I will study in this exegetical section are carefully chosen and are focal to our study because they join the themes of time and joy and God. I will now delineate why I have chosen these specific texts and show their pertinence to our study of the themes central to this thesis.

Qoheleth 2:24 – 3:15, the section we will study in *Chapter II*, begins and concludes with the first and second joy texts of the book (2:24–26; 3:12–13). Qoheleth first brings up the theme of joy in 2:24–26 which closes the parody of the king. This permits us to briefly glance at the first two chapters of Qoheleth in order to better understand the context in which this theme is introduced. Once more, the theme of joy is repeated towards the end of the section in 3:12–13. Beginning our study with the first joy text in 2:24–26 allows us to see how the introductory chapters of Qoheleth build up towards Qoheleth 3. In addition, this section includes the most significant passages on time in the whole of Qoheleth, which for the sake of our study, we cannot ignore. We will study the poem on time in 3:1–8 that uses the word תַּעַלְמִית thirty-one times, and the commentary on time in 3:10–15 that includes one of the central statements of Qoheleth containing the word עוֹלָם, along with one of the most theological sections of the entire book. The passages comprised in this section prove to be significant in any discussion of Qoheleth, and most especially since the topics of this thesis are time and joy. For example, we do not go on to include any part of Qoh 4 whose focus is more on human relationships and work, amongst other themes.

Chapter III focuses solely on Qoheleth 5:17–19, the fourth joy text. Apart from making some temporal references, we will see that this short pericope is highly theological. It will prove to build upon the foundations laid in Qoheleth 3, as it contains some particularities unique to both Qoh 3:10–15 and 5:17–19, and will continue to deepen the relationship between the themes of joy and time, as understood in their relationship to God. A discussion of the themes

of creation, work and revering God will stem from the themes of joy and time. Although we will not study the remaining verses of Qoh 5 in depth, the general section 4:17 – 6:12 will serve as a backdrop to our study of Qoh 5:17–19.

Chapter IV will study Qoh 8:15 – 9:12. Once more, we have chosen a section that contains the fifth joy text, Qoheleth 8:15, and the sixth joy text, 9:7–10. The verses after each of these joy texts contain numerous references to time and death, and hence the aspect of the finitude of time enhances the urgent call to joy, showing the interdependence of these themes in Qoheleth's thought. This section is extremely important and cannot be excluded from a study such as this that deals with the themes of time and joy, principally because of the presence of the joy texts and the noted escalation of the importance of joy, as opposed to the first verses of Qoh 8 or the last verses of Qoh 9 or Qoh 10 which touch upon secondary themes such as wisdom and foolishness. As we will see in Chapter VI, we will then see how the remaining secondary themes tie into the overall discussion of the principal themes of this thesis.

Finally, *Chapter V* will focus on Qoheleth 11:7 – 12:8. This final section includes the last joy text of the book (11:7–10) along with the concluding poem of Qoheleth that reflects on the end of life and its years lived in joy (12:1–8). Again, these verses demonstrate the relationship and relevance of the theme of time in Qoheleth alongside the progressive presentation of joy in the book. The final section of Qoh 12, the epilogue, is secondary to the discussion of time and joy, and hence is not included in this chapter.

Chapter VI will read the remaining text of Qoheleth from the perspective of the themes of time and joy, together with the themes of creation, work, justice, and reverence of God which have proven important in the study of the texts in *Chapters II-V*.

CHAPTER II: THE DIVINE GIFT OF TIME QOHELETH 2:24 – 3:15

*"Ah, make the most of what we yet may spend,
Before we too into the Dust descend;
Dust into Dust, and under Dust, to lie,
Sans Wine, sans Song, sans Singer, and – Sans End!"*
~ Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám

0. INTRODUCTION

As stated previously, the objectives of this thesis are to understand the relationship between the themes of time and joy in the book of Qoheleth, and to examine whether and how they are related to God or other important themes. We shall begin by studying the first joy text and the first important pericopes, which includes the famous poem on time.⁵² In order to better understand their role in Qoheleth's discourse, we shall also take a look at how these passages fit into the beginning of the book.

I. DELIMITATIONS

I have chosen this section of the book, composed of three distinct parts, because it is highly pertinent to the discussion of the principal themes. It includes the first two joy texts of the book (2:24–26; 3:12–13), the famous poem on time (3:1–8), and one of the most highly theological passages in the entire book (3:10–15). In addition, these individual sections are connected since they build upon one another and illumine each other's meaning. I would simply like to note that while Qoh 3:1–15 is an evident literary unit, recognized as such by the majority of scholars, 2:24–26 is clearly not part of it, mainly due to the *הבל* refrain that concludes the small section.⁵³ It instead closes the introductory section of the book, namely 1:1 – 2:23 acting as a bridge spanning the introductory section and the unit on time. Nevertheless, it is appropriate to include it in this study because it not only introduces the joy texts of the book, but also

⁵² The author of this famous poem on time has been referred to as the Omar Khayyam of the Bible. Morris Jastrow, *A Gentle Cynic* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1919), 186.

⁵³ Mazinghi, *Ho cercato*, 191.

permits us to speak of the introductory section and how it leads into this important unit on time in chapter 3.⁵⁴ Hence, Qoh 2:24–26 links the themes of time and joy.

II. DISCUSSION OF ITS CONTEXT WITHIN THE BOOK OF QOHELETH

It is important for us to be aware of how 2:24–3:15 fits into the beginning of the book. After the title in 1:1 and opening refrain in 1:2, הבל הבלים אמר קהלת הבל הכל הבל, we are faced with the first of Qoheleth's programmatic questions in 1:3, which will be the driving force in the first half of the book until the conclusion of chapter 6. After the programmatic question in 1:3, we have the opening poem 1:4–11, which describes the cyclical nature of the cosmos and its constant return. Our understanding and interpretation of this poem is important mainly because the word עולם is mentioned here for the first time, and it will be key in our discussion of the way Qoheleth understands the concept of time, especially in chapter 3. Following the opening poem is Qoheleth's parody of the king from 1:12–2:26 and toward its culmination, we find once again the rephrased question of purpose in 2:22 and the first joy text in 2:24–26, all of which leads directly into Qoheleth's extensive discussion of time in 3:1–15.

⁵⁴ The question of Qoheleth's literary structure is still an open problem that is challenging to deal with. Vittoria D'Alario thoroughly presents the status quaestionis with regards to the question of the structure(s) of the book of Qoheleth. Vittoria D'Alario, *Il libro del Qohelet: struttura letteraria e retorica* (Bologna: Dehoniane, 1993). Source criticism initiated by Siegfried and completed by Podechard, tried to give a response by means of demonstrating various authors (at least three: Qoheleth the pessimist, the *Hāsīd*, and the *Hākām*); but the uniformity of style and the terminology of the book has quickly discarded the possibility of this solution. D'Alario exposes the different possibilities that have been proposed by: Harold Louis Ginsberg, *Koheleth* (Tel Aviv: M. Newman, 1961); Giorgio R. Castellino, "Qohelet and his Wisdom," *CBQ* 30 (1968): 15-28; Addison G. Wright, "The Riddle of the Sphinx: The Structure of the Book of Qoheleth," *CBQ* 30, no. 3 (1968): 313-34; Glasser, *Le procès du bonheur par Qohélet*; James Alfred Loader, *Polar Structures in the Book of Qohelet* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1979), 81-87; François Rousseau, "Structure de Qohelet I 4-11 et plan du livre," *VT* 31 (1981): 200-17. However, even if they were each to use the same methodology, there are still differences in the analytical procedure, especially since there is no agreement on the objective criteria of structuration; therefore, we end up with an array of subjective reconstructions each trying to offer a definitive solution to the problem. Behind the desire to find a unified and organic treatise is the prejudice of wanting to find a linear and progressive logic which conforms to modern western mentality. Loretz and Loader, using instruments of literary criticism and structural analysis reach the conviction that we cannot adopt a rigid and pre-constituted structure that can be imposed on the text. Instead, I would adopt Norbert Lohfink's take on the situation: "We must take into account that the book of Qoheleth is in some degree musically constructed. As in polyphonic music, various melodic themes are played at the same time. Various structures are laid on top of one another and enmeshed in one another." Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 59. A set objective structure in any literary work would be difficult to discern even if we could claim to think that it were the intention of the author, but the author may also creatively weave several possible "structures" in order to highlight diverse themes. Just the same, the reader may detect one or another structure according to her/his interests. Consequently, any given text may contain several structures simultaneously.

II.1. THE QUESTIONS OF PURPOSE

“What profit have we from all the toil which we toil at under the sun?” (Qoh 1:3) This question, one of Qoheleth’s favorites, is a question repeated throughout history by many people, simple and wise, including Jesus and many that followed him. It is a question of meaning and purpose: why should I do what I do, why go to all this effort if one day it will all come to naught? We are painfully conscious of our mortal nature, and our formulation of such a question reveals our desire to seek meaning in our temporality and ephemerality, to find something to motivate us and move us forward. The “questions of purpose” are an important element in the first half of the book of Qoheleth. They come up in 1:3, 2:3, 2:22, 3:9, 3:21, 5:15, and 6:7–12 with similar words and with the same intention and we will see that they are closely tied to the themes of time and joy as they develop throughout the book.

While the first question of purpose in 1:3 serves as part of the introduction of the book and puts attention and high importance on this question from the start, the second question of purpose in 2:3 introduces the parody of the king, the context in which Qoheleth first uses the root שמח. Qoheleth 2:22 brings us to the third question of purpose: “For what profit comes to human beings from all the toil and striving of heart with which they toil under the sun?”⁵⁵ This question reveals the mind of someone who is not totally convinced by this frustration and does not want to resign himself to such a life. If this were a rhetorical question expecting a negative answer as some scholars argue, why then does the first joy text in 2:24–26 follow almost directly after? One does not repeat the same rhetorical question to which one has provided an answer, in this case with the parody of the king, unless that answer is not deemed satisfactory. Instead, I would like to argue that the repeated question provokes the listener to continue questioning him/herself and seek his/her own response, a response which we will see is related to the themes of joy and time. Qoheleth 2:23 brings up once more the word ענין which we saw already in 1:13, the first mention of God giving a task to the human being. In that moment, the perspective is colored by the experience about to be described, an experience that ultimately leads to frustration and senselessness. Here, again, at the conclusion of the description of the king’s experience, he describes this “task” as something “painful and irritable”: מכאבים וכעס.

In order to develop our understanding of the theological significance of the concept of joy throughout Qoheleth, we must first take a closer look at the parody of the king where Qoheleth manifests his own primitive reflections on what makes human life joyful or pleasurable, as well as exploring the meaning of the root שמח.

⁵⁵ I choose the expression “human beings” rather than “mortals” for לאדם and I have translated וברעיון as “striving” instead of “anxiety.”

II.2. THE PARODY OF THE KING

The interpretation of this royal testament or parody of the king in 1:12 – 2:26 is perhaps one of the most important elements for our understanding of the concept of joy within Qoheleth, principally because it introduces the theme of joy. The term for joy, *שמח*, appears in the context of this parody for the very first time in the book. In addition, its placement at the very beginning of the book marks its significance within the whole of Qoheleth's presentation and message. There is an apparent concern for the questions of purpose and meaning which do not disappear but only grow in insistence. Furthermore, the authoritative voice that opens the book and continues in first person throughout the first chapter is Qoheleth, son of David, king in Jerusalem. This figure is what gives authority to the book and to this introduction. Although the figure of "Qoheleth" does not come up again until 7:27, and then finally until the epilogue in 12:8–10, this beginning and the themes discussed in it are a point of reference for the rest of the book.

This section clearly distinguishes itself from the rest of the book, especially because of its manner of addressing the audience in 1:12, which corresponds to the style of royal documents: "I, Qoheleth, was king over Israel in Jerusalem..." but also for its distinct biographical and experiential style. Qoheleth the king describes his search in life and the conclusions he draws from this experiment. In fact, Qoh 1:12 – 2:26 may be understood as a "royal syndrome," a sort of psychological illness that the character "Qoheleth" seems to display.⁵⁶ Perhaps the decisive point for our understanding of the purpose of the parody of the king is what to make of the fact that neither Qoheleth nor the epilogist has further need to invoke this fiction. Therefore, the question to keep in mind is: does the rest of the book follow in agreement with the parody of the king and its negative and pessimistic conclusions, or does it question and try to disprove the discoveries and experiences of the king?

The parody of the king is overwhelmingly egocentric, a style that is not seen anywhere else in the book. This can be seen in the Hebrew text especially from 2:4 onwards where the first common singular pronoun *אני* "for myself" is repeated 9 times in only 6 verses (vv. 4–9).⁵⁷ The first person description lists the seemingly endless great projects and cultivations typically attributed to Solomon, all "for myself." There is a sensation of abundance and grandeur. The gardens and parks filled with all kinds of fruit trees of 2:5 remind us of the paradise in Genesis

⁵⁶ Roberto Vignolo, "La poetica ironica di Qohelet. Contributo allo sviluppo di un orientamento critico," *Teol* 25 (2000): 217-40. Roberto Vignolo, "Maschera e sindrome regale: interpretazione ironico-psicoanalitica di Qo 1,12-2,26" *Teol* 26 (2001): 12-64; Rüdiger Lux, "'Ich, Kohelet, bin König...' Die Fiktion als Schlüssel zur Wirklichkeit in Kohelet 1,12-2,26," *EvT* 50 (1990): 331-41.

⁵⁷ "This repetition puts great emphasis on the self-centered drive for acquisition, a sort of intense consumerism. Yet the love of possessions cannot be filled by possessing them." Fox, *A Time to Build up and A Time to Tear Down*, 176.

2–3. The purpose of the king’s work does not seem to extend beyond his *personal* collection, which also includes silver and gold, and the treasures of kings and provinces, as well as male and female singers and many concubines. Qoheleth concludes the lengthy list by saying: “Then I became great and increased more than all who preceded me in Jerusalem. My wisdom also stood by me” (2:9). All of this was at the price of his work: in order for him to attain all these possessions, he “enlarged,” “planted” (2:4), “made gardens and parks” (2:5), “made ponds of water” (2:6), and “bought slaves” (2:7) who in turn surely did even more work.

However, in 2:10–11 Qoheleth offers a mixed answer regarding the reward and profit of all his labor. In 2:10,⁵⁸ work is one of the causes of his joy and this itself was his “portion” חלק, one of Qoheleth’s key theological terms. However, at the very same time that Qoheleth experiences this pleasure because of all his labor, in 2:11 he says: “But when I turned to all the works which my hands had done and the work which I had exerted, and behold all was הבל and chasing after wind, and there was no profit under the sun.” It is significant that Qoheleth does not repeat this negative conclusion “there was no profit” elsewhere, and given its particular context within the parody of the king, this negative answer does not reflect the message of the book as a whole, but instead just the conclusion of a disappointed king.

In Qoh 2:12–16, the king describes how he questions whether it is profitable to be wise or not. Verses 11–13 and 15 each begin with a perfect first common singular verb followed by the personal pronoun אני, once again giving the sense of a very individual and egotistic search. Although apparently there does seem to be an advantage in being wise, the question that mystifies Qoheleth is that both the fool and the wise person have the same fate, therefore, Qoheleth reacts to these realizations in vv.17–23, perhaps the most negative side of Qoheleth in this book. Both vv. 17 and 18 start with ושנאתי: “so I hated life” and “so I hated all my work,” expressing the existential human experience of frustration and hopelessness.⁵⁹ These verses communicate a sort of desperation and hatred towards work and life, as we must interpret them in light of the context of the parody of the king.⁶⁰ Everyone, at some point in life, experiences these feelings, this disdain, and even hatred towards that which s/he does in life and even life itself. The phrase “under the sun” that emphasizes the terrestrial realm of these reflections comes up four times, and “this too is הבל...” comes up another four times, reminding us of where we are situated, namely, on the earth where nothing will last and where everything is passing, ephemeral, הבל!⁶¹ Clearly, the overwhelmingly self-centered search for riches and wisdom bears no fruit or satisfaction and remains too terrestrial. Life under the sun is but a

⁵⁸ Qoheleth offers a conclusion to this test or “experiment” he has made with pleasure and joy: “All that my eyes desired I did not refuse them. I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure, for my heart was pleased because of all my work and this was my portion for all my work.”

⁵⁹ Apart from 3:8 in the poem on time, the root שנא only appears here.

⁶⁰ The root עמל which is repeated a total of ten times in these 7 verses, and the noun and verb עשה used in v. 17 in place of עמל, are better understood as “labor” rather than “work.”

⁶¹ In these verses, הבל usually has the sense of “futile” over and above its literal meaning, “transience.”

breath that vanishes. Qoheleth is in despair due to his temporal existence. All that he had done “was grievous” נָעַר to him (v. 17), and vv.18–23 go on to spell out the reason for his total desperation: the fact that he must leave the fruit of his labor to the person who will come after him. Actually, he is in despair at the fact that life will one day end. Not only is the fruit of work not eternal, but, more frustrating than this, is the fact that he will not be able to enjoy it forever.

Going back to the question of whether the rest of the book agrees with the parody of the king and its negative and pessimistic conclusions, some scholars argue that the rest of the book does not repudiate any of the conclusions reached or the experiences known under the guise of king. According to them, this guise “is meant to strengthen these conclusions and validate the experiences, for Solomon had the wealth to grant himself the maximum of pleasures, and thus to carry through the experiment most thoroughly, as well as the wisdom to evaluate his experiences – and to judge wisdom itself.”⁶² However, while the rest of the book may not explicitly reject the conclusions reached by Qoheleth the king, I will show that these very conclusions and experiences urge Qoheleth to continue seeking a deeper answer. If in fact these conclusions were a definitive and satisfactory answer, they would appear towards the end of the book after all the reflections, or at least, Qoheleth would repeat them towards the end.

If we were to stop here, we might concur with the great number of exegetes who have interpreted Qoheleth negatively to be a preacher of the absurdity of life. However, this would not allow Qoheleth a fair chance to express his insights and wisdom, and it would cut short his train of thought. These two chapters are only the prologue of the answer to his search that lies in the mystery of time, its relation to joy in this human life, and how God brings these two elements together.

II.3. THE ROOT שִׂמַח

Before we go any further, it may give us some clarity to study the meaning of the root שִׂמַח. It appears 175 times in the MT, 10 times in the Hebrew text of Sirach, and 54 times in the Qumran texts, while the noun form שִׂמְחָה appears 94 times in the MT, 6 in the Hebrew text of Sirach and 63 in the Qumran texts. Looking specifically at Qoheleth, the root שִׂמַח appears with relatively great frequency throughout the entire book: nine times as a verb (2:10; 3:12, 22; 4:16; 5:18; 8:15; 10:19; 11:8, 9) and eight times as the noun שִׂמְחָה (2:1, 2, 10, 26; 5:19; 7:4; 8:15; 9:7) for a total of 17 appearances. Contrary to its other uses in the Hebrew Scriptures, Qoheleth uses this word to speak of a very human and concrete joy, that which is had in eating, drinking and working, not a strictly spiritual joy in reference to the Lord or to the law of the

⁶² Michael V. Fox, *Qoheleth and his Contradictions* (Decatur: Almond Press, 1989), 174.

Lord.⁶³ Nevertheless, as we will see, Qoheleth's uses of the root שמח frequently come up in theological contexts. Interestingly, in proportion to text length, the root שמח occurs most frequently in Qoheleth as compared to the rest of the books of the Hebrew Scriptures, followed by Proverbs, Psalms, Esther, Nehemiah, and Isaiah. I believe that this statistic is significant, especially concerning the commonplace opinion that Qoheleth is a pessimistic and negative book. The very fact that joy repeatedly comes up signals that it is a significant theme for Qoheleth.

Concerning all the occurrences of the root שמח in Classical Hebrew, about two-thirds of them are in theological contexts, and of these 180, about 40 are in theological contexts in the narrower sense in that they contain direct statements about God.⁶⁴ This proportion is not too different in the book of Qoheleth. Of the seventeen occurrences of the root שמח, ten occurrences of the root שמח appear in explicitly theologically charged passages associating joy directly with God most of the time as God's gift; these passages are the seven joy texts. These texts contain the root שמח which is found as the noun שמחה meaning "joy" in four of the seven joy texts (2:1.2.10.26; 5:19; 7:4; 8:15; 9:7), while the verb שמח meaning "to rejoice" comes up in five of the seven joy texts (2:10; 3:12.22; 4:16; 5:18; 8:15; 10:19; 11:8.9). The remaining seven occurrences of the root שמח have no direct link to God and are not included in the seven joy texts (2:1, 2, 10 [2x]; 4:16; 7:4; 10:19). Therefore, in comparison to the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures, proportionally, Qoheleth possesses a much higher percentage of occurrences of the root שמח in theological contexts containing direct statements about God.

The seven joy texts are theological statements that illumine our study of God in relation to human joy. With respect to joy, the sevenfold enumeration in the book of Qoheleth is not accidental but reflects the conscious effort of Qoheleth to reiterate its importance. At the very least, this observation means that Qoheleth's understanding of joy cannot easily be dismissed as a distraction to escape the drudgery of life.⁶⁵ Seven, signifying perfection for the Hebrew understanding, communicates that this repeated and escalating call to joy is the fullness that God is able to give the human being. To further support this positive interpretation of the root שמח, its semantic horizon in Northwest Semitic suggests that there is a close relationship between "rejoicing" and "flourishing."⁶⁶ Therefore, joy for Qoheleth is life-centered, as it promotes life in the fullest sense and "its primary concern is human flourishing in the context of daily life."⁶⁷ In short, the call to joy escalates throughout the book of Qoheleth towards plenitude and fullness.

⁶³ David J. A. Clines, "שמח," *DCH* 8:163-166.

⁶⁴ G. Vanoni, "שמח" *TDOT* 14:145.

⁶⁵ D'Alario, *Il libro del Qohelet*.

⁶⁶ The Hebrew root שמח is cognate to the Akkadian *šamāhu* which means "to grow, flourish." See the analysis in, J. C. Greenfield, "Lexicographical Notes II," *HUCA* 30 (1959): 141-51.

⁶⁷ Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment*, 81.

Scholars differ in how they render this word in modern languages. For example, Fox believes that what Qoheleth is really talking about is “pleasure” more than joy.⁶⁸ Schoors, after a long lexical analysis, also translates שמח as pleasure.⁶⁹ However, I believe that Qoheleth is more nuanced in the way that he uses this term and its meaning depends on the context in order to understand what he is trying to communicate. Though some uses of the word have a notably negative connotation, I do not believe that this makes all occurrences of the root negative. In fact, Qoheleth paints joy in a positive light, especially in the seven joy texts.⁷⁰ Nevertheless, the seven uses of the word noted above, including Qoh 2:1, 2, and 10, are the exceptions that speak of the search for pleasure by the rich king of Jerusalem who has not found a satisfying or lasting result. In 2:1, after devoting himself to studying by wisdom everything that is done under the heavens, he turns within and says, “‘Come now, let me try you with⁷¹ pleasure and the enjoyment of good things,’ and behold this too was הבל.” Here at the very first mention of שמחה, Qoheleth uses the word הבל to describe it. Within the parody of the king, where we have seen a materialistic search and negative and pessimistic conclusions and where these verses generally transmit a sense of negativity, the root takes on a very different meaning from the occurrences of this root in most other texts of Qoheleth. Consequently, “pleasure” as opposed to “joy” more accurately matches the context of these verses. The other occurrences that may be translated as “pleasure” are 4:16, which notes that there is no real reason to rejoice with the new king and 7:4, where “pleasure” is seen as the attitude of the foolish, in contrast to mourning. In a parallel light, Qoheleth condemns laughter as negative or as a symbol of foolishness in 2:2; 7:3.6; 10:19. Pleasure, in itself, is not necessarily a negative thing. We take pleasure in many good things in life and indeed, pleasure is often an experience paired with joy. However, my issue with the use of the translation “pleasure” is that if we understand it purely in the hedonistic sense, it brings along with it a negative moral connotation and therefore, it is the

⁶⁸ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 113. “שמחה in Qoheleth means pleasure, not happiness and certainly not joy. Happiness, pleasure and joy are not the same thing. *Pleasure* is not an independent emotion of sensation, but an experience or, more precisely, a “feeling-tone” attached to a more comprehensive experience. A *pleasure* may also be something that stimulates that feeling, but the two uses are distinct... Pleasure is at most a contributing factor to happiness.”

⁶⁹ Schoors, *The Preacher Sought to Find Pleasing Words II*, 176-180. Mazzinghi agrees that although Schoors’ lexical analysis is a legitimate exegetical interpretation, it may be critiqued. Mazzinghi, *Ho cercato*, 392.

⁷⁰ Pre-determined judgments of Qoheleth’s outlook on life have serious consequences for interpretation. One example, Lavoie’s description of “the poisoned gifts originating from the creator” (Lavoie, “Puissance divine et finitude humaine selon Qohélet 3,10–15,” 287), suffices to show that a pessimistic view is too often *read into* Qoheleth’s thought. The reading of Qoheleth as a skeptic, a pessimist, or a kindred spirit of Camus’ Sisyphus necessarily contorts this entire section into an angst-ridden declaration that an indifferent God merely plays games with the human being. Such a reading of Qoheleth’s book as an anthem of tragic pessimism, still prevalent among commentators, fails to do justice to Qoheleth’s notions of God, joy, and the limits of human knowledge presented here.

⁷¹ There is no consensus regarding the interpretation of the preposition ב, but it would seem reasonable to understand it as an instrumental ב together with the verb גסה, especially if the noun שמחה can also represent things or actions that make the human being experience joy or pleasure in his interior.

most appropriate term in these contexts of negativity and egotism, but not in the more positive and theologically charged joy texts.

As we have already noted above, Qoheleth's first discourse on "pleasure," the parody of the king, follows the second question of purpose in 2:3. Therefore, the parody of the king symbolizes the common search that humankind experiences when pursuing the answer to the question of purpose and profit. No one can escape this search, it is universal – even the wise and wealthy king experiences this yearning for purpose. Interestingly, from 2:22 onwards, the joy texts closely follow the "questions of purpose." The third question in Qoh 2:22 is followed by 2:24–26; the question in 3:9 is followed by 3:12–13; the question in 3:21 is followed by 3:22; the question in 5:15 is followed by 5:17–19; and Qoh 6:7–12 concludes the questions of purpose. There is no formal joy text directly afterwards, but Qoh 7:14 is often associated with the theme of joy. The formula introduced by אִין־טוֹב, "nothing is better than," begins four of the seven joy texts followed by the root שמה in 2:24, 3:12, 3:22, and 8:15. This formula responds to Qoheleth's habitual question: "what good or profit is there for the human being..." This formula "nothing is better than" always comes after a negative development and therefore points to the existence of an authentic good for the human being, the experience of joy.⁷² Therefore, it would seem as though the joy texts offer a sort of response to this rhetorical question. We shall keep this question in mind as we study the different texts throughout this thesis and return to it in the final chapter.

II.4. THE ROOT הבל

As the *Leitmotiv* of the book of Qoheleth, the word הבל expresses temporality. The root הבל occurs 99 times in Classical Hebrew: 86 in the MT, 2 in the Hebrew text of Sirach, and 11 in the DSS. Of the 86 occurrences in the Hebrew Scriptures, the verb occurs 5 times, the proper name of Abel occurs 8 times, and 38 occurrences are found in the book of Qoheleth alone.⁷³ The word הבל has had numerous pages dedicated to its meaning and interpretation.⁷⁴ Even

⁷² Mazinghi, *Ho cercato*, 400.

⁷³ These are: Qoh 1:2(5x), 14; 2:1, 11, 15, 17, 19, 21, 23, 26; 3:19; 4:4, 7, 8, 16; 5:6, 9; 6:2, 4, 9, 11, 12; 7:6, 15; 8:10, 14(2x); 9:9(2x); 11:8, 10; 12:8(3x). Clines, "הבל," *DCH* 2:486.

⁷⁴ Klaus Seybold, "הבל" *TDOT* 3:313-20; Douglas B. Miller, "Qohelet's Symbolic use of Hebel," *JBL* 117, no. 3 (1998): 437-54; Jean-Jacques Lavoie, "Habēl Habālīm Hakol Hābel: histoire de l'interprétation d'une formule célèbre et enjeux culturels," *ScEs* 58, no. 3 (2006): 219-49; William H. U. Anderson, "The Semantic Implications of Hvl and R'awt in the Hebrew Bible and for Qoheleth," *JNSL* 25, no. 2 (1999): 59-73; K. Ehlich, "Hbl – Metaphern Der Wichtigkeit," in *"Jedes Ding hat seine Zeit–": Studien zur israelitischen und altorientalischen Weisheit: Diethelm Michel zum 65. Geburtstag*, BZAW 241 (ed. Anja A. Diesel, et al.; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1996), 49-64; Michael V. Fox, "The Meaning of Hebel for Qohelet," *JBL* 105, no. 3 (1986): 409-27.

today scholars do not agree on its meaning.⁷⁵ Though הַבֵּל in Qoheleth has traditionally been translated as “vanity,” the literal sense from which the other meanings are derived is “vapor,” “wind,” or “breath.”⁷⁶ The other common meanings are derived conceptually, since we cannot trace the historical development within the Hebrew Scriptures.⁷⁷ “The root הַבֵּל describes the immaterial, transient nature of one’s breath and evanescent vapor, which is a synonym for רוּחַ, breath, wind.”⁷⁸ It is often used to describe the contradictory reality that escapes our understanding just as the vapor that quickly rises and disappears. Only God knows where it goes. In its largest number of occurrences, it is used in a nominative clause, where the meaning of הַבֵּל characterizes the human experience and its basic qualities, and as we shall see, it is most correctly used as a simile or metaphor for that which is ephemeral, unreliable, elusive, passing or fleeting. The literal meanings of הַבֵּל, “vapor” or “breath” are symbols and images that belong to the extra-textual world of things whose textual counterpart is the metaphor.⁷⁹ Therefore, הַבֵּל is in fact referring to metaphor. Metaphor is a way of using language that “carries meaning beyond” what is usually meant.⁸⁰ To read this meaning of the numerous הַבֵּל passages could shed a new light on their interpretation. Seow makes the case that הַבֵּל points to that which is “beyond mortal grasp,” denoting things and situations where humans are incapable of grasping in a physical, experiential or intellectual way.⁸¹ Oftentimes, the impossibility of taking hold of something “is due to the transient and ephemeral nature of the object under consideration.”⁸² In fact, practically all of the uses of הַבֵּל are metaphorical, with the exception of Ps 62:9; Prov 21:6; Isa 57:13 which use הַבֵּל in its literal sense of “breath.” Most scholars consider it to be a negative term, commonly translated as “nothingness,” nevertheless, we can better grasp the sense of the word in context and in fact it often possesses a neutral sense.

In many cases outside of Qoheleth, human life is likened to הַבֵּל. Ps 144:4 says that “human beings are like breath (הַבֵּל); their days are like a passing shadow (צֶל)”. In the previous

⁷⁵ The latest discussion is between Michael V. Fox and Mark Sneed. Mark R. Sneed, “הַבֵּל as ‘Worthless’ in Qoheleth: A Critique of Michael V. Fox’s ‘Absurd’ Thesis,” *JBL* 136 (2017): 879-94; Michael V. Fox, “On הַבֵּל in Qoheleth: A Reply to Mark Sneed,” *JBL* 138, no. 3 (2019): 559-63.

⁷⁶ Rainer Albertz, “הַבֵּל,” *TLOT* 1:467; Seybold, *TDOT* 3:335; Vélchez Líndez, *Ecclesiastes*

⁷⁷ There is evidence for the base-meaning ‘vapor’ in cognate languages, as well as the probability of development from literal to metaphorical uses. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 27.

⁷⁸ G. Johnston, “hbl,” *NIDOTTE* 1:1003.

⁷⁹ Tremper Longman, “Metaphor,” in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (ed. Leland Ryken and Jim Wilhoit; Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1998), 548.

⁸⁰ Interestingly, metaphor became somewhat problematic during the Enlightenment, especially since metaphorical language fell into the category of the “aesthetic” and hence not “useful” or more scientific language. This made it suspect in its transmittal of “truth”, since it would be argued that truth could be expressed more effectively in non-metaphorical language. This led to its being considered superfluous, distracting, and unnecessary when it came to seeking truth.

⁸¹ Choon Leong Seow, “Beyond Mortal Grasp,” *ABR* 48 (2000): 1-16.

⁸² Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment*, 30.

verse, the psalmist is expressing awe at God's regard for humanity: "O YHWH, what are human beings that you should care for them, people that you should think of them?" Therefore, the comparison of humanity to הבל can hardly be the futility and meaninglessness of life, but rather the meaning is something like "transitory." In Ps 62:10, for example, it is parallel to קִזָּב "illusion" in its first figurative use, while the second time הבל undoubtedly refers literally to vapor or breath. Therefore, human beings are merely transient, as vapor. In the texts of the Deuteronomistic history (Deut, 1,2 Kgs, Jer), the word הבל is used as a designation for other gods in the accusation against Israel's apostasy, and therefore it means "idols" – again, something that is empty, illusory and limited.⁸³

However, our greater interest lies in how Qoheleth uses this word. After having observed and reflected, Qoheleth repeatedly comes to the conclusion "even this is הבל" (גם־זוהו הבל) in 2:15.19.21.23.26; 4:4.8.16; 5:9; 6:2.9; 7:6; 8:10.14; or גם־זוהו הבל in 2:1; and a similar conclusion in 11:10. Only a few times does our sage make the broad conclusion "all is הבל" (הכל הבל) in 2:11.17; 3:19; cf. 11:8. Thus, it seems as though the actual focus of the concentrated use of הבל in Qoheleth is judgment.⁸⁴ This judgement can easily be interpreted "also this is passing," "also this is temporary," "also this is meaningless," and "also this is futile," but if we hold on to the more literal sense of vapor which lacks the negative connotation inherent to the words "futile" or "meaningless," then we are left with a more neutral meaning based on the temporal aspect of the word.

On a final note, the thematic marker of Qoheleth, הבל, brings to our memory the proper name from the Genesis 4 narrative that it recalls, Abel. Abel's life upon the earth was particularly short-lived due to the jealousy and anger of his brother Cain who killed him after perceiving how God approved of Abel's offering more than his own. Abel's brief existence evokes the transience of life. It is in this sense that the word הבל denotes something that is passing and temporal and which can be comprehended as a measurement of limited time to which much of human experience is constrained. Therefore, to conclude, I would affirm together with Fredericks that "it is more than possible to interpret and translate Qoheleth's הבל statements along the line of life's *brevity*, distinct from any notion of futility, vanity, emptiness or meaninglessness. Pleasure and wisdom are repeatedly commended in spite of death, and as prevalent as absurdities or ironies in life might be, they do not define the essence of life."⁸⁵ I would argue for a more neutral sense of the word הבל based on a more literal meaning of the metaphor that in itself lacks the negative aspect which has later been applied to it.

⁸³ Daniel C. Fredericks, "hebel," *NIDOTTE* 1:1005.

⁸⁴ Albertz, *TLOT* 1:467.

⁸⁵ Daniel C. Fredericks, *Coping with Transience. Ecclesiastes on Brevity in Life* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 47.

to the book, the joy texts have often been interpreted as a despairing hedonism within the context of the meaninglessness of life,⁹⁰ or a sort of anesthetic offered by God to the human being.⁹¹ The verse begins with “there is nothing better” אֵין־טוֹב, the exact same phrase that will later begin the joy texts in 3:12, 3:22, and 8:15.⁹² “There is nothing better for a human being *than* to eat and drink and tell himself that his labor is good. This also I have seen that it is from the hand of God. ...” We immediately note a change of mood and tone to the preceding section replete with negativity and a sense of futility. For the first time, it sounds as though there *are* good things in life that come from the hand of God, including the good things in creation, and the simple things such as eating and drinking which are part of daily life.

The repeated theme present in the joy texts is that of “eating and drinking,” symbolic of the good life and its pleasures.⁹³ The binomial phrase “to eat and to drink” appears in five of the seven texts (2:24a; 3:13a; 5:17; 8:15a; 9:7a), while “to eat” appears on its own in 5:18. Not only are eating and drinking essential to human life, survival and existence, but in biblical literature they serve as a very concrete expression of the joy of life, including moments of encounters and even the acquisition of wisdom.⁹⁴ In addition, eating and drinking are part of well-known biblical symbolism, that of the banquet often accompanied by wine and which points to enjoyment, pleasure, and friendship.⁹⁵ Qoheleth is inviting his listener to do what s/he always does, to do what is most human, that is, to nourish oneself, but most importantly to enjoy it. The joy texts which highlight “eating and drinking” put the emphasis on the טוב “good” or “pleasure,” that God *may* provide in the ordinary course of life. Eating, drinking, and enjoying one’s labor are positively evoked, in Qoheleth, as the gift of God and resonate with the goodness of creation as it is articulated in the Genesis creation narratives.⁹⁶ It is important to note the relationship between the sense of the goodness of creation, eating and drinking, relationship and friendship, work, and the desire and search for wisdom.

⁹⁰ For example, Loader argues that Qoheleth’s call to joy “can only be a sort of intermezzo in a meaningless life... If there is no prospect beyond the grave, then all that remains for man is to enjoy himself as long as he can.” James Alfred Loader, *Ecclesiastes: a practical commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 41-2.

⁹¹ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*.

⁹² Ogden studies this form and notes two modes of expression: it is followed by a preposition plus אֵין־טוֹב and either the relative אֵין־טוֹב־מִן־עִשְׂרָה with Qal imperfect forms or אֵין־טוֹב־מִן־עִשְׂרָה with infinitive constructs. “The אֵין־טוֹב־מִן־עִשְׂרָה form is unique to Ecclesiastes but is probably a development of the “better-than” form in Proverbs.” Graham S. Ogden, “Qoheleth’s Use of the “Nothing Is Better”-Form,” *JBL* 98, no. 3 (1979): 339-50.

⁹³ cf Rudolf Smend, “Essen und Trinken - ein Stück Weltlichkeit des Alten Testaments,” in *Beiträge zur Alttestamentlichen Theologie: Festschrift für Walther Zimmerli zum 70 Geburtstag* (ed. Walther Zimmerli, et al.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1977), 446-59. Pahk, *Il canto della gioia in Dio*.

⁹⁴ Pinçon, *L’énigme du bonheur*, 63.

⁹⁵ See Pahk, *Il canto della gioia in Dio*, 204-206.

⁹⁶ Craig G. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 151.

God's main work is God's creation, and therefore the human being, in his/her work, becomes a participant of God's creation. This act of seeing the good of one's work, gives a sense of satisfaction and completion, which for God, concluded with the seventh day of rest. This labor, in and of itself, regardless of its fruit or outcome or profit, is good. It is at this point that Qoheleth notes: "Also this I have seen that it is from the hand of God." (2:24) This expression is another way of saying that this "eating, drinking, and seeing the good in his work" is a gift from God, because God provides it. The second creation narrative combines these elements since it is by means of eating a fruit that the human being is to gain "wisdom and knowledge." The narrative highlights the human being in relationship, the man and woman in a partnership of equals, but who in ceasing to fear God and losing trust in one another lose the essence of the original joy of paradise. One of the consequences is that the man will now have to work and labor in order to eat and survive, whereas before their food was freely provided by God. The human drama will now consist in the challenge of recovering that original joy, both in relationship, in work, and in the simple act of eating and drinking.

This is the first mention of God since the start of the parody of the king in 1:13, where the king had said that God has given a grievous task to human beings. We begin to see the root שמח used in a different way and with a very different meaning than that which we saw in the parody of the king. Qoheleth 2:25 introduces the thought: "Who can eat and who can have enjoyment without God?", while 2:26 explicitly states: "God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy..." Hence, ושמחה is one of three direct objects of the verb נתן, where God is the subject; it therefore comes from God and is put into juxtaposition with wisdom and knowledge, a relationship which we will take a closer look at below.

In addition, this section constitutes an authentic break with the royal parody of 2:1–23, not in the sense that it is completely disconnected, since it serves as a response to the frustration and futility expressed in the royal parody, but in the sense that it expresses another voice and a development of Qoheleth's belief.⁹⁷

III.1.1. QOHELETH 2:24

Qoh 2:24 mentions twice the experience of "seeing," the first in a more general way and the second as a way of formulating Qoheleth's first-hand experience. After "eating and drinking," the third object of the "nothing is better" expression is "to see for himself that his labor is good." Before going further, let us note that while the word טוב generally means

⁹⁷ Contrary to Schwienhorst-Schönberger who believes that Qoheleth answers as King. "Erstmals beantwortet Kohelet - hier noch als König - die Frage nach dem Inhalt und der Bedingung der Möglichkeit menschlichen Glücks." Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet*, 238.

“good,” it is in the same semantic field as שמה and at times, it can also be understood as “pleasing” and “desirable.”⁹⁸ It communicates the idea of happiness and is found in all of the joy texts.⁹⁹ The expression often used together with or in place of שמחה is ראה בטוב “to see the good” or “to experience what is good” (2:1.24; 3:13; 5:17; 6:6).¹⁰⁰ In addition to providing an answer to the frustration coming from apparently fruitless effort and toil, the choice of words in Qoh 2:24 may remind us of the first creation account in Genesis, where God contemplated his creation and “God saw that it was good” וירא אלהים כי טוב.

In addition, the expression גם־זה which begins the second half of v. 24 signals that Qoheleth is noting something additional which comes “from the hand of God.” Once more, this expression remits us to the idea of a creator God who creates and forms with his hand. The first thing that Qoheleth had noted to have come from God was “the grievous task” in 1:13. It is the same task which he has just referred to in 2:23, said to be painful and grievous, and which he will note in 2:26 as “gathering and collecting so that he may give to one who is good in God’s sight.” Therefore, Qoheleth has just created a contrast between two things that have come from God’s hand, the first being seemingly negative and now the experience of joy that is clearly good. Overall, this text introduces us into the atmosphere of God’s continual work of creation.

III.1.2. QOHELETH 2:25

Verse 25 reiterates the point made in the previous verse asking: “For who can eat and who can have enjoyment apart from Him?” If we are to read the verse, accepting the modification to the MT as I have noted in footnote 89, we find further emphasis on the impossibility of enjoyment without God. First, however, we must discuss the meaning of the root חוש, which is highly disputed.¹⁰¹ The basic meaning of this root, which appears 22 times in the Hebrew Scriptures, is “hasten,” but a secondary meaning is “to feel” either painful (as in Job 20:2) or

⁹⁸ The word טוב (which appears 45 times in 38 verses) or טובָה (4:8; 5:10, 17; 6:3, 6; 7:14; 9:18) Four out of the seven joy texts (2:24; 3:12.22; 8:15) are introduced by the formula אֵין־טוב. This formula makes the value of what is expressed thereafter “absolute.” For a more detailed analysis of this formula see, Graham S. Ogden, “Better Proverb (Tob-Spruch), Rhetorical Criticism, and Qoheleth,” *JBL* 96, no. 4 (1977): 489-505; Ogden, “Qoheleth’s Use of the “Nothing Is Better”-Form,” 339-50.

⁹⁹ In fact, Fox dares to say that “Qoheleth makes no distinction between טוב and שמחה when they designate good feelings and experiences.” Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 117.

¹⁰⁰ Agustinus Gianto, “The Theme of Enjoyment in Qohelet,” *Bib* 73, no. 4 (1992): 528-32.

¹⁰¹ Schoors offers a thorough exposition of the different meanings and sources of this verb. Antoon Schoors, *The Preacher Sought to Find Pleasing Words: a Study of the Language of Qoheleth* (vol. I Grammar; Leuven: Katholieke Universiteit Leuven. Departement Orientalistiek, 1992), 384-386. See also: Friedrich Ellermeier, “Das Verbum חוש in Koh. 2,25. Eine exegetische, auslegungsgeschichtliche und semasiologische Untersuchung,” *ZAW* 75 (1963): 197-217.

joyful, as it is taken here in Qoh 2:25. Gesenius translates חוּשׁ in this passage as *geniessen* – “enjoy.”¹⁰² The two other meanings which can be attributed to this verse in question are “be anxious” or “be sated.”¹⁰³ Ellermeyer settled the debate on this verb, and is followed by a host of scholars who stick to the meaning “enjoy,” on the basis of an extensive analysis which is unconvincing to Schoors.¹⁰⁴ It is the only time the Hebrew Scriptures use this word to denote joy. “If חוּשׁ is polyvalent, then Qoheleth may be focusing the reader’s attention upon v. 25 in particular as a hinge around which vv. 24 and 26 turn.”¹⁰⁵ If we read this verse closely in Hebrew, we will notice a play on the words חוּשׁ and חוּץ, which means “apart from.” They have an almost identical pronunciation and therefore חוּץ further emphasizes the sound of the word חוּשׁ. In fact, if read quickly, they might sound like homonyms and would seem to be a dittography which would *sound* like Qoheleth were saying: “For who can eat and who can have enjoyment, enjoyment from Him?” This creative reading would not significantly change the meaning, but it might simply highlight the rare word חוּשׁ and put an accent on the meaning “enjoy.”

III.1.3. QOHELETH 2:26

This joy text concludes with v. 26: “For to a person who is good in His sight, He has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, while to the sinner He has given the task of gathering and collecting so that he may give to one who is good in God's sight. Also this is breath and chasing after wind.” God gives the human being knowledge and wisdom, together with joy in 2:26, supplanting the idea that knowledge and wisdom only give grief and pain, as had been mentioned in 1:18. It is true that knowledge and wisdom make one acutely aware of the reality and the beauty of different life events by pointing to the responsibility and the pain associated with this awareness and hence cause suffering. However, at the same time, this enables the wise person to experience a very deep joy. The fact that שְׂמֵחָה is paired with knowledge and wisdom here in 2:26 shows the development in its meaning and interpretation. In the same way, the negative connotation of knowledge and wisdom from 1:17 evolves and takes on another level in 2:26. Knowledge and wisdom are different in 2:26 because they are accompanied by the important third element: joy.

¹⁰² Wilhelm Gesenius, *Hebräisches und aramäisches Handwörterbuch über das Alte Testament* (Leipzig: F.C.W. Vogel, 1921).

¹⁰³ This meaning of this verb is highly disputed in this particular verse. Clines, “חוּשׁ,” *DCH* 3:179.

¹⁰⁴ Schoors, *The Preacher Sought to Find Pleasing Words I*, 386.

¹⁰⁵ In a footnote, Byargeon notes that this is “supported by a word count of vv.24–26: v.24 contains 18 words, v.25, 7 words, and v.26, excluding the *hevel* judgment as a concluding formula, contains 18 words.” R. W. Byargeon, “The Significance of Ambiguity in Ecclesiastes 2,24-26,” in *Qoheleth in the Context of Wisdom* (ed. Antoon Schoors; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1998), 367-72, 370.

First, let us look at what God gives to “one who is good in His sight”: namely, “wisdom, knowledge and joy,” and in a second moment we will look at the “task” that God gives to the sinner.

III.2. WHAT GOD GIVES TO ONE GOOD IN HIS SIGHT: WISDOM, KNOWLEDGE, AND JOY

We return to the parody of the king, the search for wisdom and knowledge, and particularly the initial experience spelled out in 1:13–18. In 1:13, Qoheleth says that he had “set his heart¹⁰⁶ to seek and explore with wisdom concerning all that has been done under heaven.” The verbs “seek and explore” לדרוש ולתור,¹⁰⁷ express a merism whereby Qoheleth’s search and exploration intend to embrace both that which is known and that which is unknown; in other words, everything which takes place in the realm of human experience, *everything* that is done under heaven, although he does not explicitly specify who the agent of this action is.¹⁰⁸ The very fact that Qoheleth does not specify the agent of the action leaves open the possibility that the human being is not the only actor. As we will see throughout Qoheleth, God is continuously acting and working in the human realm, and hence we can be certain that the human being in his search and exploration also seeks understanding of divine action. This therefore enhances the need for the search to be carried out with wisdom, as any claim to understanding God’s action requires a certain degree of God-given wisdom. This search is carried out בחכמה, “with wisdom,” and in this sense, wisdom, the royal quality *par excellence* is here the instrument and not the object of Qoheleth’s search.¹⁰⁹ By this, therefore, we must assume that the king already possesses the wisdom needed for this search. In 1:13b, Qoheleth seems to spell out this “seeking and exploring” by describing it as an “evil task” ענין רע that God has given to human beings. This is the first time God comes onto the stage. We will return to this “task” in a moment, as it is also repeated in 2:23, directly before the joy text, and then again in 2:26.

In 1:16–18 the king states: “Behold, I have magnified and increased wisdom more than all who were over Jerusalem before me; and my mind has observed a wealth of wisdom and

¹⁰⁶ The expression “to set his heart” points to the seat of reason and will, the place where the human being makes decisions and is more properly understood as I “dedicated myself” or “applied myself”.

¹⁰⁷ The verb דרש “search” is used only this one time in Qoheleth, although it is common in the Hebrew Bible; it is most often used in reference to the exploration of something known, often the Torah or God. The verb תור “explore”, on the other hand, is used in reference to the exploration of something unknown. Mazinghi, *Ho cercato*, 164.

¹⁰⁸ It is interesting to note that neither God nor God’s law is ever the explicit object of Qoheleth’s search. Mazinghi, *Ho cercato*, 164.

¹⁰⁹ Wisdom does not have a univocal sense. On one hand, it has an instrumental meaning, “the faculty and mode of thought by which one may rationally seek and comprehend truth,” but on the other hand, wisdom also has a meaning akin to knowledge, that which is known and passed on. Fox, *Qohelet and his Contradictions*, 80–81.

knowledge...” Wisdom is now seen as the object of the king’s acquisition, which has grown and accumulated, and at the end of the verse, “wisdom and knowledge” חכמה ודעת are coupled together.¹¹⁰ Wisdom is no longer used in the instrumental sense as it was in v.13, but it points to the goal of the action, the “knowledge” which Qoheleth wishes to acquire.¹¹¹ Their sense here is practically synonymous, and therefore they again form a merism that further emphasizes the greatness of this wisdom/knowledge that Qoheleth claims to have observed.¹¹² Nevertheless, the king does not claim to possess or even to have reached *all* wisdom and knowledge, thereby recognizing, albeit implicitly, that the human being, even the wisest of sages, is limited.

Qoh 1:17 has some textual difficulties. The MT reads: “I have given my heart to know wisdom, madness and folly...”, because the form וְדַעַת, a nominal infinitive, would also be united to the two terms following “wisdom,” namely “madness and folly.” However, if we modify the MT as suggested by the BHQ, we see a repetition of the word-pair “wisdom and knowledge.” Following the ancient versions G Sir Vg, instead of וְדַעַת we read וְדַעַת. In order to be consistent we must move the *zaquef* from הַכְּמָה to וְדַעַת.¹¹³ This reading therefore places “wisdom and knowledge” in contraposition to “madness and folly,” and they are concluded to be “striving after the wind,” although, interestingly in this case they are not הבל. The term for ושכלות “madness” is written with a *sin* instead of a *samekh*, which looks more like “prudence” and may simply be an orthographic variant. However, Qoheleth may want to be ambiguous on purpose. The means that the human being is willing to go to in order to acquire wisdom may at times be likened to a sort of madness.¹¹⁴ All this is “chasing after the wind,” a negative conclusion. Perhaps what our Sage is trying to get across is not that wisdom and knowledge are useless in themselves, but that the human being’s ambitions and efforts to become great and increase wisdom will lead nowhere. Hence, the following verse as introduced by the כִּי clause provides the explanation: “Because in much wisdom there is much grief and increasing knowledge *results in* increasing pain.” This *mashal* with which Qoheleth concludes this section may be an allusion to the creation narrative of Genesis 2–3, where Adam and Eve, seeking to grow in wisdom and knowledge by eating the fruit of the prohibited tree, end up having to labor and give birth in pain. However, it may also indicate that the search and ambition to have more

¹¹⁰ “In Wisdom Literature, both are almost always ethically positive, and *da‘at* as well as *hokmah* implies more than mere storage of information.” Fox, *Qohelet and his Contradictions*, 82.

¹¹¹ “Desde luego los dos juntos abarcan todo el ámbito del conocimiento teórico y práctico, general y particular, estático y dinámico.” Vílchez Líndez, *Eclesiastes*, 184.

¹¹² “Wisdom Literature usually applies the terms only to knowledge of God’s will, the causal relation between deed and consequence, and the principles of proper behavior, as well as to the reasoning ability to apply such knowledge.” Fox, *Qohelet and his Contradictions*, 83.

¹¹³ cf. Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet*, 195; Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 12; Vílchez Líndez, *Eclesiastes*, 183; Mazzinghi, *Ho cercato*, 173.

¹¹⁴ A madness, which may be likened to Plato’s *theia mania*. “Lo sforzo dell’uomo di conoscere la Sapienza lo porta a concludere che spesso non sembra esserci alcuna differenza tra la Sapienza e la stoltezza, tra il desiderio di conoscere e la follia.” Mazzinghi, *Ho cercato*, 174.

and more wisdom and knowledge does not eliminate the reality of pain and suffering from human life, but rather makes one more aware of it.

Finally, 2:21 closely mirrors 2:26, though instead of “wisdom, knowledge and joy” we have a parallel statement made about the human being who has labored with “wisdom, knowledge and skill,” but then must give his legacy to one who has not worked with them. Skill adds an attribute that further modifies and defines “wisdom and knowledge” as something within one’s human capacities. Nevertheless, we touch the frustration of having to leave behind the fruit or profit of one’s work with death. The sense of satisfaction is lacking: “for what does the human being get in all his labor?” (2:22), because his “task” is painful and grievous (2:23).

In contrast, however, 2:26 adds to both “wisdom and knowledge,” God’s gift of “joy” used here for the first time in Qoheleth in a more positive sense, as the previous references in the parody of the king pointed towards the meaning “pleasure.” Without the divine dimension, knowledge and wisdom alone give grief and pain. However, when these are gifts received from God, as they are in 2:26, joy is also part of the gift. Joy is clearly a gift that comes from God, yet it is also something we may cultivate and acquire by means of our work, and it is at the same time something we choose to experience by eating, drinking and telling ourselves that our work is good. The meaning evolves from mere “pleasure” as described in 2:1–10 and takes a qualitative step.

We must note that this joy text is thoroughly impregnated with the presence of God. After only having mentioned God in 1:13 as giving a “grievous task” to human beings at the very beginning of the parody of the king, God now reenters at the close of the parody and Qoheleth mentions God in every verse of this joy text. The joy described in 2:24 is from “the hand of God.” Qoh 2:25 questions whether someone can eat or have joy without God, and finally, God is the active giver in 2:26. The joy that Qoheleth presents in these verses is a divine gift and forms a total opposition to the superficial sort of “pleasure” that Qoheleth as the King Solomon experienced temporarily, at the beginning of Qoh 2. The theological perspective of these verses highlights the “good” of this “enjoyment” in contrast to a life that seeks pleasure as something absolute and finds it wanting (2:1–11).¹¹⁵ The contrast is sharp and significant: there is no profit (2:11) for the work that one does when one seeks to accumulate possessions and seek pleasure by one’s own accord. The only way that the human being can “find enjoyment in his toil,” according to Qoheleth, is when it comes “from the hand of God.”

¹¹⁵ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 26.

III.3. THE “TASK” GOD GIVES TO THE SINNER

The emphasis in 2:26 is placed on the opposition between the gift of “wisdom, knowledge, and joy” given to the one pleasing to God and the “task of gathering and collecting” which God gives to the sinner. God’s gift to the sinner is more of an imposition: “the task of gathering and collecting so that he may give to one who is good in God’s sight.” As we saw in 1:13, Qoheleth speaks of the “evil task” עֵינִן רַע that God has given to *all* human beings to be busy with. In 2:23, “All his days his *task* is painful and grievous; even at night his mind does not rest. This too is הַבֵּל.” Finally, in 2:26 he further describes this “task” as that of “gathering and collecting” עֵינִן לְאִסוּף וּלְכַנּוּס so that he may give to one who is good in God’s sight. Interestingly, the word עֵינִן frequently occurs in the context of statements about human cognition, and hence Qoheleth is concerned with the human endeavor to acquire knowledge.¹¹⁶ He notes the futility of accumulating many possessions in this life if one will not take them when one dies. The parody of the king seems to illustrate perfectly this futile endeavor. It is the senselessness of gathering and collecting for someone else that Qoheleth highlights here. These three mentions of “task” up until now give it a negative meaning. The next and final time that Qoheleth mentions “task” in 3:10, it will take on a new and more positive connotation, as we will study later in this chapter. At that point, it is followed by vv.11–15, which further imbue it with a sense of joy and goodness. For now, however, let us focus on the primary connotation of the “task” which God gives the human being.

It is interesting to note the diverse actions of “giving” which Qoheleth attributes to God. The verb נָתַן is used 11 times with God as its subject and the remaining expressions use phrases such as “from the hand of God” or “a gift of God.” God gives a task to the human being (1:13; 2:26; 3:10), God gives joy (2:24; 2:26; 3:13; 5:17.18), God gives wisdom and knowledge (2:26), God gives עֵלֶם (3:11), God gives days or years of life (5:17; 8:15; 9:9); God gives riches and wealth (5:18; 6:2); God gives the spirit (12:7). These are all different elements of life that God gives to the human being, and in 2:26 we see how God gives both “wisdom, knowledge, and joy,” and “the task of gathering and collecting.” Though the former gift is destined to the person who is good in God’s sight, the latter is given to the sinner. There is a distinction between the gifts, one being apparently more desirable than the other, and Qoheleth’s statement in 2:26 sounds like the simplistic and predictable belief that God rewards the good and punishes the sinner.¹¹⁷ God is the subject of the giving, and God gives apparently desirable gifts and

¹¹⁶ In fact, according to Schellenberg, five out of the eight instances of the word occur in the context of passages where Qoheleth reflects on the limits and sources of human cognition. Annette Schellenberg, “Qoheleth’s Use of the Word עֵינִן,” in *The Language of Qoheleth in its Context* (ed. A. Berlejung and P. Van Hecke; Leuven: Peeters, 2007), 143-55, 145.

¹¹⁷ For more on this particular verse, see Sanders who notes that newer exegetical approaches have led to the assumption that Qoheleth 2.26 describes an absurd aspect of life, therefore disqualifying the retributive sense of this verse. Paul Sanders, “A Human and a Deity with Conflicting Morals (Qoheleth 2.26),” in *Open-*

other seemingly challenging gifts. However, one kind of gift does not rule out the other and, in fact, in both actions, God is giving to the one good in his sight. The sinner becomes a sort of mediator who gathers and collects in order to give to the one good in God's sight and therefore, whether directly or indirectly, God is giving to the one good in his sight. The focus therefore lies on the one who is pleasing to God: both God and the sinner end up giving to this one. One cannot really value the gifts of joy and time, for example, if one does not taste the often dry and tiring task of life, and the challenge of real work. We shall explore in the chapters to come how Qoheleth reacts to these traditional solutions to the problem of evil and how his thought and reactions develop.¹¹⁸

At the conclusion of 2:26, we find once again the expression: “Also this is הבל and chasing after wind.” The repeated word הבל is often associated with the phrase: “chasing after the wind” רעיון רוח or רעות רוח. The word רעות and רעיון derive from either the Hebrew רעה “to pasture,” or the Aramaic רעינא “to take pleasure in,” “to desire.”¹¹⁹ This second meaning is frequent in Late Hebrew. The first meaning “to pasture” may denote a futile endeavor, since who is able to “herd,” catch, or control the wind? This action of chasing after the wind, on one hand, shows that the human being is not in power or control since it expresses something that is not within human grasp. Yet, on the other hand, it reveals a very characteristic attitude of the human being, that of seeking God, the drive to go beyond what is within one's reach and the motivation to surpass oneself. This latter sense is not unrelated to the second possible origin of the root. If we take רעות to mean “desire” and רוח is understood to include the God-given breath or spirit which activates and sustains life, “we have the fundamental, yet tragic, paradox that resides at the heart of human existence and experience: the ephemeral nature of human existence, contrasted with the innate desire to retain the vital spirit that animates human life.”¹²⁰ This phrase is repeated three times throughout the second part of Qoh 2, specifically in vv. 11, 17, and 21. In v. 11, הבל had referred to all the activities done by his hands and all the labor he had exerted; in v. 17, הבל was again pointing to the work done under the sun; while in v. 21,

Mindedness in the Bible and Beyond, Library of Hebrew Bible/ Old Testament Studies (ed. M.C.A. Korpel and L.L. Grabbe; vol. 616; London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 237-46, 239.

¹¹⁸ After Koch's original article published in 1955 and the English translation in 1983, the so-called Tun-Ergehen-Zusammenhang or act-consequence relationship has taken prevalence over and above the theory of divine retribution in the Old Testament. Klaus Koch, "Is there a Doctrine of Retribution in the Old Testament?," in *Theodicy in the Old Testament* (ed. James L. Crenshaw; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 57-87, 79-80. His ideas, however, have received ample criticism. Peter Hatton, "A Cautionary Tale: The Acts-Consequence 'Construct'," *JSOT* 35, no. 3 (2011): 375-84.

¹¹⁹ Marcus Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (New York: The Judaica Press, 1985), 1487.

¹²⁰ Perdue, *Wisdom & Creation*, 207.

the act of giving one's legacy or portion to someone else after laboring with wisdom, knowledge, and skill is הבל.¹²¹

We may ask, consequently, what זה or "this" refers to in v. 26 when Qoheleth says, "Also *this* is הבל and chasing after the wind"? Since it comes at the conclusion of the verse, it makes most sense to say that Qoheleth calls הבל the entirety of the verse: that is, the contrast between what God gives to the one pleasing to God and what God gives to the sinner. If both gifts are indeed labeled as הבל, does this mean that Qoheleth dares to question and cast doubt upon the value of God's gift? Is the gift of joy so new and unexpected that Qoheleth still doubts that it can be from God? Or perhaps by judging it as הבל he is simply stating that even joy, the joy that comes from God and that we experience in this lifetime is ephemeral and will pass away and end? Or perhaps, the הבל judgment refers to the conclusions taken from the apparent retributive theory. If we were to accept and uphold the retributive theory pretending to understand and comprehend God's justice, the conclusion presented in 2:26 would make perfect sense, but the fact that Qoheleth immediately labels it as הבל, signals to us that he may already be discreetly putting this theory in question. Therefore, we can still hold as true Qoheleth's statement in 2:25, that life without God is הבל, first and foremost a reality that is passing. In other words, with or without God, life is הבל, fleeting and ephemeral. Nevertheless, Qoheleth is not being clear. Evidently the first joy text is a completely new thought for Qoheleth, and it would seem as though he is still making sense of its meaning. To label the gifts of wisdom, knowledge and joy as הבל might seem like a contradiction at first, especially if we understand הבל with a negative and not a neutral connotation, since they are good and divine. However, the truth is that they too will pass away and come to an end, as will the gift of life itself. We may therefore conclude that the use of הבל need not imply the negative connotation of absurd or futile, and this final phrase of v. 26 is the only implicit reference to time in this joy text as it speaks of the fleeting nature of life and the futile act of chasing the wind, which escapes human control. Qoheleth is presenting us with a reality that he judges as temporary and passing.

III.4. QOHELETH 2:24-26 AS TRANSITION BETWEEN JOY AND TIME

This first joy text plays an important role at this point of Qoheleth's treatise. By 2:23 we are at an apparent dead-end, as the previous verses are permeated by an exasperated tone questioning the meaning and purpose of work and effort. The repetition of הבל and its connotation of something meaningless and empty rings true throughout these lines of frustrated complaint and acknowledged futility. After the king's royal experiment of pleasure, testing and

¹²¹ I would simply like to note here the use of the root הלק here translated as portion or legacy which will come up in 5:17–18 and 9:6.9, texts which we will study in the next two chapters. This root also comes up in 3:22 and 11:2. We will see how important it is for the concept of joy within Qoheleth.

tasting that which worldly riches and wealth might provide, 2:23 brings us to the stark realization that these gains offer no lasting purpose, provide no meaning for one's work, and sadly give no true, enduring joy. Therefore, the first joy text, 2:24–26, offers a sharp turn to this negative tone. Our first “there is nothing better than” phrase, which will later introduce other joy texts, points us to the greatest good for the human being in this life: to eat, drink, and recognize that one's work is good. In addition, as we have noted, these verses take on a theological flavor, a vital element absent from the entire royal discourse. For the first time, joy is said to come from God, and Qoheleth proposes a turning point in his discourse. Therefore, these verses are a bridge between the search for meaning and purpose, joy as a response to this search, and the coming poem on time in 3:1–8, which proposes a more realistic vision of life marked by the rhythm of the mystery of time. By the conclusion of 2:26, Qoheleth has set the scene for the poem on time that follows. It is almost as if Qoheleth is not yet totally convinced by the answer he timidly offers in this first joy text, but as we will see, the affirmation that joy is a response to the question of purpose will nevertheless increase in strength throughout the treatise.

No matter how much the human being can search, labor, buy, accumulate, and even experience pleasure (2:10), there can be no joy if it is not given by God. One's labor and the fruit of one's work may be the source of despair (2:20) just as much as it can be the source of God's joy. If one seeks to pile up and accumulate things that one will eventually lose when one dies, then one is working for the future instead of for the present. The inevitable consequence is giving one's legacy to one who has not labored with wisdom, knowledge, and skill (2:21). If, however, one lives in the present, eating and drinking, and telling himself that his work is good, this makes all the difference and it too comes from the hand of God. As we have noted above, the contrast formed between the first two chapters of Qoheleth, the egoistic search of the king, and this first joy text highlights the fact that any experience of life can be a source of joy if one chooses to enjoy and allows God to give him/her that joy. The key is in v. 25 where Qoheleth bluntly asks: who can eat and have enjoyment without God? In other words, a life without God is first and foremost a reality that is passing, and secondarily we may add also to *הבל* the meaning of empty and futile, fleeting and fruitless, as all the riches and pleasures which the king uselessly accumulates but does not enjoy.

Therefore, in this first joy text, where Qoheleth turns away from the preceding negativity and proposes joy as the greatest good for the human being in this life, we witness a development of Qoheleth's belief from the parody of the king, a very egotistic search for riches and pleasure, to a very theologically charged experience of human joy. We have seen the temporary and passing reality of possessions and riches that then open way to a desire for something more consistent and with weight, joy as a divine gift. Immediately following this first joy statement is Qoheleth's famous poem on time. Although the poem does not explicitly mention joy, we

cannot ignore its strategic placement after the first joy text, and we will look at its relationship with joy in the sections to come.

IV. QOHELETH 3:1–8 POEM ON TIME

1	לכל זמן ועת לכל-הפץ תחת השמים: ס	For everything there is a season, a time for every affair under the heavens:
2	עת ללדת ועת למות עת לטעת ועת לעקור נטוע:	A time to give birth, a time to die; a time to plant, a time to uproot what has been planted.
3	עת להרוג ועת לרפוא עת לפרוץ ועת לבנות:	A time to kill, a time to heal; a time to tear down, a time to build up.
4	עת לבכות ועת לשחוק עת ספוד ועת רקוד:	A time to weep, a time to laugh; a time to mourn, a time to dance.
5	עת להשליך אבנים ועת כנוס אבנים עת לחבוק ועת לרחק מחבק:	A time to throw stones away, a time to gather them; a time to embrace, a time to refrain from embraces.
6	עת לבקש ועת לאבד עת לשמור ועת להשליך:	A time to seek, a time to lose; a time to keep, a time to discard.
7	עת לקרוע ועת לתפור עת לחשות ועת לדבר:	A time to rend, a time to sew; a time to keep silent, a time to speak.
8	עת לאהב ועת לשנא עת מלחמה ועת שלום: ס	A time to love, a time to hate; a time for war, a time for peace.

IV.1. QOHELETH 3:1 OPENING LINE

The preliminary introductory verse, a sort of thesis statement in 3:1, is made up of 7 words and sets the tone for what follows: “For everything there is a season, a time for every affair under the heavens.”¹²² The first five words *לכל זמן ועת לכל-הפץ* form a chiasmic structure with the words “all” *כל*: A, A’, and “time” *זמן* and *עת*: B, B’. In A, *לכל* expresses a general ambiguous “everything,” whereas in A’, *לכל* is in construct with *הפץ* and limits it to “every affair.” Time, expressed by means of two different words *זמן* and *עת*, indicates “the totality of time,” and is found at the center of the chiasm. Therefore, the totality of time is at the center of

¹²² Mazzinghi, *Ho cercato*, 193.

“all” that forms part of human existence “under heaven.” This structure highlights the importance of time and its centrality in the poem to follow.

Here in 3:1, I conserve the translation of the word *חפץ* with its later meaning of “affair” or “event,” however, an earlier meaning of this word is “joy” or “pleasure.”¹²³ Qoheleth uses it with this earlier meaning in 5:3 and 12:1 and even 12:10 according to some translations, giving validity to this specific connotation within Qoheleth.¹²⁴ Therefore, it is not impossible that Qoheleth in the ambiguous and ironic style that characterizes the book, uses this word with a double meaning in 3:1 in order to bring the element of joy directly into the opening line of this most-important poem on time. Qoheleth repeats the word *חפץ* in a similar phrase in 3:17 and 8:6, where both interpretations “affair” and “joy” are complementary and make sense. In addition, the meaning of *חפץ* in 5:3 can also go both ways: “God has no affairs with fools” and “God has no pleasure or joy with fools” both work very well. If we take the possible interpretation of *חפץ* as “joy” into account in our study of the opening line above, A לכול “to everything” is mirrored with A’ where לכול is in construct with *חפץ*, narrowing the meaning of “everything” to “every joy” by the conclusion of the verse. The totality of time, expressed by זמן and עת is at the center and hence, it is at the center not just of everything or of every affair, but of every joy. In other words, the totality of time is at the heart of every joy that is part of human experience, and joy is to be considered essential and vital to human existence. Joy contains the totality of time in terms of its ability to unite all times, or in another way of putting it, in its quality of timelessness. Therefore, the element of joy is also present in this famous poem, albeit in a hidden and less obvious way.

Rashi also agrees that this opening line has something to do with joy as he comments: “one who has frivolously accumulated many possessions should not rejoice. For although he possesses them now, everything has its time and they will ultimately pass on to the righteous.”¹²⁵ For him, the passage of time equates to the passing of all moments and hence all things in this life, which furthermore invite to an attitude of detachment. We are unable to hold onto any moment or time as an end unto itself, and therefore an acceptance of the passing aspect enables us to enjoy each moment more fully.

Taking the lead from 2:26 where the theme of time was introduced by means of the word *הבל*, the poem puts a strong emphasis on the different times in these verses and joy is hidden and

¹²³ The root *חפץ* whose basic meaning is “happiness, joy, delight, pleasure” or “affair, concern, business, matter” is found in 3:1.17; 5:3.7; 8:3.6; 12:1.10. “The noun then refers to the substantivized desire, delight, will.” Schoors, *The Preacher Sought to Find Pleasing Words II*, 212.

¹²⁴ The nominative form has the same basic meaning as the root, but adds a certain nuance especially in Qoheleth. W. E. Staples, “The Root Meaning of *hāpeš* in Ecclesiastes 5,” *JNES* 24 (1965): 110-12.

¹²⁵ Meir Zlotowitz, *Koheles/Ecclesiastes/Megilat Qohelet: A New Translation with a commentary anthologised from Talmudic, Midrashic and rabbinic sources*, ASTS (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 1994), 82.

almost invisible. After the mention of the first joy text, the pendulum is now swinging strongly in the direction of time, in the tension between time and joy. Nevertheless, the poem expresses and reflects an inversion of what we have said about time disappearing and becoming timeless and seamless within the experience of joy. Time is at the heart of every joy, and this entire poem is embraced and encompassed by the overarching and primordial experience of joy. If only for a moment, Qoheleth looks through the prism of joy and sees the multiple times that make up and build up that experience. For this reason, we cannot judge any of these times as positive or negative, as good or bad, but simply as the times of life where joy is a potential experience, always possible on a deeper level. The emphasis on time, however, undoubtedly takes precedence in the text. The first stich of v.1 says “For everything there is a season,” and it is separated by an accent from the next stich that only speaks of time. The second part, “a time for every affair under the heavens” brings into relationship the themes of joy and time. Nevertheless, looking at the totality of the verse, there is clearly a superiority of temporal references, since there are two, as opposed to the one “hidden” reference to joy in the second stich. Another important point is that in this introductory verse Qoheleth does not repeat the more common term for joy שמחה that he has just used in 2:26, but instead uses the more ambiguous term הפנ. It would therefore seem that the text is insinuating that joy is “submitted to time” and that therefore time is more important than joy. We will return to the theme of joy and how it is present or absent in this poem on time towards the end of this section.

This raises another question, however, which we must keep in mind for the discussion of time in the verses to come: What exactly does the “totality of time” mean, and is it quantitative or qualitative? We shall return to it when we study Qoh 3:10–15. The repeated expression “under heaven” concludes this verse, which along with “under the sun” as we noted earlier, points to the realm of human experience hence limiting time to this realm.

We have in this opening line the first occurrence of the word עת which, after יום and עולם, is the most important word of the semantic field “time” in the Hebrew Scriptures, and which always refers to time in some way or another. There are a total of 456 occurrences of עת in all the texts of Classical Hebrew combined, of which 296 are from the MT, 44 are from the Hebrew text of Sirach, 114 are from the Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS), and 2 are from Inscriptions.¹²⁶ Of the 296 occurrences in the MT, 40 are in Qoheleth and 31 alone are in chapter 3, while the remaining nine occurrences are in 7:17; 8:5.6.9; 9:8.11.12(2x); 10:17.¹²⁷ The word עת is typically translated by the Greek καιρός in the LXX, which today holds a very philosophical meaning. However, it is only until after Paul Tillich’s study that the philosophically weighted sense

¹²⁶ Clines, “עת,” *DCH* 6:626-633.

¹²⁷ Apart from the occurrences in Qoheleth, עת is found 36 times in Jeremiah; 22 in the Psalms; 18 in Deuteronomy and Ezekiel each; 16 in Daniel and 2 Chronicles each; 11 in 2 Kings and Isaiah each; 10 in Genesis, Judges and Job each; and 9 in 1 Chronicles. Tryggve Kronholm, “עת” *TDOT* 11:437.

of *καίρος* as a moment of crisis-demanding decision is applied to studies of the Hebrew Scriptures. A precise definition of *תע* is difficult and its meaning varies according to the context in which the word is embedded. It is from this context that the actual content or quality of the time in question can be determined.¹²⁸ The chief meaning of *תע* has been proposed to be something like “a definite point in time for something,”¹²⁹ or “the proper time.” Nevertheless, in Qoheleth, it does not take on a purely chronological meaning, and it is never used in the sense of a period of time or duration.¹³⁰ Actually, *תע* in Qoheleth seems to express an idea of time that is indefinite.¹³¹ We hope to better understand what Qoheleth means by *תע* by means of our study of the poem on time below.

IV.2. THE WORD *תע* AS “PROPER TIME”

With regards to the possible definition of “proper time” which is often associated with the word *תע*, we must note that the doctrine of a proper time for everything is universal in classical wisdom both in and outside of Hebrew culture.¹³² The art of living may be defined as learning how to determine not only whether something is necessarily right or wrong, but whether it is the appropriate time to do such a thing. The mission of the wise person, according to traditional wisdom, is to discern the precise time for appropriate conduct and speech. If we were to interpret Qoh 3:1–8 along this line, the objective of the poem would be to transmit the belief that there is a “correct” and “precise” time for the different moments of human life. There would exist, for example, an appropriate time “to plant” so that more fruit may be obtained, or the best time to “pull up what is planted” in order to replant in good timing, or as is often emphasized in Wisdom literature, the right time “to speak” and “to keep silent” (Prov 15:23; 25:11). In addition, if this poem were about “proper times,” we must ask what exactly *makes* them proper. Does God decree that a time is proper or correct? Or is it a space in time allotted for that specific event because it is part of human reality? Or is there a different time for each person depending on his/her own circumstances to determine when and where to “plant” and

¹²⁸ Wilch, *Time and Event*, 32-33, 102.

¹²⁹ Ernst Jenni, “*תע* ‘ēṭ time,” *TLOT* 2:952. Although *תע* can parallel “day” in the expression “in those days and at that time” (Jer 33:15), in essence the word does not express a natural division of time, nor does it imply a special situation in the course of history as do other words such as: *אַחֲרֵי־יָמִים* “end” or “time to come;” *עַד* “eternity;” or *עוֹלָם* “long time,” “age,” “eternity.” The related adjective *תַּעֲיָה* is a *hapax legomenon* found only in Leviticus 16:21 meaning “opportune.” The related adverb *עַתָּה* occurs 433 times and means “at this time” or “now.”

¹³⁰ Mazzinghi, *Ho cercato*, 211. Schoors, *The Preacher Sought to Find Pleasing Words I*, 111.

¹³¹ Kronholm, *TDOT* 11:434-451.

¹³² Bo Isaksson, *Studies in the Language of Qoheleth: with special emphasis on the verbal system* (Uppsala University: Alqvist and Wiksell International, 1987), 177; Oswald Loretz, *Qohelet und der alte Orient. Untersuchungen zu Stil und theologischer Thematik des Buches Qohelet* (Freiburg: Herder, 1964), 200, 252; Hans Heinrich Schmid, *Wesen und Geschichte der Weisheit eine Untersuchung zur altorientalischen und israelitischen Weisheitsliteratur* (Berlin: Alfred Topelmann, 1966), 33.

“uproot,” “build” and “tear down,” which consequently makes “that” time “proper”? If the “proper time” is part of the creation that is external and superior to humanity and is ultimately a gift from God, does that imply that the human being has no power over it? Does this, in turn, imply that the human being is subjected to a greater power that determines him/her in every moment? Qoheleth’s imprecision does not always help to clarify these questions, and this can be evidenced by the diversity of scholarly opinion. In any case, the way we understand “proper time” determines whether we believe in a certain degree of moral structure, and this in turn may or may not lead to a deterministic view of God, and a passive attitude on the part of the human being. However, as we shall see by the end of our study, the poem does not give any hints or indications as to whether the human being can discern or know these times; it simply affirms that these times exist.

IV.3. QOHELETH 3:2–8

The word *תָּו* comes up 29 times in vv. 1–8 out of the 40 times that it occurs in the entire book. Qoheleth 3:2–8 contains fourteen pairs of antithetical situations, each beginning with the word *תָּו*, for 28 uses of the word. As is well known, the number seven and its multiples give the sense of fullness, totality, order, and perfection.¹³³ The number four, with which seven is multiplied, is also symbolic of completeness by being the number associated with the four directions, north, south, east, and west, and also the four elements. The “times” noted are for the most part significant of the human experience, and Qoheleth highlights all these events of human life as understood “within time.”

The expression “there is a time” which introduces each of the following 28 stichs is admittedly ambiguous. In verses 2–8, *תָּו* appears in succession each time in a construct relationship to an infinitive, except for the last pair in v. 8, where nouns are used, namely “war” and “peace.” Each verb in this poem on time is preceded by the preposition *לְ*, which would indicate finality; there is a time *for* each and every thing, not *of*.¹³⁴ This sense of finality gives each of the human experiences outlined in vv. 2–8 an active character, as well as a quality of decisiveness and conclusiveness. The real subject is lacking, as the short phrases express the time for a variety of realities that can take place in everyone and anyone’s life, nevertheless there is an active attitude required of the human being. Therefore, the moments and times that compose a human person’s life, no matter how varied they may be, are intentional, placing the

¹³³ Vélchez Líndez, *Ecclesiastes*, 225.

¹³⁴ “Il nostro saggio non si trova all’interno di una prospettiva in cui il “tempo opportuno” è già fissato ed è pienamente conoscibile dall’uomo che sarebbe così in grado di coglierlo; egli si riferisce piuttosto a una serie di azioni che l’uomo è in grado di compiere oppure subire: *tempo per*, e non *tempo di*.” Luca Mazzinghi, “Qohelet tra giudaismo ed ellenismo: Un’indagine a partire da Qoh 7,15-18,” in *Il libro del Qohelet: tradizione, redazione, teologia* (ed. Giuseppe Bellia and Angelo Passaro; Milano: Paoline, 2001), 90-116, 198.

human person in an active role. While it is true that the human being cannot know or control these times, s/he can choose to act.

The notable repetition of the word **תָּע** in addition to the rhythmic pattern of vowels of the infinitive verbs marks a regular cadence in this poem. It is almost as if the poem itself expressed the tick-tock beat of the second-hand on a clock. By using this choice of syntax, Qoheleth conveys his message not only through his choice of words, but also by the effect of their sound on the listener. Qoheleth expresses a sense of harmony and order, although the patterns are not symmetrical or regular. In addition, there are features of the poem to be mentioned below that are not as predictable as we would expect, and which therefore express the natural tensions existent in human life.

Many scholars have tried to elucidate the pattern in these 8 verses.¹³⁵ Loader labels the opposing pairs as “desirable” and “undesirable,” and finds an intricate structure of chiasms within chiasms; Fox calls “positive” the pleasant and constructive events, and “negative” their opposites. I believe that either manner of categorization of the 28 events in some way places a judgment on the events. Who are we to judge whether a specific moment is positive or desirable? Why, for example, is weeping or mourning something negative or undesirable? It is often one of the most healing and liberating emotions! Just the same, laughing and dancing, though enjoyable, may not always be expressive of a deep inner joy. Each event and action depend on the person and his/her circumstances and context. What I do concede, however, is that they are opposing events. Though they are not extremes and therefore lack a relevant continuum between them, which indicates totality, and are hence not merisms, they do imply totality by illustration, offering a broad range of examples of the “everything” which jumpstarts the poem in v. 1.¹³⁶

The first two pairs of events in v. 2 delimit the boundaries of that which breathes and lives on the earth: “to give birth” and “to die,” common to humans and animals alike, and “to plant” and “to uproot the plant,” common to the rest of the vegetative creation growing on the earth.¹³⁷ In v. 2, we have the phrase **עַת לִלְדַת** where **לִלְדַת** is the qal infinitive construct of **לָד** meaning “to give birth.” The active understanding and translation of **לִלְדַת** is significant because it is paired with **לְמוֹת**; the latter is the only event in the entire poem that is completely outside

¹³⁵ Loader, *Polar Structures in the Book of Qohelet*; Wright, “The Riddle of the Sphinx: The Structure of the Book of Qoheleth,” 313-34; Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 32f. Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 246-52.

¹³⁶ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 194.

¹³⁷ “En Qo 3,1-8, Qohelet presenta en un principio dos alternativas que, en realidad, marcan el tono de todo el resto de pares que se citan a continuación: el tiempo de generar o nacer y el tiempo de morir no están al alcance del ser humano, pues éste no es capaz de decidir sobre los momentos fundamentales de su vida.” Enrique Sanz Gimenez-Rico, “Momentos y tiempos del Dios del tiempo,” *Sal Terrae* 93 (2005): 525-35, 533.

human control.¹³⁸ Dying is underlined deliberately as the one event that stands separate from every other event of human life.¹³⁹ The active meaning could reflect the author's intention to hint at the possibility that death is an event that breaks with the apparent harmonic whole presented in this poem, accentuating the unique and problematical character of death that will be repeated throughout the book.¹⁴⁰ In addition, the root עקר denotes "uproot"¹⁴¹ more than "harvest,"¹⁴² mainly because there is no other place in Classical Hebrew where it is used with the sense of "harvest." In addition, "uproot" better expresses the death of the plant that would correspond to the preceding pair, "to give birth/to die." Both pairs, therefore, express the beginning and end of all forms of life that exist on the earth. I find the Midrashic interpretation noteworthy, since together with the theme of purity, the theme of joy is noted with this first pair of times: "Is then all the wisdom which Solomon uttered simply that there is 'A time to be born and a time to die?' Rather, the meaning is: Happy is the man whose hour of death is like the hour of his birth; just as he was pure in the hour of his birth, so should he be pure in the hour of his death."¹⁴³ Although the accent of the Midrash lies with the purity of the person at the end of his/her life, this sense of purity may in turn point to the attitude of fearing God which as we shall see, propitiates an experience of joy.

V. 3 looks at the constructive and destructive forces present in life: "a time to kill" and "a time to heal." We cannot admit that Qoheleth is outright stating that there is a "proper time" to kill, but rather, he is observing reality and merely states what he sees. A sad and violent truth is still evident today: the fact that one human can take away the life that God has given to another is the ultimate proof of the freedom that God has given to human beings. The proper antithesis to killing would be "to bring back to life," but since that is not within the powers of the human being, the closest that is within his/her capacity is "to heal." However, we may also understand this statement in a more figurative and less literal way. There are moments that for new life to grow and emerge, we must kill what is taking away life. Numerous examples abound in medical science, for instance antibiotics, which are necessary to eliminate an infection in addition to chemotherapy, which likewise kills cancerous cells along with good and healthy cells. Nevertheless, both treatments are necessary and justified in order to eradicate a disease, even though there is an initial process of killing for healing to take place. In v. 3b we have the

¹³⁸ According to Ibn Yachya, "Solomon begins by enumerating man's beginning and end – birth and death – the exact timing of which are beyond human control." Furthermore, Zlotowitz goes on to specify: "It is the natural cycle that is being considered here; not man's capability to artificially extinguish or prolong life." Zlotowitz, *Koheles*, 82.

¹³⁹ Jennifer L. Koosed, *(Per)mutations of Qohelet: Reading the Body in the Book* (London: T & T Clark, 2006), 96.

¹⁴⁰ Bundvad, *Time in the Book of Ecclesiastes*, 93.

¹⁴¹ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 207. Elisha Qimron, "New Texts from Qumran and their Contribution to the Hebrew Lexicon," *Tarb* 60 (1990-91): 649-51.

¹⁴² Vélchez Líndez, *Ecclesiastes*, 228.

¹⁴³ Zlotowitz, *Koheles*, 82-83.

pair: “a time to tear down” and “a time to build,” which forms the perfect counterpart to v. 3a. Human life is a continuous restoration of that which one has contributed to destroy.

V. 4 lists various actions through which the human being expresses oneself: weeping, laughing, mourning and dancing. Qoheleth here is referring to normal events in the life of human beings; as we previously noted, however, these expressions of joy, sadness, pain and freedom cannot be easily pinned down. There is still an interiority which we are not permitted to penetrate, and which keeps the human being as a mystery unto oneself. One can weep for joy just as much as one can laugh in sarcastic disgust.

V. 5 is not so clear and has been the object of much discussion. A time to throw stones and to gather them has been said to make reference to war and peace (along the lines of texts like Isa 5:2, Hos 12:12 and 2 Kgs 3:19.25), where throwing stones means a destructive action against the enemy territory, while gathering them means a positive action, such as preparing a field free of stones for cultivation in a time of peace. On the other hand, according to the Midrash on Qoheleth, throwing and gathering stones would be a euphemism for sex or continence. The next stich, a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embraces, may refer to friendship and/or the relationship between a man and a woman. In either of these cases, these are actions that the human being can freely choose to engage in.

V. 6 speaks of the time to search, the time to lose, the time to keep and the time to discard. These are normal, everyday actions in human life. However in v. 6a we come across another unpredictable feature of the poem that has been singled out as a crux: the fact that Qoheleth pairs seeking with losing instead of with finding.¹⁴⁴ A search that does not conclude in finding is a frequent trope of Qoheleth's, and one that is at the core of his teaching on the limitations of the human being's capacity to know. Again, v. 7 notes very ordinary actions: “to tear apart,” “to sew,” “to keep silent,” “to speak.” All these actions, however, may also refer to gestures of mourning in Israel's tradition.¹⁴⁵ To tear one's clothes and to stay silent are signs of desperation. In addition, to speak and to stay silent may refer to the wise use of the word according to classical wisdom tradition. All these actions have in common that they require the wise judgment of the person who must decide whether the time is right or not.

Finally, v.8 concludes our poem on time with some of the most universal and momentous actions: a time “to love,” “to hate,” “for war,” “for peace.” This is not the last time that the love-hate pair appears in Qoheleth, as we will study it further in Qoh 9:1 and 6. Especially aware as we are of the atrocities of war throughout human history, it may be shocking to admit

¹⁴⁴ Hermann Spieckermann, "Suchen und Finden: Kohelets kritische Reflexionen," *Bib* 79, no. 3 (1998): 305-32, 314.

¹⁴⁵ Mazzinghi, *Ho cercato*, 201.

that there is a “time for war.” Nevertheless, it is included in this full picture of human life because war is a reality, regardless of the pacifist conviction that no real profit can come from violence and war. It is a part of human existence in this world and will remain so until a full and true era of *shalom* may be established and transform all people from within. This verse also differs from the rest in that the four actions are positioned in a chiasmic structure, concluding the entire poem with the very important Hebrew word שלום. This word not only signifies peace, but also wholeness, health, and completeness. It is particularly significant that Qoheleth concludes with the word *shalom* because it offers a sense of plenitude and totality to the ensemble of the 28 moments in time delineated in this poem, which as we mentioned at the beginning are multiples of 7 and 4, numbers symbolic of completeness. *Shalom* serves as a climax and summary of all the individual times lived fully. It gives a sense of balance and equilibrium to the poem and the consequent completeness. Therefore, Qoheleth has just presented his vision of time in human experience with a sense of totality and fullness.

IV.4. TIME AS GIFT AND OPPORTUNITY

Qoheleth represents a unique view in early Judaism, as Wilch tells us, “that every occasion which comes upon a [person] in the course of his life is an opportunity given to him by God.”¹⁴⁶ It is an opportunity for the human person to enjoy the pleasures and work that life offers by making the most of life that lies within his human capacity, and not being disheartened by its difficulties, sorrows and injustices. It is equally an opportunity to live and experience joy. Neher espouses a similar line of thought with the following theological view: “Le temps est un *don* לכל זמן. Cette notion apporte l’élément d’unification dans la diversité des temps, car, quelle que soit son essence et son apparence, le temps n’est jamais créé par l’homme, il lui vient du dehors, c’est une offre.”¹⁴⁷ I agree with these views to some degree. Time is a gift and an opportunity given to the human being by God, but not only so that the human being passively receives them, but for him to choose to act upon them. By this, however, I do not imply that the action is morally obliging. Perhaps on a larger cosmic order, Qoheleth might admit to the existence of an “appropriate” or “proper” time, but he decidedly breaks with the retributive thinking that is associated with the traditional idea of “proper time.” Traditional thinking would say that the very existence of a “proper time” imposes a responsibility on the human person to discern it and act accordingly and consequently, one is to expect the reward or punishment corresponding to one’s action.

¹⁴⁶ Wilch, *Time and Event*, 128.

¹⁴⁷ “Time is a gift..., time is never created by the human being, it comes from the outside, it is offered to him.” André Neher, *Notes sur Qohélet: (L’Ecclésiaste)* (Paris: Les Ed. de Minuit, 1951), 104.

However, Qoheleth does not limit himself to traditional wisdom, and he repeatedly and increasingly admits to the fact that we *cannot know* everything, and the “proper” or “correct” time for many things would fall under this not knowing.¹⁴⁸ For Qoheleth, wisdom is more about knowing our true limitations, rather than knowing everything. We are free to act and choose according to our experience and there is always room to grow and learn. Therefore, the times of our lives are more of an opportunity to choose to act. For these reasons, I prefer not to speak of *תָּו* in Qoh 3 as “proper time.” The poem simply lists the different possible times for human beings depending on their circumstances and reality. In this sense, we can affirm that humanity is not subject to a deterministic God who defines the times for each person, but rather each one is free to choose and to act. The poem on time does not imply that the human being can discern or know the times but notes that these times simply exist, and God is the ultimate judge of how we have ultimately chosen to act on the gift of time.

Instead, time is a gift, and each moment and situation are an opportunity provided by God. We might question the interpretation of Qoh 3:3 considering this statement, but as I noted above, “a time to kill” may also be understood in a less literal way as a destructive force in life which complements the constructive and life-giving aspect. True wisdom, redefined by Qoheleth, means to live our human existence with a radical openness to all the situations that may present themselves in life. This openness consists in “an acceptance of that which comes, whatever and whenever that may be.”¹⁴⁹ Although Wilch then goes on to define this time as an “occasion-when” which stresses the passive acceptance of the occasion, as opposed to a “time-for” which emphasizes the appropriate moment for a particular activity, I would argue that acceptance of the given moment is not something inevitably passive. Resistance to the unplanned and unforeseen moments and circumstances of life make acceptance in some circumstances difficult if not impossible, and openness implies an active attitude of receptivity. Every individual faces concrete decisions each day of his life under the sun.¹⁵⁰ Either one can make these decisions and live them as a constant tribulation since one does not know the opportune time beforehand, or the person can learn to live with an attitude of surrender and acceptance of the uncertainty of time. There are times and there are times, and whether they may be deemed “proper” or not, is simply not up to the human being to judge. God will be the judge, and perhaps in the way we least expect. Therefore, wisdom is to recognize and accept that God is the judge and that we as limited human beings cannot ultimately judge. Justice is divine.

¹⁴⁸ In his famous chapter on the doctrine of the proper-time, Gerhard Von Rad gives his view on determinism. “In so far as everything and every activity has its proper time, he was still in agreement with traditional ideas. But of what use is that to the ‘agent,’ if he ‘cannot find out’ for himself God’s temporal order, which is undoubtedly wise and well-intentioned?” von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, 142.

¹⁴⁹ Wilch, *Time and Event*, 124.

¹⁵⁰ Kurt Gallig, *Der Prediger* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1969), 93-94.

Qoheleth's main argument is directed against the person "who is not content to accept the opportunity within its given limits and tries to overplay the situation and strive for something beyond his reach."¹⁵¹ Anyone can try to discern the right time, or even think that one knows it, but only the one who fears or reveres God grows into the wisdom that enables one to limit oneself within the possibilities given by life and by God.¹⁵² This human incapacity to determine time actually makes a good match with the idea that time is a gift and opportunity from God, it also brings the human being into an attitude of humility and a profound respect and reverence of God. Hence, time as gift and opportunity brings God straight into the heart of human life under the sun. Since the human being cannot know or control moments, circumstances and times, s/he is more disposed and inclined to receive and accept these times as gift. However, when one lives in the illusion of being in total control, one will inevitably hit frustration and confusion when life seems to take its own course. Therefore, one who is open to receive and actively accepts the gift and opportunity that God gives by means of time is one who actively collaborates with God. In his work and daily life, by means of his fearing and revering God, the human being enters the rhythm and wholeness of the times that come, remain, and pass away.

The fact that the poem on time follows the first joy statement of Qoheleth is worth reflecting on. What is Qoheleth trying to communicate with this? As we saw previously, the first joy text, 2:24–26, gave a sharp turn to the negative tone of Qoh 2. We encounter the greatest good for the human being in this life: to eat, drink, and recognize that one's work is good. In addition, Qoheleth says that joy comes from God and he proposes a turning point in his discourse: joy serves as an answer to the search for meaning and purpose. At this point, he then presents the different times that make up human life, times that are equally a gift and opportunity coming from God. Interestingly, joy will once more appear directly after the poem on time in 3:12–13, the second joy text. The poem therefore is sandwiched between the first two explicit and important joy statements. As noted earlier, joy seems to offer us a privileged vantage point for the times and opportunities that God gives. The more one can be present and live fully each moment in time that God gives, the more real is the experience of joy as gift. In addition, in the measure that one experiences joy one becomes more sensitive to the gift of passing time and the different moments in time that God gives.

¹⁵¹ Wilch, *Time and Event*, 128.

¹⁵² Hans Walter Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament* (London: SCM, 1974), 90.

IV.5. THE TIMES OF QOH 3:2–8 AND THE CONCEPT OF PERMANENCE

While the word *תָּ* indicates independent entities, it does not express a fixed moment of time that is critical or decisive.¹⁵³ Each elementary experience is available to humanity in all times and all places, and each has its relative worth and suitability, its “place” and “moment” in the grand scheme of life. In addition, this perception of the different times for possible actions comes from the experience of the limitation of the human being. One cannot be doing two things at the same time or be successful in everything to the same degree.¹⁵⁴ No one activity has universal sway, any more than exhaling or inhaling dominates the rhythm of breathing. Permanence is not part of the chronological equation. Yet, limitation is possibility when viewed from a different perspective. While it is true that our human condition is existentially limited, it also encounters endless possibility that depends on our free choice to act upon the gift and opportunity of time. The limitation imposed by time becomes possibility to choose one action over another. The poetic arrangement of these moments suggests that such opposites are actually counterparts, all part of the temporal rhythm of life, which never progresses yet never stops.¹⁵⁵ Particular and specific moments clearly have their importance; otherwise, Qoheleth would not bother to enlist 28 different specific occurrences of human life.

If we step back and look at the singular moments outlined in 3:2–8 from a wider perspective, as expressive of the times of all human beings throughout all history under the sun, then we might say that while some “times” are critical and decisive for the life of an individual, the cycle of life is repeating itself and continually being renewed. There are constantly times of giving birth and times for death in this terrestrial realm; it is the constant cycle of life. This perspective on 3:1–8 would coincide very well with the view of time that the opening poem in 1:4–11 presents.¹⁵⁶ In 1:4–11, the rhythm of the cosmos expresses the mystery of time. The poem juxtaposes realities that are passing and temporary and at the same time permanent. It is significant that Qoheleth uses the word *עולם* twice in the poem, at its start in 1:4 and near its conclusion in 1:10. In the first occurrence in 1:4, Qoheleth contrasts two types of temporal existence: the permanent, unmoving constancy of the earth and the coming and going of human generations. This gives emphasis to the permanence of the earth as opposed to the passing nature of human existence. In 1:10 *עולם* is used in contrast to that which we might think is new; it has *already* existed for ages before us. This same theme may be seen in a similar manner in Qoheleth’s repeated phrase *הכל הכל* seemingly directed at human existence that is not meant

¹⁵³ The only exception may be those times that delimit human existence, the time ‘to give birth’ and the time ‘to die’ (3:2). Birth and death can happen only once in a single person’s life and lie beyond human control. However, as we shall see further on, even these ‘times’ may be understood in a general and generic way in this poem. Kronholm, *TDOT* 11:443; Schoors, *The Preacher Sought to Find Pleasing Words I*, 111-119.

¹⁵⁴ von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, 139.

¹⁵⁵ William P. Brown, *Ecclesiastes* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2000), 41.

¹⁵⁶ As Mazzinghi points out, there is also a connection at a structural level between these two poems. Mazzinghi, *Ho cercato*, 191.

to produce anything new or lasting.¹⁵⁷ The events of human life in 3:2–8, seen from the broader perspective noted above, are parallel to the processes of nature in 1:4–7 that seem to oscillate in a cycle with no end.

These two poems set the boundaries of the first section of the book and enclose the royal parody and the first joy text. Given the limited number of poems in Qoheleth's treatise, the placement and theme of the poems can shed light on the interpretation of the book. After the opening line of the book and the **הבל** phrase, we have the first question of purpose in 1:3 followed by the poem in vv. 4–11. The royal parody and first joy text follow and are concluded by the poem on time which closes with a question of purpose in 3:9.

(1:1–2 title and **הבל** phrase)

1:3 first question of purpose

1:4–11 opening poem

1:12–2:23 parody of the king; 2:24–26 first joy text

3:1–8 poem on time

3:9 second question of purpose

The common view of time shared by both poems, as we have just noted, highlights the absurdity of the king's search for happiness. In the greater scheme of things, the temporary and passing sources of pleasure contrast with the continual cycle of life. The first poem begins with the repeated flow of the coming and going of generations and affirms the fact that there is nothing new under the sun. Likewise, the second poem demonstrates "nothing new" through the 28 events that include no surprises, and which repeat generation after generation. Therefore, observing both 1:4–11 and 3:2–8, we could suggest that the cyclical repetition of nature and human existence conveys a sense of permanence or endlessness in contrast to the fleeting riches and pleasures of the king in the royal parody. Can it be likened to the continuous breathing of a person consisting in a constant flow of new air that keeps the person alive?

Diametrically opposed to the fleeting and temporal nature of human life is the sense of permanence and endlessness, a sense of totality and perfection that also defines human life. This contrast and opposition hold both aspects of time in tension. While human life is brief, ephemeral and as transient as a breath of air, there is something about human nature which gives our life and existence the weight of eternity: whether it is the human longing for perfection and wholeness or the explicit belief in the divine reality that admits to a realm "above" the sun and the heavens and beyond the confines of limited time. The two aspects of time may seem contradictory, but they complement each other. One emphasizes action, movement, and

¹⁵⁷ Qoh 1:2.14; 2:11.17; 3:19; 12:8.

continual transition, while the other reinforces the sense of stability, constancy, and permanence. The bigger picture of the cycle of life with its sense of permanence, durability and eternity does not and cannot obliterate the particular and individual moments of life. The whole makes no sense without the particular; that would make it too abstract and generic. Similarly, the moments and times do not have substance if they are not part of a greater and continuous whole. The 28 events of 3:1–8, regardless of whether they happen once in a person’s lifetime or whether they occur repeatedly, reflect the double aspect of time since they both signal punctual times within a person’s life and yet occur repeatedly in human history. Hence, the only way for the human being to reconcile this complementary tension is by living in the attitude of revering God and cultivating a sense of respect and awe before the mystery of time. In addition, the very question of purpose points to a desire for fulfillment on another level. This sense, which gives a fuller picture of Qoheleth’s understanding of time, will become clearer in Qoh 3:10–15, the theological commentary that follows this poem, especially since עולם appears in 3:11 and עולם in 3:14. We will take a closer look at the meaning of this word below.

Reflecting on God’s gift of time from these considerations on the passing and yet permanent quality of time, we may conclude that God’s gift also encompasses these aspects. God’s gift is stable and permanent in that God is in Godself permanent and stable, upholding our lives and all the times of our lives. God is always ready to give the gift of time, while God holds us in existence, in addition to holding all our times, our past, present and future. However, God’s gift is also a passing reality since we too are a passing through this life. God depends on us to receive and accept the gift of time, and in this sense God’s gifts are also a passing reality. To all of this discussion of temporality and eternity, Qoheleth’s conclusion is simple: the truly enjoyable life is one that is open to accept what God’s hand gives, no matter what that may entail in its particulars.¹⁵⁸ This is the main argument that Qoheleth will prove in the remainder of his book, which is why 3:2–8 is a symbolic reference to all possible events contained in the course of human life. Qoheleth 3:1 is a preliminary summary that corresponds to the remaining verses 2–8 of the poem; “every possible event that may transpire in the world of the human being is included – there is a given possibility for each one.”¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁸ “Así, aunque el ser humano no puede comprender el misterio de la eternidad de Dios (sólo Él puede comprenderlo), sí puede disfrutar y alegrarse en plenitud en momentos puntuales: comiendo, bebiendo, disfrutando de su trabajo. El ser humano es afortunado, no porque Yahveh le conceda bienes y posesiones, sino porque Yahveh le capacita para disfrutar en momentos concretos de dichos bienes, de dichos dones.” Sanz Gimenez-Rico, “Momentos y tiempos del Dios del tiempo,” 531.

¹⁵⁹ Wilch, *Time and Event*, 126.

IV.5.1. THE MEANING OF THE WORD עולם

The word עולם occurs a total of 873 times in all the texts of Classical Hebrew combined, of which 440 are from the MT (20 of those being from the Aramaic parts of the Hebrew Scriptures), 46 from the Hebrew text of Sirach, 386 from the DSS, and 1 from an Inscription. The word עולם is translated as “everlastingness,” “long time,” “duration,” “limitless time,” “eternity,” “farthest, remotest time” and in later Hebrew as “world” or “underworld.”¹⁶⁰ However, it may not always be appropriate to use the word “eternity,” as it may introduce a preconceived concept of eternity, burdened with all manner of later philosophical or theological content.¹⁶¹

Since עולם is a widely used word having a variety of nuances, it is often not easy to interpret in a given context. Most commonly in the Hebrew texts, עולם refers to the past, signifying “ancient time,” “everlastingness,” and “long duration.” When used with this meaning, it is found in construct with another noun, for example: עמ עולם meaning “people of ancient time,” or better yet, “ancient people” (Isa 44:7, Ezek 26:20), “fathers of old” (1QM 13:7; Si 44:1), etc. However, this use is not at all common in the book of Qoheleth, so we will now explore each of the times that עולם appears there.

In Qoheleth, עולם comes up seven times: 1:4.10; 2:16; 3:11.14; 9:6; 12:5. Our first encounter with the word עולם in Qoh 1:4 exhibits it in its usual static meaning of unalterable constancy.¹⁶² The verse opposes the transience of the generations of people to the permanence of the earth. “One generation comes another generation goes, but the earth remains forever.” In this case, the temporal meaning of עולם is clear given the fact that the first stich of the verse speaks of generations coming and going, therefore the second stich containing our word must point to the opposite, namely a reality that remains in a permanent manner.

The singular use of the plural לעלמים in Qoh 1:10 is “an intensive plural of feeling.”¹⁶³ According to Jenni, “a genuinely numeric plural occurs in the Hebrew OT at most only in Qoh 1:10; otherwise the reference is usually to the iterative, extensive, amplifying plural.”¹⁶⁴ The fact that עולם is found in the plural form may indicate that it can refer to a “period of time” with the plural then signifying something along the lines of “periods of time, ages.” The meaning “ages” would make sense in the surrounding context: “Even the thing of which we say, ‘See, this is new!’ has already existed in the ages that preceded us.” In fact, “age” is the meaning attributed to עולם, by the Qumran texts.

¹⁶⁰ Clines, “עולם,” *DCH* 6:300-307.

¹⁶¹ Ernst Jenni, “עולם ‘olām eternity,” *TLOT* 2:853.

¹⁶² Jenni, *TLOT* 2:861.

¹⁶³ Ernst Jenni, “Das Wort ‘olām im Alten Testament,” *ZAW* 64 (1952): 197-248.

¹⁶⁴ Horst Dietrich Preuss, “עולם” *TDOT* 10:532.

The word עולם in the Hebrew Scriptures is commonly found with the sense of “long duration” and “everlastingness” into the future or having a sense of the past that extends into the future (Isa 54:8; Jer 31:3). Additionally, this sense may be taken as something which lasts one’s lifetime (Ex 21:6; Deut 15:17; 1 Sam 1:22; 27:12), “perpetuity,” “eternity,” and of what remains forever (Deut 13:17; Isa 51:6; Ps 145:13). This is the sense oftentimes attributed to the use of עולם in Qoh 3:11, where it is used as the object of the verb “to give.” “God has made everything appropriate in its time. He has also set עולם in their heart, yet so that the human being will not find out the work which God has done from the beginning to the end.” Qoh 3:11 is perhaps the most highly debated verse due to the enigmatic meaning of the word עולם. We can only really understand Qoheleth’s use of עולם here by looking at the wider context of Qoh 3. Close to follow, we have another occurrence of עולם in 3:14, and once again, God is very much the protagonist: “I know that everything that God does will remain forever.” Both uses of עולם are set in close context to Qoheleth’s famous poem on time and will be significant for discerning the bigger picture of Qoheleth’s view on time.

A negative use of עולם in the sense of long time/duration is found in Qoh 2:16. In Qoh 2:16, our word לעולם is preceded by the preposition ל, and is used to modify זכרון “remembrance,” with the meaning “no longer” or “never again.” “For there will never again be remembrance for the wise person as for the fool.” Any possibility of remembrance into the future is eliminated permanently for any person, regardless of whether s/he is wise or a fool. Here we experience that עולם also moves forward in time and is not only pointing to the past. Another example of this negative use pointing towards the future is Qoh 9:6, which continues the statements made about the dead. 9:6b says, “Never again will they [the dead] have part in anything that is done under the sun.” In this context, Qoheleth uses the word עולם to emphasize the exclusion of those who “forever” leave the realm of the living. Qoheleth intends a clear break between this life and that which takes place when one dies.

As opposed to many of its occurrences in other texts of the Hebrew Scriptures, in the book of Qoheleth, עולם is never found in construct. It is again, an interesting observation to make in order to understand how Qoheleth understands time, in its aspects of transience and permanence. In many Qumran texts for example, עולם is found in construct with itself עולמים or עולמי or with other future-oriented lexemes such as עד (Isa 45:17; 1 QH 4:28; 5:7.19; 9:8.31, etc.), underscoring that עולם functions to express the highest possible intensification (“everlastingness of everlastingness,” “perpetual holding”). Also, in such combinations with עולם, the paired lexemes are themselves intensified as in the expression “unending joy,” for example.¹⁶⁵ Since עולם is mostly used within construct combinations or as an adverbial accusative, it is also used in construct with “God” in the expression “everlasting God” (Isa 40:28; Gen 21:33; Si

¹⁶⁵ Preuss, *TDOT* 10:532.

36:22), and with other nouns. In addition, it occurs in connection with terms for love (Jer 31:3), signs (Isa 55:13), goodness, joy (Isa 35:10), light, covenant, peace, shame and disgrace (Ps 78:66; Jer 23:40) amongst others. It is commonly used with the preposition לְ (Ex 3:15; 31:17; Deut 32:40; 33:11, etc.) or the preposition עַד (Deut 29:28; 1Sam 20:23; 2Sam 3:28; Ezek 27:36, etc.) having the sense “to/unto everlastingness” or “forever.” Often when used in this way, it is then followed by several different verbs such as “to be,” “to love,” “to keep,” “to be angry,” “to tell,” and so forth. This may simply tell us that Qoheleth is not interested in intensifying the things of the earth, under the sun, and not even the reality of God. Perhaps it is already too obvious to him that God is permanent and everlasting.

IV.6. TERMS OMITTED FROM THE CATALOGUE OF TIMES

At this point it may be appropriate to ask about the terms which Qoheleth could have but did not include in this poem and why. It is clear that the 28 “moments” are representative of a person’s life-time, and that it is not possible to enumerate all, as the list would have no end, but I am referring to those themes which are prevalent in the book of Qoheleth, and yet which are excluded as particular moments in 3:2–8. Themes such as fearing God, being wise and being a fool, work, and the question of whether there is a time for הַבֵּל. Finally, our all-important theme of joy, which is repeated in the seven joy texts of Qoheleth, together with eating and drinking – all of these are absent from the 28 moments.

One possible explanation is that the omission of important themes signals the fact that they are of a universal and overarching nature, extending beyond particular and individual moments, and which therefore inform all moments, and influence all decisions and options. To fear and revere God is non-negotiable. Our sage would surely not concede that there is a time to not revere God, as it is an attitude and disposition that should always be adopted. Likewise, being wise or being a fool goes beyond individual moments; it is also a way of living life, although it clearly does manifest itself in concrete decisions and actions. Throughout the book, Qoheleth is constantly saying that *everything* is הַבֵּל, and though here, where he is writing of different moments in human life, he does not define any such moment as הַבֵּל, this does not exclude the affirmation made elsewhere that all is הַבֵּל. All moments and times are “passing” and “fleeting”: one human experience or emotion yields to the next and hence, in an argument from silence, all times may be defined as הַבֵּל. It would presumably be unnecessary to note or repeat this fact at all.

Likewise, work is a very important theme in Qoheleth, and yet amongst the 28 moments, we do not have an explicit “time for work” or “a time for rest.” This is particularly

thought provoking, since we have noted various parallels between Qoh 3 and the creation narratives of Genesis, including the theme of labor or work. Genesis 1, which outlines the seven days of creation, clearly demarcates the seventh day as God's day of rest, an explicit designation of time which is absent here. Nevertheless, the theme of work is implied amongst the different moments outlined in the poem on time. To give birth, which according to Genesis 3 includes the dimension of labor and suffering, could be understood as work, in addition to planting and uprooting, killing and healing, tearing down and building up, keeping and throwing away, tearing apart and sewing together. Therefore, work and its fruits or profit are of a universal and overarching nature. They are seen in singular moments, but also encompass the whole of human existence and the existential questions of life and therefore inform all moments and influence all decisions.

Finally, we may ask how the theme of joy comes into play in the poem on time in Qoh 3. One might think that Qoheleth has joy in mind when speaking of laughing and dancing, but as we have previously noted, these two actions in themselves do not necessarily point to the joy that comes from the hand of God. In addition, the specifications of this repeated joy, namely eating and drinking, are also absent. It would therefore seem that the theme of joy is absent from these 28 "times." However, I would argue that in the same way that "a time to work" is absent and yet encompasses many of the individual times, joy too is of a universal and overarching nature which can be experienced in many ways. When Qoheleth speaks of joy in the rest of the book, he speaks of eating and drinking, very terrestrial and human activities that could easily have been included in this list of times; however, the fact that they are not raises them to another level of importance. In fact, they become almost symbolic. The actual source of joy, God's hand, lies beyond even these temporal limitations, since God holds time, belonging to the realm "above the sun" which is beyond our reach. By the very fact that joy comes from God and that only God can give it, joy comes onto the same level of importance with time, both being gifts from God. We cannot mistake the joy that comes from God with the temporal pleasures and profits such as those experienced by the king in chapters 1–2. The latter wilt and fade, leaving the human being emptier than before, and frustrated with his/her search, whereas the joy that comes from God would have within it a quality of permanence.

We must also recall the presence of the word *פֶּנִּין* in 3:1, the opening verse of the poem. As noted earlier, Qoheleth in his ironic, poetic, and mysterious way is not a stranger to using words with several meanings to confuse or provoke his public. In this particular case, we have a very explicit use of a word that is known to mean "joy" or "pleasure," a particular meaning which Qoheleth is not a stranger to, since he uses it with this meaning later on in 5:7 and 8:6. Although we may uphold the principal meaning to be "affair" or "matter," which makes better sense within the context of the poem itself, we cannot help but also read the start of this famous poem with the nuance of "joy." Hence, the introductory verse could plausibly be read as: "For

everything there is a season and a time for every joy under the heavens.” Interpreting this opening line and the subsequent poem with this meaning yields a richness with regards to our understanding of joy in the book. The implication is that no moment of human life is necessarily excluded from the experience of “God-given joy.” It is possible in every moment and at every “time” to taste joy. Joy comes from a deeper source, not from external or superficial conditions or sources. This, therefore, provides a general conclusion to our reflections on 3:1–8 from the perspective of the “time-joy” pair. Joy is an overarching reality, a universal experience that is included in and beyond each of the individual moments and times listed in the poem of 3:1–8. Nevertheless, time still maintains the upper hand in these first chapters of Qoheleth and we have yet to see if it will be maintained or if it will lose its superiority over the course of the book.

IV.7. QOHELETH 3:9 TRANSITIONAL QUESTION

9 מה־יתרון העושה באשר הוא עמל: 9 What profit does the worker have from his work?

After the poem on time and before its theological commentary, we encounter for the fourth time the programmatic question that here serves as a transition between these two important sections. We shall look at it on its own and see how it points both backwards and forwards.

Qoheleth reminds us of the driving question, the question of purpose and meaning stated in 1:3, and repeated twice in the parody of the king in 2:3 and 2:22. In this particular case in 3:9, Qoheleth brings us back to the first question in 1:3, where he begins with the same phrase: “What profit...” מה־יתרון. In addition, not only is the question in 3:9 more poignant after all that has been stated in the first 2 chapters, but we cannot disregard the fact that in 1:3 Qoheleth had asked: “What profit is there for the human being...,” while in 3:9 the question is: “What profit is there to the worker...” The substitution of לָאָדָם with הַעוֹשֶׂה is very important, as this kind of human being, concerned with profit from his work, is interested in the answer to come, which will be put into contrast with God’s work in vv.10–15.¹⁶⁶

IV.7.1. THE MEANING OF יִתְרוֹן IN QOHELETH

In order to better understand this question within its context, we will study the meaning of יִתְרוֹן more closely. The questions in chapter 2 did not use the specific word for “profit,” so

¹⁶⁶ Mazzinghi, *Ho cercato*, 204.

we shall look at the other nine occurrences of the word יִתְרוֹן in the book of Qoheleth. It is only included in three of the seven programmatic questions of purpose (1:3; 3:9; 5:15), and with regards to the rest of its occurrences (2:11.13; 5:8; 7:12; 10:10.11), it is related in one way or another to wisdom.

In Qoh 5:15, the third programmatic question of purpose that uses our word יִתְרוֹן, we are in the context of a discussion of the senselessness of accumulating riches if they are to be lost at the moment of death. “What does it profit one to toil for the wind?” Here Qoheleth uses the image of wind in direct reference to the riches that one cannot take with oneself at the end of one’s life.

In Qoh 2:11, as we have previously noted, the disillusioned king’s answer is that there is no profit. After looking at all the work and toil of his lifetime, he concludes that there is “no profit under the sun.” However, in Qoh 2:13, we have the first time that profit is related in some way to wisdom: “And I saw that wisdom has as much profit over folly as light has over darkness. Wise people have eyes in their heads, but fools walk in darkness. Yet I knew that the same lot befalls both.” (2:13–14) Although these two statements conclude in the topic of the same “lot” that befalls both wise and fools, Qoheleth shows the advantage of wisdom over folly in a direct comparison with the advantage of light over darkness. The following verse further explains this image of light and darkness where wise people have eyes in their heads, namely, wisdom gives them the capacity to see clearly where they are walking, while fools walk in the dark. We may therefore conclude that a wise person has profit over a fool, in that s/he has light and can therefore see where s/he is walking and not risk being hurt by walking blindly in the dark.

The next use of the word “profit” is found in Qoh 5:8, a *crux interpretum* that has been understood in numerous ways.¹⁶⁷ I prefer the translation: The profit of a country in all aspects is a king for the cultivated land. Since the verse mentions a king, it is probable that אֶרֶץ refers to “country.”¹⁶⁸ The meaning of בְּכֹל, “in all,” varies according to the way the entire verse is understood. Despite the ambiguity of the verse, its syntactical structure appears to be clear: it is a nominal clause, וַיִּתְרוֹן אֶרֶץ being the predicate and מֶלֶךְ לְשֹׂדֵה נֹעֲבָד being the subject. “The personal pronoun K הֵיא, Q הוּא, functions as copula or anaphoric pronoun. In that function it should agree in gender and number with the subject מֶלֶךְ or by attraction with the predicate יִתְרוֹן.”¹⁶⁹ Q is the superior reading. This verse speaks of the profit that comes to a country when

¹⁶⁷ Schoors gives a thorough presentation of the different manners of interpreting this passage. Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 410-416.

¹⁶⁸ Elster, Delitzsch, Plumptre, Wildeboer, McNiele, Haupt, Baum, Lepre, Scott, Rylaarsdam, Lauha, Eaton, Beek, Michaud, Backhaus, Fox, Rose.

¹⁶⁹ A Cairo fragment and two Masoretic manuscripts, as well as Pesh. (*hw*), support Q, while the LXX indirectly supports Q as well. Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 412.

the king is concerned with work and cultivation. Qoheleth here decries passivity. A land that is left uncultivated is wasted; however, the king who is the ruler of the country can bring crops and profit when he is concerned about its cultivation. Contrasted with the preceding verse and the following verse, and taking into account the socio-political context, “vs. 8 seems to underline that, nonetheless, a king who cares and gives structure to the agricultural system, as the Ptolemies did, is an advantage for the country and its population.”¹⁷⁰ The figure of the king, traditionally associated with wisdom, has the power and authority to invest in and cultivate the land so that it does not remain passive and unfruitful. Hence, wisdom and profit are associated albeit indirectly.

Qoh 7:12 also uses the idea of wisdom in relation to profit. “The protection of wisdom is as the protection of money; and knowledge is *profitable* because wisdom gives life to those who possess it.” In this case, Qoheleth believes that wisdom is something valuable that deserves protection, and knowledge is something that one should seek after. In fact, knowledge can give profit because wisdom gives life to whoever has knowledge. Therefore, the profit comes directly from wisdom in the form of life to those seeking to cultivate knowledge.

Finally, in Qoh 10:10–11 we have a pair of proverbs that again praise the profit and advantage of wisdom: “If the ax becomes dull, and the blade is not sharpened, then effort must be increased. But the advantage of wisdom is success. If the snake bites before it is charmed, then there is no advantage in a charmer.” When one is wise, one can do less work and have the same successful result. Likewise, the profit that comes from the charmer is to prevent the snake from biting. If we were to associate the charmer with one who is wise and who has the capacity to subdue the negative forces of the snake, the profit that one gains is not having to deal with a snake bite.¹⁷¹

In reference to יִתְרוֹן Schoors affirms that “sometimes the word is used in such a way as to infer that ‘profit’ has some reality. It is then used in a comparison or applied to certain activities or attitudes, such as wisdom.”¹⁷² Therefore, in summary, it is only within the context of the parody of the king, as we have seen previously, that Qoheleth gives a straightforward answer of “no” to the question of profit from the work and toil of his hands. Apart from this exceptional instance, we might conclude that the ability to gain profit lies in the one who has wisdom and hence, one who has wisdom is more likely to gain profit.

¹⁷⁰ Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 415.

¹⁷¹ Interestingly, Schwienhorst-Schönberger relates the wise person with one who is “on time.” “Wer *nicht* rechtzeitig handelt, hat *auch* keinen Gewinn.” Ludger Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Das Buch Kohelet: Studien zur Struktur, Geschichte, Rezeption und Theologie* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1997), 236.

¹⁷² Schoors, *The Preacher Sought to Find Pleasing Words I*, 427. See also W.E. Staples, *JNES* 4 (1945): 90.

IV.7.2. THE ROLE OF THE QUESTION OF PURPOSE AFTER THE POEM ON TIME

We may then ask ourselves, what role this question plays directly after the poem on time in 3:1–8. After such an eloquent and rhythmic proclamation of time, this question of purpose breaks the natural silence produced after the monotony of the poem: “What profit has the worker from his/her toil?” The beauty of the rhythm and regularity of the “times” that make up human existence is contrasted with the reality of work and the desire for profit. As we noted, many of the moments enlisted may be classified as times for work. Is the human being fulfilled and satisfied with these times of work in themselves, or is there still a need to assure an outcome and profit from one’s efforts? Is Qoheleth insinuating that gaining profit from one’s work is related to how we live the temporal rhythm of life and the different moments and times that we actively choose? Would this poem, which closes with the question of purpose and profit, therefore, be the ideal description of the wise person’s approach to life? If profit is related to how we live the different “times” under the sun, then it would follow that the wise person is the one who accepts the gratuity of the rhythm of the times in human life and yet at the same time seeks to gain profit. There is a delicate balance between gratuity and detachment, and at the same time, recompense. This matches very well with how God makes everything beautiful in its time, the gratuity of God’s gifts which leads into the experience of joy. In some way we might say that God’s gift of joy is part of the profit and recompense that the human being gets out of his work. In addition, the worker who makes good use of his time acts by investing his effort and responding to the gift and opportunity provided by time. This question in 3:9 also points us forward to what Qoheleth asserts in vv.10–15 and how he relates עולם to עת in v.11. Therefore, עולם is not excluded from the discussion of wisdom as we will see, and this question of purpose functions as a hinge, tying the poem on time with the following verses.

V. QOHELETH 3:10-15 THEOLOGICAL COMMENTARY ON TIME

- | | | |
|----|---|--|
| 10 | ראיתי את־הענין אשר נתן אלהים לבני האדם
לענות בו: | I have seen the task which God has given to human beings to be occupied with. |
| 11 | את־הכל עשה יפה בעתו גם את־העלם נתן
בלבם מבלי אשר לא־ימצא האדם את־המעשה
אשר־עשה האלהים מראש ועד־סוף: | God makes everything beautiful in its time; moreover, he has put the everlasting into their hearts, yet the human being cannot grasp the work that God has done from beginning to end. |
| 12 | ידעתי כי אין טוב במ כי אם־לשמוח ולעשות
טוב בחייו: | I know that there is nothing better for them than to rejoice and do well during life; |
| 13 | וגם כלי־האדם שיאכל ושתה וראה טוב בכל־
עמלו מתת אלהים היא: | moreover, for every person who eats and drinks and sees the good in all his work – this is a gift of God. |

- 14 ידעתי כי כל־אשר יעשה האלהים הוא יהיה לעולם עליו אין להוסיף וממנו אין לגרע והאלהים עשה שיראו מלפניו: I know that everything God does is lasting; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has done this, so that people should stand in reverence before God.
- 15 מה־שהיה כבר הוא ואשר להיות כבר היה והאלהים יבקש את־נרדף: Whatever happens has already happened; whatever will happen has already happened; and God seeks what has blown away.

This pericope provides us with one of Qoheleth's most highly theological reflections, using the word for God, אלהים six times in five verses. At its core, in vv. 12–13 we find the second of the seven joy texts of the book, and this section concludes the discussion of time in Qoh 3. Therefore, it is of great interest for us to investigate how it relates to the preceding poem on time, Qoheleth's discussion of joy, and how they are related on the theological level. Hidden within it also lies Qoheleth's implicit answer to his programmatic question of meaning and purpose which he has just repeated in 3:9.

Looking at these five verses, we may detect the following simple chiasmic structure, mainly identified by the vocabulary used throughout the pericope:¹⁷³

A 3:10 God gives the human a task

B 3:11 God does/makes 2x (עשה); the word עלם; the human cannot find out

C 3:12–13 Second text on joy

B' 3:14 God does/makes 2x (עשה); the word עולם; the human in awe before God

A' 3:15 God seeks what has gone by

God is clearly the protagonist of these verses, being the one who gives, does, works, and seeks. God gives the human being “a task,” עלם, and “the ability to eat, drink and see the good in all his work.” However, the human being also plays an important role since s/he is the recipient in this relationship, and equally has a very active role. The human being is meant to occupy himself with the God-given task, and even if s/he cannot find out God's work of creation, he is still meant to do good and see the good in all his work. As we can see, this relationship between God's creative work and the human being's response continues to grow and develop through this chapter. In addition, the role of the human person is especially prevalent in regards to the experience of joy at the center of this pericope in vv. 12–13, where God is only mentioned indirectly as the provider of the gift of joy and the focus is primarily on how it is best for human beings to live. Here at the core of this section, where God is giving, doing and creating, the human being is called to be a participant of this work by means of choosing to act upon God's

¹⁷³ In structuring the text, Mazzinghi sees it reflected in Qoh 1:13–18. Mazzinghi, *Ho cercato*, 214-216.

gift and live it with joy. We will first begin by looking at the outer shell of this pericope, vv. 10–11 and vv. 14–15, and then take a closer look at the text on joy in vv. 12–13.

V.1. QOHELETH 3 VV. 10–11 AND VV. 14–15

Verses 10–11 clearly give evidence of God’s active participation in the world of Qoheleth’s experience as is seen in the structure of the verbs, where God is repeatedly the subject:

A I have seen the task which God *has given* (נתן)... (10)

B He *has made* (עשה) everything... (11a)

A’ He also *has put* (נתן) עלם (11b)

B’ ...the work which God *has done* (עשה) (11c)

The remaining verses have the following structure when it comes to God as the subject of the verb עשה in v. 14 and the verb בקש in v. 15:

A everything God *does*, endures לעולם (14a)

A’ God *does* (14b)

B God *seeks out* (15)

V.2. QOHELETH 3:10–11

In vv. 10–11, Qoheleth describes “the task that God has given to human beings to be occupied with.” Qoheleth is pointing directly back to 1:13 where at the start of his discourse our Sage had noted, “It is a grievous task [ענין רע] which God has given human beings to be occupied with.” Again in 2:23 this task is mentioned in a negative light as something “painful and irritable” [מכאבים וכעס ענינו]; in 2:26 “the task” is given to the sinner, and it is one of gathering and collecting. Now, however, there is a notable change in the mood. Qoheleth 3:10 is neutral; it is no longer negative. In addition, since Qoheleth follows by stating, “[God] has made everything beautiful in its time” in 3:11, we may say that the task God has given the human being may now be perceived as something positive. The adjective יפה used to describe everything that God has made in its time does not only insinuate a “good” or “appropriate” time; it is a word commonly used to mean “beautiful.” Now, this God-given task clearly has something to do with the different beautiful times of human life, as it points back to the poem on time, while it also looks forward to the verses to come, where God is mixed into the mystery of time. Let us note that Qoheleth uses יפה instead of טוב, the adjective repeated in the first

creation narrative of Genesis, when referring to God's work of creation.¹⁷⁴ Therefore, by using the word *יפה*, he not only avoids the moralizing nuance that is present in the word *טוב*¹⁷⁵ but also presents creation in a much broader sense.

Qoheleth develops and expands the idea of the creator God of Genesis, which is foundational for Hebrew thought based on the Torah. Not only is God the creator of all things that God judges to be good, but Qoheleth expands the conception of God by showing how God involves the human being intimately in his creation, which is what makes God's work beautiful. Part of God's work of creation is to place the mystery of time into the human heart, even if this surpasses human comprehension. Therefore, not only does God create everything and see that it is good, but God places "the everlasting," a dimension of creation that is divine, directly into the human heart. Regardless of the absence of the word *טוב*, the use of the word "everything" *הכל* puts an emphasis on the totality of God's work, and in addition the use of *עת* points back to the poem on time and reminds us of the totality of God's creation in its sequential and timely manner as described in Gen 1. The time-creation pair, evident in Gen 1 which describes the orderly manner in which all things come into being throughout the six days of creation, is here represented in a new way in Qoh 3:10 by means of the phrase "he has made everything beautiful in its time." The time-creation pair as seen on the seventh and final day of the creation account consists in God admiring all that he has made and making it a sacred day for rest. This concept would correspond to God's setting "the everlasting into their heart" that is, the perfection and completeness of creation is precious and sacred, even to God who honors the day. In this manner, Qoheleth connects with the creation accounts of Genesis and offers a fuller picture of the theology of creation. Hence, the totality comes from the relationship of Genesis and Qoheleth and their complementary depictions of the God of creation.

Putting aside for a moment the "task" which God has given to human beings, we come to perhaps one of the most contentious phrases of the book in 3:11b. What exactly is God placing in the heart of the human being, and for what purpose? The interpretation of *עולם* is crucial for our understanding of Qoheleth.¹⁷⁶ Qoheleth's emphasis on the individual times in 3:1–8 carries significant weight in the understanding of *העלם* in 3:11, since *עת* again appears in 3:11 as *בעתו*. "God has made everything beautiful in its time; moreover, he has put *העלם* into their hearts..." The close association of *עת* and *העלם*, in this case, requires that we attribute a temporal meaning to *העלם*,¹⁷⁷ especially since God is the protagonist of both subsequent actions.

¹⁷⁴ Both J.J. Lavoie and Mazzinghi support this against many previous scholars including Gorssen and Glasser who saw no relation between the two words. Jean-Jacques Lavoie, *La pensee du Qohelet: Etudes exegetique et intertextuelle* (Montreal: Fides, 1992), 168. Mazzinghi, *Ho cercato*, 221.

¹⁷⁵ Vélchez Líndez, *Eclesiastes*, 237.

¹⁷⁶ Cf. two exhaustive studies on this word by Mazzinghi, "Il mistero del tempo," 147-161 and Mazzinghi, *Ho cercato*, 217-227.

¹⁷⁷ Examining other possible interpretations, R. Murphy notes that "darkness" or "ignorance" "can be justified philologically, but the contrast between *עלם* and *עת* suggests a temporal meaning, such as 'duration.'" Murphy,

The translation of םג as “moreover” transmits the sense of consequence in both of God’s actions: God “making everything beautiful” and God “putting םהעלם into the human heart,” and therefore they are two parts of the same movement.

On one hand, the word םהעלם here points to the idea that God places in the human being the longing for bringing together the past, present and future in a way that only God is able to do.¹⁷⁸ These various moments, always fleeting, always running away into the past, make up the limited sphere within which the human being thinks and lives. The human being is simply unable to gather together the collection of scattered moments, the memory of past events, that which is to come, into an intelligible whole by himself, though s/he perhaps longs for it. The meaning of םהעלם according to Mazzinghi refers to “uno spazio di tempo dalla durata indefinita, che supera ogni possibilità di verifica da parte dell’uomo e che si colloca quindi su un piano diverso da עת, con il quale, del resto, è posto in un rapporto antitetico.”¹⁷⁹ In the defective spelling without the *waw*, he sees a play on words with םעלם that means “to hide,” “to keep secret,” and consequently Mazzinghi interprets this term as “the mystery of time.”¹⁸⁰ I have chosen to translate this term as “the everlasting,” avoiding the false connection with life-after-death that comes with the term “eternity,” yet retaining the sense of permanence and the indefinite duration of time that cannot be explained or comprehended by one’s reason.

Is the “task” our Sage is referring to in 3:10 that of tackling “the everlasting”? Qoheleth concludes v. 11 by affirming, “Yet they cannot grasp what God has done from the beginning to the end.” Is this God-given task really impossible? It is true that by the time one notices something which begins, it is already in the process of passing away and “attempts to time the beginning or ending of things are futile.”¹⁸¹ Yet is the human being still meant to find a way to make sense of his/her life within the confines of time? Maybe one must accept the fact that one cannot know what the next moment will bring or where the previous moment has gone. This is in fact an essential element of “fearing” God and recognizing God’s sovereignty and accepting

Ecclesiastes, 30. See also: Chango, *Qohélet et Chryssippe au sujet du temps. Εὐκαιρία, αἰὼν et les lexèmes ‘ēt et ‘ōlām en Qo 3,1-15.*

¹⁷⁸ Murphy, Rodríguez Ochoa and others speak of “duration,” which accurately understands the temporal extension but does not reflect the gathering of time together from God’s perspective. It is highly difficult for םהעלם to be translated with one single word in English. Although םהעלם in verse 14 conveys the sense of permanence, the term “eternity” is understood in connection with heaven and eternal life, ideas foreign to Qoheleth, therefore by avoiding it as a translation for םהעלם, we avoid any possible imposition of ideas foreign to Qoheleth’s intention with this word. Nevertheless, Schwienhorst-Schönberger makes an attractive case for understanding “eternity” as “the coincidence of past, present and future”; cf. Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet*, 273. P. Sacchi’s translates it as “una certa visione d’insieme”, is as close as one can get to the essence of this idea. Paolo Sacchi, *Ecclesiaste* (Rome: Edizioni Paoline, 1971), 142. See also: Jesus Asurmendi, *Du non-sens l’ecclésiaste* (Paris: Cerf, 2012), 33-34.

¹⁷⁹ Mazzinghi, *Ho cercato*, 225.

¹⁸⁰ Mazzinghi, *Ho cercato*, 225; Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 261.

¹⁸¹ Rami M. Shapiro, *Ecclesiastes: annotated & explained* (Woodstock: SkyLight Paths, 2010), 30.

our human limitation. Perhaps the answer lies in learning to live with unknowing and in learning to receive the other gift from God, which will be unveiled in vv. 12–13: the gift of joy.

Qoheleth is telling us here that God has placed עֹלָם into the human לֵב; it may therefore be useful to clarify the Hebrew understanding of the word לֵב. “The לֵב functions in all dimensions of human existence and is used as a term for all the aspects of a person: vital, affective, noetic, and volunative. The prescientific anthropology of the OT does in fact view the human person as composite...”¹⁸² From this notion of the vital לֵב comes the notion of לֵב “as the seat of human emotions,” and hence the לֵב is the place where one experiences emotions such as despair, grief, sadness, joy and pleasure. In addition, the human לֵב is the noetic seat of many activities and “within the לֵב take place intellectual visualization (cognition and memory), thought, understanding, and attention. Finally, wisdom is pictured as residing in the heart.”¹⁸³ In the case of Qoh 3:11b, לֵב would accurately describe the noetic and volunative, but also the vital and affective center of the individual. The vital and affective dimensions unite past, present, and future within the experience of the human being, since one is in a constant process of development and growth building upon what has taken place in the past and walking toward the future determined by the present. In addition, memory, which would be part of the noetic dimension, does much of this work. These then would inform and nourish the volunative dimension that looks towards the future with the possibility of directing one’s own course in life. Furthermore, I think that Qoh 3:11 points to the human yearning for eternity, a quality inherent in human nature where people have the need to look beyond the present moment and inquire about times past and what is to come.¹⁸⁴ The verse expresses the striving of individuals to transcend themselves in the midst of human limitation and temporality, giving לֵב a connotation of the existential nature of humanity.

As we have noted, the word עֹלָם encapsulates the coherent vantage point from which God unifies the past, present and future. The unity of these times, and the ability to understand time in its entirety, is what the human being longs for and struggles to achieve. In fact, Qoheleth seemingly responds to the apocalyptic current of his time that gave supreme importance to embracing with one single glance, past, present and future, as well as order and finality.¹⁸⁵ Qoheleth, on the contrary, strongly denies that the human being is conceded this possibility of understanding history from its origins, to its conclusion, and in all its totality, and though God does set עֹלָם “in the heart” of the human being, God has not permitted the human being to comprehend this reality as a whole. Therefore, what we need to explore is exactly what God’s

¹⁸² Heinz-Josef Fabry, “לֵב,” *TDOT* 7:412.

¹⁸³ Fabry, *TDOT* 7:414, 419.

¹⁸⁴ Delitzsch already suggested this back in 1872. C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on The Old Testament* (Edinburgh; London; New York: T&T Clark, 1872), 261, while Strobel speaks of a “sense of eternity” in A. Strobel, *Das Buch Prediger (Kohélet)*, Die Welt der Bibel Kleinkommentare zur Heiligen Schrift, 9 (Düsseldorf: Patmos-Verlag, 1967), 55.

¹⁸⁵ D’Alario, “Qohelet e l’Apocalittica. Il significato del termine ‘ôlām in Qo 3,11,” 82.

gift of *עלם* is and what its implications are. If it is not an understanding of the totality of time by means of reason, then what is it?

On the one hand, one might read this situation of not knowing or understanding the everlasting as an absolute frustration.¹⁸⁶ On the other hand, though, the restricted access to intelligibility that Qoheleth marks out becomes the very condition for the possibility of joy and reverence of God. There is an uncommon wisdom in knowing one's limits and in absolute trust and surrender. Although the human being simply cannot conjoin the various times together to make sense of them as a whole, God has placed *עלם*, this vision of *completeness* and *wholeness*, into the human heart. Only God can do this, and that is why the human being's only response is to "revere God" (3:14). Therefore, as has already been insinuated above, there is a direct link between God's gift of *עלם* – the mysterious dimension of time that the human being can never fully understand – the experience of joy noted in 3:12, and the attitude of revering God. The very attitude of fearing or revering God comes from encountering and touching that which is everlasting. Both the realization that our life is fleeting and temporal, but also the recognition of the weight of something more permanent and lasting, infuses this sense of reverence and awe. In addition, and very significantly, God is placing something of God's own self, something of God's divine essence, into the human being, hence the human being's incapacity to comprehend is logical and expected. We will notice a parallel concept of God placing something of Godself in the human being in our study of Qoh 5:17–19.¹⁸⁷ One possible analogy to this would be something like our modern concept of "grace" which we can experience and verify, even though we do not necessarily comprehend it fully with our reason.

In Qoh 3:11b we come upon a frequent and interesting verb, *מצא* meaning "to find." Here and in two other places (7:13; 8:17), the language of "seeking" and "finding" expresses the unsurpassable boundary for human knowledge. The object of this verb here in 3:11 is "the work of God," something that the human being is unable to fully understand or grasp.¹⁸⁸ The human being cannot find out the work of God "from beginning to end" *מראש ועד־סוף*. Wisdom is clearly not equivalent to knowledge since regardless of whether one is wise, it is beyond all

¹⁸⁶ Fox offers a particularly negative view of this state of affairs: "Qoheleth is frustrated that life cannot be 'read,' that the multiplicity of disjointed deeds and events cannot be drawn together into a coherent narrative with its own significance." Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 133.

¹⁸⁷ "Sperimentando la vanità dei suoi sforzi sia sul piano teoretico che su quello esistenziale, l'uomo può acquistare la piena coscienza dei propri limiti di fronte alla grandezza di Dio e quindi ridimensionare l'orgoglio e le proprie infondate pretese di onnipotenza." D'Alario, "Qohelet e l'Apocalittica. Il significato del termine 'ôlām in Qo 3,11," 88.

¹⁸⁸ Since Qoheleth had used the verb *ראיתי*, "I saw" to introduce his reflection in the preceding verse, consequently, the epistemological value of the verb *מצא* here is linked to the primary source of knowledge for Qoheleth. Luca Mazzinghi, "The Verbs *מצא* 'to find' and *בקש* 'to search' in the Language of Qohelet - an Exegetical Study," in *The Language of Qohelet in its Context* (ed. A. Berlejung, Van Hecke, P.; vol. 164; Leuven: Peeters, 2007), 91-120.

human beings to find out and understand God’s work. For Qoheleth, wisdom consists in openness to “the everlasting,” an experience of the fullness and completeness of time which despite the fact that it is beyond human comprehension, it transmits the sense of something lasting, perfect and complete and leads to a profound reverence of God.

V.3. QOHELETH 3:14–15

14a I know that everything God does is lasting;

14b nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has done this, so that people should stand in reverence before God.

15a Whatever happens has already happened; whatever will happen has already happened;¹⁸⁹

15b and God seeks what has blown away.

We skip ahead to the last two verses of this section, vv. 14–15, B’ and A’ of the chiasm noted above in section V, which are parallel to vv. 10–11. Interestingly, we come up against a second use of עולם in Qoh 3:14: “I know that everything God does is עולם.” At this point, we find the word עולם in relation to God’s doing and making; in other words, “God’s work” – work which could also be defined as God’s creation. I chose to translate this phrase “everything God does is lasting” because it best expresses the sense of עולם in this case. To say, for example, “everything God does endures forever” might sound like God’s creation can never die; this would contradict what Qoheleth says elsewhere about the fleeting nature of creation. Instead, the phrase, “it is lasting” does not necessarily mean that it lasts “forever,” but it does give the impression of something that endures because it is of high and durable quality. Although God shares this mystery with the human being, by setting עולם in their heart, it nevertheless remains beyond their intellectual capacity to grasp or control this gift of “the everlasting” and consequently the human being “is unable to find out the work which God does from beginning to end” (3:11). Hence, עולם speaks of God’s creation being complete and perfect, and as we will see in the next section, this is related to the act of revering God. Verse 14b expresses this perfection of God’s work by saying: “nothing can be added to it or taken away from it.”¹⁹⁰ This formulaic expression is found in other passages of the Hebrew Scriptures as a way of emphasizing the authority of God’s word.¹⁹¹ In addition, this formula underlines the binding force of

¹⁸⁹ I choose to translate מה־שֶׁהַיָּה as “whatever happens.” “In Qoh 1:9 and 3:15, *mah-shehayah* refers to the general situation under the sun, in the more dynamic sense of ‘what happens’ rather than in the more static or ontological sense of ‘what is.’” Schoors, *The Preacher Sought to Find Pleasing Words II*, 55; Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 213.

¹⁹⁰ I use the word “complete” in the sense of “whole,” although by no means necessarily finished.

¹⁹¹ See: Deut 4:2; 13:1; Jer 26:2; Prov 30:6; cf. Rev 22:18–19.

God's commandments and it appears in conjunction with the command to fear God in Deuteronomy 4:10 and 13:15. In Qoheleth's case, however, the formula is applied to God's work and action, not God's word, as Qoheleth's God does not speak with authority but rather acts with authority. God's work and activity is always and everywhere in force, "imposing itself upon human subjects who are incapable of escaping or controlling it in any way."¹⁹² Qoheleth is constantly examining "that which is done" [נעשה] upon the earth (1:9, 13; 2:17; 4:3; 8:9, 16; 9:3, 6) and his ultimate conclusion is that it is all the work of God. (8:17; cf. 11:5) Nevertheless, though God's mode of communication here in Qoheleth is his action and not his words or commandments, the effect is the same as that seen in Deuteronomy since the second half of this verse asserts that, "God has done this, so that people should stand in reverence before God."¹⁹³

The last verse of this pericope may give us a clue to what Qoheleth has been talking about in the earlier verses. One possible translation for v. 15 is "Whatever happens has already happened; whatever will happen has already happened; and God seeks what has blown away." What can we make of this riddle? Its start, *מה־שהיה כבר הוא*, very closely matches the start of the riddle in Qoh 1:9, *מה־שהיה הוא*, which concluded the opening poem in Qoh 1:4–11, "What has been, that will be; what has been done, that will be done. Nothing is new under the sun!" Qoh 1:9 looks first to the past as a way of defining the future, assuring that what has been and what has been done, will be and will be done. The regularity and certainty of how nature's cycles have repeated themselves gives assurance that this will not change in the future, and that nothing new is to be expected. The riddle here in 3:15 essentially closes this first section of the book and affirms that the present and the future are a repetition of the past. Both riddles look in opposite directions, but they also express the idea that there will be no surprises. Nevertheless, 3:15 brings God into the picture with the phrase "and God seeks what has blown away" which we will study in a moment. God has no problem possessing, holding together, and comprehending the completeness and totality of time: past, present and future. However, since the human being cannot hold these times together, humans only have access to the present moment. It is in the *present* that the human being can have access to the past by means of one's memory, and to the future by means of one's desire and will to make certain decisions. Since we can safely assume that God as Creator of all that exists, including time and space, is not limited by either space or time, then God's involvement in human life allows the present to open a window for the human being into the fullness and wholeness of time, as far as God shares this gift with him/her.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹² Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment*, 89.

¹⁹³ The ψ particle, which introduces this final clause introduces a purpose/result clause. According to Murphy, this statement attributes purpose to divine activity, along with 7:14 where Qoheleth says that "God acts...so that human beings may not grasp anything after them." Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 35.

¹⁹⁴ See also: Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet*, 273-274, who speaks about God's grasp of time and the human being's incapacity to hold it.

In addition, what shall we make of the phrase, “and God seeks out what has passed by” or another possible translation: “and God seeks what has blown away”?¹⁹⁵ Perhaps a clue lies in the second part of the riddle in 1:9, “nothing is new under the sun,” emphasizing the fact that what takes place in our human realm has already taken place before. If we relate this phrase to 3:15b, then what God is seeking in the present is something that has already existed in the past. Here, Qoheleth uses the verb בקש “to seek,” and it is the only time in Qoheleth that God is the subject of this verb. Elsewhere in Qoheleth, the seeking after is always performed, in vain, by the human being (3:6; 7:25. 28. 29; 8:17; 12:10). The very fact that God is the one seeking here, in this case something from the past implies that the human being, by contrast, is unable to do the same with a positive outcome; the human being is unable to hold onto time that has passed. When the human being is previously said to have a time to “seek” in 3:6, the contrasting element is a “time to lose.” However, that which God seeks, only God can seek and successfully find.¹⁹⁶ Does this imply perhaps that God is continuously rescuing into his “timeless present” everything of ours and of our times that have passed, everything that *we ourselves* are unable to hold? Is this God’s work that the human being cannot understand? Nevertheless, even though one is incapable of comprehension, one is still able to revere God and this knowledge of God invites one to adopt this attitude of revering God.

The phrase יבקש את-נרדף has a temporal dimension to it, indicating both the passage of time and the events that once took place within the present time fading away into the past. God is the one who “collects” the temporal moments that have escaped into the past and brings them back again into the future. This then becomes the present. With this phrase in 3:15b, Qoheleth emphasizes God’s power to grasp all times over against the fleeting and mortal vantage point of human beings, since only God can seek after and gather what, from our point of view, has vanished into the past. Qoheleth echoes the cyclical nature of the sun, wind, and sea of the opening poem in Qoh 1:4–11, and uses the word נרדף to allude to the reality that all things are a passing breath.¹⁹⁷ Qoheleth’s choice of רדף to represent this passing away may itself signify an association with the wind not only in 1:6, but in all of his references to “chasing after the wind” throughout the entire book. Blenkinsopp’s attention to the uses of רדף elsewhere in the Bible provides a perspective on the verb often overlooked. He notes that “every other occurrence of the verbal stem in Niphal has to do with *the action of the wind driving something*

¹⁹⁵ For a thorough summary of the history of interpretation of the root רדף, see Esposito, “Observations on God and the Wind,” 79-97.

¹⁹⁶ Mazzinghi, “The Verbs מצא ‘to find’ and בקש ‘to search,’” 105-106.

¹⁹⁷ I agree with Schwienhorst-Schönberger that 3:15b is intended as an explication of *hā’olām*, or God’s vision of time, in 3:11. “Was für den Menschen in Vergangenheit (v. 15aα) und Zukunft (v. 15aβ) auseinanderfällt, wird von Gott umgriffen (v. 15b), ist in seinem Handeln Ewigkeit (v. 14a).” Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet*, 275.

before it.”¹⁹⁸ Though the niph'al of רדף is actually only found in Lamentations 5:5 and Sirach 5:3,¹⁹⁹ Blenkinsopp’s theory may still be retained regarding those passages employing רדף with reference to the driving wind. In Job 30:15, the imperfect תרדף is more suitably interpreted as a Niph'al instead of a Qal: “...my honor is driven off like the wind.”²⁰⁰ The context in Isa 17:13 is quite unambiguous: “...but God will rebuke them, and they will flee far away; *blown away*, like chaff on the mountains before the wind...”²⁰¹ Ps 83:16 connects the root רדף with the meaning of בקש: “So pursue them with your tempest.” Finally, Seow adds Hosea 12:2 to the list, in which the prophet speaks of Ephraim as “shepherding the wind, *chasing* the east wind.”²⁰²

The purpose of this pursuit is to establish “a thematic link with the cyclical movement of the wind endlessly turning on itself in the opening poem of the book (1:6). The same metaphor may lie behind the description, nine times repeated, of purposeful human activity as ‘chasing the wind.’”²⁰³ Verse 15b is certainly the conclusion of 3:1–15, but it also functions equally well as the conclusion of the unified whole 1:3–3:15, much like 12:8, which can be considered the conclusion of both the final poem on death and the entire book. Qoheleth may be altering the same theme of the transitory nature of what is repeated under the sun by likening it to wind that is blown away, only to once again return, thanks to the efforts of God. The image of the wind inevitably reminds us of God’s creative breath at the moment of creation and God’s continual creative work in the world. Once again, we have a reference to creation here in Qoh 3:1–15. While it is true that this remains a mystery for human beings, together with the incomprehensibility of time, this is the key condition for human beings to revere God. The possible translation, “and God goes in search of what has blown away,” wishes to reflect the reference to the wind, while also expressing how time escapes the human being’s intellectual grasp and what is blown away disappears from our limited perception of the world. At the same time, it invites the human being to an attitude of surrender and trust since s/he cannot search and find

¹⁹⁸ The passages he cites in support of this argument are Lv 26:36, Isa 17:13, Ps 83:16, Job 13:25 and 30:15. However, רדף is a Pual in Isa 17:13, and a Qal in both Ps 83:16 and Job 30:15. The Lv 26:36 and Job 13:25 passages actually come from the related root נדף, which means, in the Niph'al, “to be driven about as by the wind”. Other cases of נדף in the Niph'al not mentioned by Blenkinsopp are Isa 19:7 and 41:2, Ps 68:3, and Prov 21:6. Blenkinsopp, “Ecclesiastes 3.1-15,” 63.

¹⁹⁹ The use of this root in Sirach and Lamentations does not seem to match the context or use of רדף in Qoheleth 3:15b. The element of persecution, which Sirach presumably draws upon in citing this verse from Qoheleth, does not fit in with Qoheleth’s reflections on time and the limits of human knowledge. Interestingly, Zorell defines the participle in Sirach 5:3 as “*Id quod (velut vento) abactum est et evanuit*”. Franz Zorell, *Lexicon Hebraicum Veteris Testamenti* (Rome: 1989), 758.

²⁰⁰ See the remarks on this occurrence for רדף in *BDB*, 923a.

²⁰¹ Zorell once again makes note of the allusion to wind in this Pual participle: “*propellitur, abigitur alqs ut gluma vento*.” Zorell, *Lexicon Hebraicum Veteris Testamenti*, 758.

²⁰² Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 165-166. He then concludes, “Thus, *nirdāp* may be an allusion to the *rē’ūt rūah* (1:14; 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4, 6; 6:9) and *ra’yôn rūah* (1:17; 4:16)”. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 76, and Mazzinghi, *Ho cercato*, 235-236, note this possible allusion as well.

²⁰³ Blenkinsopp, “Ecclesiastes 3.1-15,” 63.

for the time that has passed. The verses in which רדף is used in connection with the wind are sufficient to demonstrate that the proper way to translate נרדף here is to incorporate this allusion to wind blowing something away.

V.3.1. FEARING GOD OR RATHER “REVERING” GOD

Qoheleth first mentions the theme of revering God in 3:14. The emphasis in these verses is on God’s inscrutability and on all the things that humans cannot do, know or have. In addition, it is significant that this precise verse comes immediately after the joy text in vv. 12–13 and there is clearly a link as both 3:12 and 3:14 begin with “I know,” ידעתי . This, therefore, signals a connection between revering God and joy. At this point, we shall make some preliminary considerations about what Qoheleth means by the phrase “fearing God” or preferentially “revering God” which comes up at critical junctures in his theological discourse (3:14; 5:6; 7:18; 8:12–13; 12:13b). The root איר and its derivatives frequently occur as an equivalent for true religion. Often this root is connected with God’s ways or laws.²⁰⁴ Thus in much of the Hebrew Scriptures, to “fear” God is to keep God’s commandments, and to obey God’s voice (Qoh 12:13). Reverence of God plays an important role in the wisdom literature of Israel, from Proverbs, which asserted that “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” in 1:7 to Job, whose principal characteristic was to fear God in 1:8; this virtue is essential for a meaningful existence and the understanding of piety. For the most part, “fear of God” is a virtue that is encouraged and leads to right behavior and good consequences. There is a debate as to whether it means “respect” or “fear” or somewhere in between, however what is certain is that “the object of fear is the Creator of all, the one who is sovereign over his creation. Those who experience reverence in his presence know their rightful place in the universe.”²⁰⁵ We must ask, however, what Qoheleth means by this expression and how it functions in our particular reading of the book through the lens of time and joy, and this will become clearer throughout the remaining chapters of this thesis.²⁰⁶

Qoheleth is unique in that he never uses the nominal expression “the fear of God” or “the fear of the Lord,” but rather exclusively uses איר in its verbal forms. This may indicate that Qoheleth understands “revering God” as something dynamic and in flux, and hence not as

²⁰⁴ See for example, Dt 5:19; 6:2, 24; 31:12; 28:58; Qoh 12:13.

²⁰⁵ Tremper Longman and Peter Enns, *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 201.

²⁰⁶ I do not agree with the numerous scholars who think that all mentions of “fearing God” are orthodox glosses inserted into Qoheleth at a later time by a second hand. “This statement concerning the fear of God is an inextricable element of Qoheleth’s discourse, and to excise, ignore, or otherwise downplay it would be to dismiss an important theological conclusion. Thematically, it flows with the rest of the text and its primary concern with the work of God; indeed, it makes a crucial claim about the very *telos* of divine activity.” Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment*, 87.

a fixed principle or a quality that one can possess or control. This active sense of “revering God” also corresponds to the perspective that since it is God’s action and not God’s word that incites the human being to revere God, therefore “revering God” invites the human being to action and collaboration. In addition, Qoheleth always uses **ירא** with God [**אלהים**], the unknowable and mysterious God, and never YHWH, the more familiar actor within the history of Israel.²⁰⁷ God remains somewhat elusive and incomprehensible, and hence to some extent distant. Qoheleth speaks of “fearing God in terms of what one can and cannot do in light of God’s mysterious activity. Qoheleth’s discourse on fearing God is firmly rooted in a theology of divine transcendence.”²⁰⁸ Therefore, revering God means recognizing and respecting the distance between the divine and the human, better understood as “awe” or “reverence,” although not necessarily fear and terror. If human beings could know and understand God’s work and God’s action, they would feel to some degree in control of what is happening “under the sun,” but there is a repeated insistence on the limitations of human knowledge, and this teaches the human being to respect and “revere God.”

“Fear of God, properly understood, is more than a ‘stance’ or ‘attitude.’ It has a behavioral component as well, a full range of humanity’s response to the deity.”²⁰⁹ Revering God implies not only a motivation for obeying God’s laws and commandments, but it is a deep awe and profound respect before the presence of God along with the reverence in witnessing the wonders of God’s works. This meaning appears here in 3:14, as the human being sees the perfection of God’s works. The human being can neither add nor take away anything to what God has done, nor from his complete and lasting creation. At this point we may note the connection between the key word **עולם** and the act of revering God. The word **עולם**, points to not only the fact that God’s creation is “lasting,” but also points us back to the use of **עלם** in v. 11b. God has just given the totality of time, “the everlasting,” God’s self-gift into the human heart. This in turn points to God’s proximity and God’s divine gift, which we could also call grace. This divine action has a direct relationship to the human beings’ reaction and consequent attitude. Revering God, a sense of the respect and even distance, are a consequence of God’s mysterious and generous gift of Godself. Paradoxically, however, the word **עולם** also introduces this sense of distance as it points to the eternal dimension of time and consequently the greatness of God while highlighting human limitation. The word **עולם** points to a paradox, God is near as he gives this divine gift into the human heart, but God is also great and surpasses the limitations of the human heart, thus also being distant. Therefore, this gift of **עולם** allows the

²⁰⁷ Egon Pfeiffer, "Die Gottesfurcht im Buche Kohelet," in *Gottes Wort und Gottes Land* (ed. H. G. Reventlow; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1965), 133-58, 134.

²⁰⁸ Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment*, 85.

²⁰⁹ Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment*, 121. See also, Bernard J. Bamberger, "Fear and Love of God in the Old Testament," *HUCA* 6 (1929): 39-53, Michael L. Barré, "Fear of God and the World View of Wisdom," *BTB* 11-13 (1983): 41-43.

human being to recognize and touch closely the essence of God, while at the same time touching how incomprehensible and mysterious this gift is, and hence distant.

To revere God is the purpose and end of all of God's extensive activity. It may remind us of Job's attitude of awe before God's creation and the consequent silence after he dares to question the reasons for suffering and injustice.²¹⁰ God reminds us blatantly, as if saying: "I know what I am doing." In fact, Qoheleth himself reaffirms this in 5:1: "God is in heaven and you are on earth; therefore, let your words be few." One is invited to trust and not try to understand that which has no explanation. In short, here Qoheleth is calling us to have this same attitude of surrender before the extensiveness of God's creation and work and this is the essence of the act of revering God thus far. "Qoheleth makes the divine mystery his preeminent claim about God, and thereby becomes a difficult but crucial witness to the *deus absconditus*."²¹¹ There is however, a consoling element to God's inscrutable work and a positive dimension that affirms the possibilities that human beings *do* have, and it lies in the possibility of joy. We will return to the implications of the very important attitude of "revering God" and its connections to human enjoyment as we draw conclusions to this theme in the last chapter.

V.4. QOHELETH 3:12–13 SECOND TEXT ON JOY

¹² I know that there is nothing better for them than to rejoice and do well during life;

¹³ moreover, for every person who eats and drinks and sees the good in all his work – this is a gift of God

Finally, we come to Qoheleth's second joy text, Qoh 3:12–13, at the very heart of this profound discussion on the mystery of time. Although the human being is unable to grasp the totality of time, even if God gives this gift by depositing עלם into the human heart, at the very same time, the gift said to come from God's hand is joy. Therefore, עלם and joy are brought into relationship, albeit indirectly, as both are gifts of God. The essential element which unites the everlasting and joy is the attitude of revering God which we have just developed in the previous section. These two gifts of God, time and joy, produce in the human being an attitude of profound reverence of God. Recalling the conclusion that we reached earlier, namely that this joy is not limited to a single moment in time, it is therefore a gift that one can access at any point of one's numerous "times" in life, putting it at the height of the human being's way of fulfilling God's task in life.

²¹⁰ See: Job 38 and Job 42.

²¹¹ Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment*, 88.

This second joy text opens with “I know” ידעתי escalating the emphasis of the previous joy text in 2:24–26 that we studied at the beginning of this chapter. This affirmation underlines the human experience that is fundamental to Qoheleth and the conclusions he reaches about life and God. The opening “I know” will be repeated once more two verses later when he speaks of everything which God does, which will remain עולם. Again, this is an indirect link tying the experience of joy to God’s work and its permanence as described by עולם. This opening is followed by the “nothing is better than” formula, elevating the action of rejoicing and doing good in one’s lifetime to the maximum ideal of the human being. The fact that it limits these actions to “one’s life” בחייו at the end of 3:12 emphasizes the fact that the human being can only experience joy in the here and now– in the limited time here on earth. However, as we saw earlier when studying the poem on time, limitation is also possibility and the “here and now” of the human being is also the fullness of his being. Furthermore, in 3:13 eating, drinking, and seeing good in one’s work are elevated to the status of “gift of God” מתת אלהים היא. As we will see in chapter III, this phrase is used only twice in the whole of Qoheleth, here and in 5:18. Not only does it link this joy text with the following joy text in 5:17–19, but it may also give us light to see exactly what Qoheleth describes as “a gift of God” both here and in 5:18. For now, the gift of God is described as “every human being who eats, drinks, and sees the good in all his work.”

As was stated earlier, vv. 10–15 seem to offer a response to the question of purpose in 3:9. Here at the heart of this passage we unveil the focal point: God’s gift of joy. Amid the human being’s task and work (3:10), search and query, lies God’s work (3:11, 14), which in some dimension remains a mystery to the human person (3:11b, 14a). This mystery of God’s work nourishes our capacity for wonder, and hence human beings are led to revere God (3:14b). It appears that this action on God’s part and the curiosity and desire to seek and understand, inherent to human nature, prepare the ground of the human heart to receive God’s gift of joy. To “eat, drink and see good in one’s work” within the seemingly endless human task is God’s gift. Therefore, this task is no longer an arduous and unprofitable one, as the profit is “to see good” or, in other words: to enjoy life.

V.5. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GENESIS 1–2 AND QOHELETH 3:10–15

To begin, God plays a central role both in Gen 1–2 and Qoh 3:10–15. In Gen 1–2, God is the subject and protagonist of all that takes place. God is the creator; God speaks and what he pronounces comes into existence, hence God’s word has authority. In six days of creation the entire cosmos takes shape. Without a doubt, God is the focal point. In the same way, we may see how God is the protagonist of Qoh 3:10–15. God gives a task to humankind, and it may very well be the task entrusted from the moment of creation, a responsibility for the rest

of the created world and participation in God's creative task. Furthermore, God has made everything appropriate in its time, which as we noted earlier, is an allusion to the six days of creation outlined in Gen 1. Earlier we noted that the formulaic expression "nothing can be added to it or taken away from it" is found in other passages of the Hebrew Scriptures as a way of emphasizing the authority of God's word, though in Qoheleth's case the formula is applied to God's work and action. God also places the mystery of time in the human heart and verses 14–15 reinforce the perfection and completeness of God's work, since "everything God does will remain forever."

The image of the wind repeated throughout Qoheleth, as we noted when studying Qoh 3:14–15 in section V.3., alludes to God's creative breath in Gen 1 at the beginning of creation. God's רוח, wind or breath, was moving over the surface of the waters when God first began creating the heavens and the earth in Gen 1:2. The image of God's breath is repeated once more in the second creation narrative in Gen 2:7 when God breathed into the human being's nostrils the breath of life. Hence, we have another link between the creation narratives and Qoh 3:10–15, and we may conclude that just as God is the main actor in the creation account of Genesis, God is also the central figure in this key section of Qoheleth.

Qoheleth has presented how God has dominion over time, past – present – and future, a particular dimension of God's creation and God makes the human being a participant in this dominion over time by placing the mystery of time in the human heart in Qoh 3:11. This concept reminds us of Gen 1 where God who has dominion over creation, creates the human being on the sixth day and gives him a central role over the rest of God's creation, making the human being a participant in God's dominion over all other creatures. After creating the beasts of the earth and the cattle and creeping things in Gen 1:24–25, God creates the human being in God's "image and likeness" in Gen 1:26 letting them "rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." We can see a relationship between the concept of participation presented in these last verses of the first creation account of Genesis and the human being's participation in God's dominion over time in Qoh 3:10–15. Qoheleth offers a complementary version to the creation theology of Genesis and confirms the central role of the human being in God's created world of time and space. Just as the human being is given dominion and power over the rest of God's creatures, the implication would be that the human being is also given dominion and power over God's gift of time. The consequence of the human being's participation in "God's time" is spelled out in Qoh 3:12, the human capacity to enjoy and "do well during life." In other words, to participate in God's dominion over time means to enjoy and therefore be *fully present* in the present moment as the human being works – work that is part of God's work of creation.

In addition, we may note an openness to the future in Gen 1–2, especially when it comes to God's creative work on the sixth day: the human being created in God's image and likeness

who is commanded to be fruitful and multiply, and who shares in God's dominion over the rest of creation. On this final day of creation, the human participation in creation is only at its beginning. In this sense, the work on this day is said to be "very good," though it is still incomplete and undetermined. We may compare this to the sense of future that we grasp in Qoh 3:15. "That which will be has already been," there is no surprise to that which will come but nevertheless it is God who rescues the past and builds the future from that which he rescues. Therefore, 3:15 is speaking of our participation in the eternal being of things, that is, living newly that which already existed in the beginning. On the sixth day of creation, the human being enters the picture and participates in that which was at the origin: the possibility to help complete creation. Therefore, what Genesis calls creation, Qoheleth would define as time. Thus if time is Qoheleth's way of speaking of creation and time is at the origin of everything, then we can conclude that the concept of time is what is most important in this chapter.

V.6. QOHELETH 3:10–15 CONCLUSIONS ON THE THEOLOGICAL COMMENTARY

The joy text in 3:12–13 is at the very core of the most theologically charged passage in the book, and this evidently indicates that joy has a strong link with God's presence and action. In addition, God's activity can be defined as God's continual work of creation, a theme we have noted repeatedly throughout the entire section studied in this chapter and these verses in particular. In 3:14, Qoheleth says that God's actions are עולם, belonging to the realm of the permanent and unchangeable – nothing can be added, and nothing taken away. Therefore, no one can equal or come close to the creative work that God does, no matter how much the human being may work. The vital point here is the recognition that one cannot add or take away from what God has done. Whether this be God's work of creation or God's gift of joy, the quality of עולם attributed to God's work, gifts, and actions are the direct cause for human beings to revere God. In addition, the human capacity to hold together the tension of עת and עולם and to accept the limitations inherent to human nature, lead to an attitude of revering God, a principal characteristic of wisdom. We cannot forget how wisdom has repeatedly come up in relation to Qoheleth's understanding of the reverence of God. The capacity, therefore, to hold together the completeness of time may be attributed to the quality of wisdom that God makes the human being able to acquire. A realistic recognition of humanity's place in the order of being, fully aware of the limitations imposed by time is humbling and therefore humanity acquires an attitude of reverence, awe, and surrender.

The reverence of God is both an acknowledgement of one's limitations and the fleeting dimension of time, as well as a response to God's gift of joy. In turn, however, the attitude of revering God is the gateway to touching the divine dimension in one's earthly life, because the significance of time becomes relative in light of God's infinite vastness. Revering God instills in the human being a sense of the sacredness of God's gifts of time and joy. Therefore, God

penetrates the human sphere of experience when one is open to the divine. “E volontà di Dio che l’uomo trovi la gioia, ma essa nasce dall’aver compreso che nessuna gioia è possibile senza il “timore” di Dio, senza il rispetto del suo mistero, anche di quel “mistero del tempo” che Dio ha posto nel cuore dell’uomo perché egli lo tema.”²¹²

Although the concept of wisdom is only mentioned in 2:26 as God’s gift to the person good in God’s sight, along with the gifts of knowledge and joy, it is implicit in the experience of the human being who learns to recognize and accept the different times of life. In other words, if we understand that the poem on time describes one who lives the gift of time and its “moments” as the wise person, then the subsequent question of purpose in 3:9 is pinpointing the wise person and questioning the profit coming from his work. We might also say that wisdom is implicit in the gift of God in 3:12–13. In addition, from our understanding of *תָּו* when looking closely at the poem on time, we can affirm that the times enlisted in the poem are not the traditional “proper” times that the wise person must discern. They are simply times, to which we must not attribute any value judgement. Nevertheless, Qoheleth mentions these opposing times to assert that God is over all of them and holds them together. Consequently, Qoheleth breaks with the retributive thinking associated with the concept of “proper time.” As we saw earlier, the very existence of a proper time imposes a responsibility on the human person to discern it and act accordingly. However, since Qoheleth admits that we cannot know even the “correct” or “proper” time, then God cannot expect us to act in a way that is beyond our capacity. We begin to notice that Qoheleth’s concept of wisdom takes a step beyond its traditional definitions: it is not about knowing everything, but rather it is about acceptance and surrender. It is about letting God be God, and hence standing in awe before the infinitude and incomprehensibility of God who holds all mysteries. At the same time, it is equally about having a meaning and purpose to one’s life and work and hence, actively seeking to respond, collaborate, and participate in one’s own humble way in God’s greater work. This is indeed a very different picture of the wise person: one who recognizes that she cannot judge and cannot know, and yet acts just the same. Wisdom is to know one’s true limitations, and, at the same time, recognize and accept the possibilities within one’s reach. Hence wisdom is to recognize and accept that God is the final judge and the ultimate source of justice. Therefore, we notice a trend: human wisdom gives one the ability to recognize God’s justice. This is in fact, the message of the book of Job. In the measure that Job recognizes the greatness of God’s creation, growing in reverence of God and wisdom, particularly by means of God’s speech out of the whirlwind in chapter 38, Job is led to understand that God’s justice goes beyond the limitations of human reasoning. Job 11:7–9 and 26:14 both admit that knowledge and understanding is beyond human reason and again in 38:2.4, Job lacks understanding or discernment of God’s primordial principle and design of the cosmos.²¹³ On this point, both Job and Qoheleth unite in

²¹² Mazzinghi, “Il mistero del tempo,” 161.

²¹³ In addition, although it is possibly a later addition, the poem on the quest for wisdom in Job 28, repeatedly questions the source of wisdom and the place of understanding.

their critique of traditional thinking that God will show justice in a retributive manner alone. In Job, God is not bound by the law of retributive justice, and hence Job's friends are delivered thanks to Job's intercession. God freely chooses to bless Job with good even after he defies and confronts God, in the same way that God allows Job to be afflicted even though innocent. "The integrity of Job and God is confirmed, but integrity has taken on a new meaning that transcends conformity to a mechanistic moral or natural law of reward and retribution."²¹⁴ For Qoheleth the highlight is placed on the experience of joy which may be lived in the present moment, regardless of the outcome or end to which one comes.

With regards to God's work and God's search of what has blown away in our past, Qoheleth asserts that God rescues everything in our lives which has receded into the past. It is an essential part of God's continual work of creation, and it cannot be separated from our present. We are today what our past has made us to be, and though we cannot remember and much less understand everything from our past, it is not lost nor does it go to waste, because God holds it. God sustains and molds it as the clay which the potter shapes and forms, creating us anew and reshaping us (see Jer 18:1–6). Our human life is described as *הבול* and chasing after the wind, a futile and unreachable task; humankind is simply unable to understand "what God has done" in spite of having *עולם* in its heart. Though it may seem "futile" to us, at times even a waste and without value, God collects our past. It is not valueless to God, on the contrary, it is what God uses to continue God's creative work. God is able to rescue that which has blown away.

If one is concerned about something from one's past, it is impossible to focus on the present. One is constantly turning events over and over in one's head, thinking how events could have been different, how one might have responded differently, or perhaps simply dwelling in that past and reliving it with no possibility of bringing it to life or changing it, no matter how much one tries. However, when one can perceive God's action, the "redemptive" way that God collects our past, the inevitable consequence is joy, and one can live and enjoy the present. Qoheleth does not mention our future, since the future is out of our hands and we cannot control it and furthermore, Qoheleth does not believe that God is deterministic and hence God cannot decide for us. Nevertheless, while it is true that the future is beyond us, not even the future escapes God's hands, as we saw in the comparison between Gen 1–2 and Qoh 3:1–15. There is an openness towards the sense of future which is part of the totality of time. Just as Gen 1–2 has an opening to the future, Qoh 3:1–15 also opens to the future, when he notes "that which will be has already been..." For Qoheleth, the past informs the future and all these times are contained within God who "seeks what has passed by." Even this action of God's seeking implies that God's work is unfinished and is projected towards what is to come in the future.

²¹⁴ Norman C. Habel, *The Book of Job: a commentary* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1985), 68.

We must recall my original claim that this section responds to the programmatic question of 3:9. The first connection between 3:9 and 3:10 is the theme of work. As we are looking at a worker who toils in 3:9, we immediately note that God has given this task (עֵינִי) or work to the human being. Then, God's gift in 3:13 consists in the human being seeing the good in all his/her work. I believe this is a clear response to the question of whether there is profit from human work – the very fact that the human being can appreciate the good in his/her own work is in itself profit. The experience of joy is also a reward for the work that one does. Finally, the very fact that one witnesses God's involvement and activity is a reward for one's work, as one may see that one is not alone in one's efforts. God is also at work, and God's work is perfect and complete. The affirmation that joy is a response to the question of purpose will nevertheless increase in strength throughout Qoheleth's treatise.

With regards to the theological focus of this concluding section, although God is not explicitly named in 3:1–8, God is behind the different moments and times of life which are God's gift and opportunity. Nevertheless, God is brought to the forefront of the discourse in 3:10–15 and we encounter the experience of joy, a divine gift, and we cannot help but notice how God is the protagonist. It is relevant that God is now prominent as we are faced with the gift of joy, since the experience of joy potentially present in the “moments” and “times” of human life cannot be had without God. God's prominence emphasizes the importance of understanding the gift of joy as something that comes from God, and as something not merely human.

Finally, 3:10–15 completes the theme introduced in 3:1 that we discussed earlier: that the fullness of time is at the heart of every event that is part of human experience. Qoheleth 3:11 mentions both עַתָּה and עוֹלָם, again reminding us of the “fullness of time” and at the same time the completeness and perfection of God's work which is beyond human understanding. The fact that God's work is “lasting,” עוֹלָם, and that nothing can be added or taken away from it, emphasizes its perfection and completion, expressed at the end of the poem in 3:8 that concludes with *shalom*.

VI. CONCLUSIONS ON TIME AND JOY

Our study of this entire section has permitted us to build links between the first two joy texts and the important poem on time, 3:1–8, as well as Qoheleth's views and observations on the nature of God that are delineated in the theological commentary after the poem on time. Our study of the first joy text has opened a window onto the role of the first two chapters of the book and how they build up towards the exposition on time in Qoh 3. The parody of the king functions as a sort of prologue that touches upon the desires of those who might think that happiness lies in riches, honor, and pleasure, but it leaves an open question. It does not give a satisfactory answer to the question of purpose and we remain unconvinced and unclear about the usefulness of the king's search. Qoheleth already begins to hint at a theme that will become increasingly recurrent and important: life is short, all people have the same fate, and hence, we will die one day. There is a tinge of despair in Qoheleth's first attempt to respond to the rhetorical question of purpose (2:10–11). He connects with the deep anthropological longing for happiness but does not yet reveal where to find it. However, by the first joy text in 2:24–26, God's simple gift of joy closes the parody and points us in an entirely different direction. God offers the human being the experience that his work is good, hence introducing us into the theme of creation and our active part in God's creation, by means of our work. It follows that the experience of joy can no longer be understood without taking the theological dimension into account, as now Qoheleth has tasted a different quality of joy; it is no longer just pleasure, it is something more, it is something that has a divine touch. As we will see, the call to joy escalates throughout Qoheleth towards an experience of plenitude and fullness.

By means of the poem on time and the theological commentary that follows, Qoheleth presents both dimensions of time in tension: human life is brief, ephemeral, and as transient as a breath of air, and yet the human longing for perfection and wholeness gives life the weight of eternity. In between these two passages, Qoheleth repeats the question of purpose (3:9) and reminds us of the task given to the human being by God (3:10). It follows therefore that the answer to this question of purpose lies in the resolution of this tension. Within our limited and ephemeral reality, the "mystery of time" *עלם*, the vision of *completeness* and *wholeness*, which God has placed into the human heart and which communicates God's divine essence is an experience of intimate contact with God and therefore something like "grace," even if one cannot comprehend it, and hence it is at the same time the realization of God's distance. We may describe Qoheleth's thought as "apophatic theology," the sense of the "luminous darkness" of God, as well as the infinite distance giving us a sense of intimate contact with the mystery. The most obvious implication of the gift of *עלם* is joy, since the second joy text of the book 3:12–13, follows straight afterwards. For the first time, Qoheleth offers an acceptable answer to the question of purpose: receiving the joy that comes from God's hand. Joy makes all of one's work worthwhile. The very fact that the human being can eat, drink, and see good in all his work, elevates his daily routine of work and the fleeting nature of his life to another

dimension – to a divine dimension, the dimension of עולם, hiding within the present moment. The greatest implication is that the human being is able to “reach” the fullness of the mystery of time by means of being fully present “here and now,” allowing God to chase after the past that has blown away and living with a true attitude of respect, awe, and reverence of God.

Both time and joy are noticeably important and central themes in this chapter, though for the moment, time seems to be taking the lead. In the measure one recognizes and values these gifts of time and joy as gifts that come from God, one grows in the attitude of revering God. The reflections on time invite us to consider the quality of each specific moment and its uniqueness and importance. It is in receiving the different “times” that one comes into direct contact with God, God’s work, and creation. Hence, time here takes priority and this awareness of time and its multiple dimensions nourishes the attitude of reverence for God. Time as עולם, that which is everlasting, introduces us into the reverence of God that is eternal himself. The fullness of time, potentially present in each “present moment” is at the same time what makes the experience of joy “timeless.” We are only able to receive joy as God’s gift when we learn to live here and now in the “present moment.” The themes of joy and time open the door to understanding the attitude of revering God, as well as the themes of death, the question of life purpose, and the role of work and creation, which we will continue exploring throughout this thesis.

CHAPTER III: FLEETING AND PRECIOUS JOY EXPERIENCING GOD'S TOUCH QOHELETH 5:17–19

*“Un adolescente enamorado habla con su abuela:
- Abuela, ¿nunca tienes miedo en un momento de gran felicidad por saber que
no puede durar siempre, que un día va a pasar y que nunca volverá a suceder?
- Dios viene donde no es mencionado. Es así la vida.”*

~ Rita Azevedo, Frágil como el mundo

0. INTRODUCTION

We continue our exploration of the themes of time and joy in the book of Qoheleth and their particular interaction with each other. As we have seen in the previous chapter, though our temporal existence is limited, time itself is a gift that comes from God. Despite the limitation imposed by time, God gives the human being the “mystery of time” and the gift of joy. It is precisely the experience of joy, which allows the human being to touch both this mystery of time and the divine, hence leading him/her to the experience of revering God. Through these discussions, Qoheleth opens the door to other themes such as work, creation, and death, which will become increasingly important. We now turn to the fourth joy text, Qoh 5:17–19.

I. DELIMITATIONS

Qoh 5:17–19 is a short pericope of only three verses, but we shall analyze it within the larger context of chapters 5 and 6. It is a passage of great theological importance within the book. Qoheleth 5:17–19 features the name of God on four occasions within its three verses. Additionally, there are two more occurrences in 6:2, a verse linked to our passage. Few other parts of the book can claim such a specific emphasis on the figure of God.²¹⁵

²¹⁵ Of the 40 times that אֱלֹהִים appears in Qoheleth, six cases are found in 3:10–15 which, according to Lohfink, is *the* theological text of the book, and five cases in 4:17–5:6, which is Qoheleth's treatment of religious behavior. Qoheleth 5:17–19 should therefore be considered the third “theological” passage of the Book of Qoheleth. Lohfink, “Qoheleth 5:17-19 - Revelation by Joy,” 631.

II. COMPOSITION AND UNITY OF 5:17–19 WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF QOH 5 AND 6

Qoheleth 5:17–19 finds itself embedded within the surrounding context that speaks of religiosity and worship of God, immediately followed by economic questions: poverty, wealth, injustice, and greed, and the resulting “lack of satisfaction” from the accumulation of wealth. It is particularly interesting that these two themes are presented one after the other, as sometimes in real life there is too much of a disconnect between them. However, it is possible that Qoheleth is trying to show us how intimately linked they really are. In addition, the theme of the rich and poor, and their satisfaction or lack thereof, sounds very much like the themes present in the parody of the king. In the previous chapter, we noticed the frustration and emptiness that comes from accumulating riches, and these verses seem to confirm those findings.

The unit commonly accepted by most commentators is 5:9 – 6:9.²¹⁶ However, I would extend this section to include the start of chapter 5 and the conclusion of chapter 6, since they both touch upon the very important theme of “revering God” which encloses this section in 4:17 – 5:6 and 6:10–12. Therefore, we shall study our pericope 5:17–19 within this larger context:

A 4:17 – 5:6 Respect and revere God

B 5:7–11 People who feast with their eyes and yet are never satisfied

C 5:12–16 The rich people who work but never enjoy the good things do not rest – all people go to the same place in the end where we take nothing with us

D 5:17–19 Good: God empowers the human person to enjoy

D' 6:1–2 Bad: God does not empower the human person to enjoy

C' 6:3–6 The rich people who work but never enjoy the good things do not rest – all go to the same place in the end where we take nothing with us

B' 6:7–9 People who feast with their eyes and yet are never satisfied

A' 6:10–12 Revere God and question of purpose

This chiasmic structure can be identified from the following elements present in the text. The sections A 4:17 – 5:6 and A' 6:10–12 hold in common a sense of respect for a stronger and greater being. Although A' does not explicitly mention God, the theme of revering God is

²¹⁶ Several scholars including Daniel C. Fredericks and Vittoria D'Alario offer a thorough analysis of the chiasmic structure that can be observed in 5:9 – 6:9. Daniel C. Fredericks, "Chiasm and Parallel Structure in Qoheleth 5:9-6:9," *JBL* 108, no. 1 (1989): 17-35. D'Alario, *Il libro del Qohelet*, 126-131.

insinuated, as we will see shortly. Section A focuses on the importance of listening over speaking empty words and empty promises which have no consistency. Qoheleth 4:17 mentions the invitation to listen, while 5:1–6 repeat the concept “words” four times, and vv. 4–6 use “vow” or “voice,” both means of expressing words. The imperative “revere God” in 5:6 summarizes the preceding verses and all the concrete behaviors which have been recommended express the command to revere God. The ethical instructions expressed in this section invite the reader to an integrity and coherence that extends beyond the cult and into daily life. The summary is stated succinctly in v.6: “...in many words there is הבל.” In the previous chapter, we came to conclude that it is not God’s word but instead God’s action that brings the human being to an attitude of reverence to God, and hence the human being consequently acts and collaborates. The call here is to show reverence and respect when coming into the presence of God, with actions and not just with mere words. It speaks of the seriousness of making a vow to God, confirms that dreams and words are empty if they are not pursued or striven for, and concludes with a firm imperative in 5:6b: “Rather, revere God.” Therefore, revering God is the point of arrival.

Although A’ 6:10–12 does not mention God, God is implied in 6:10: “Whatever exists has already been named, and it is known what the human being is; for he cannot dispute with him who is stronger than he is.” The beginning of this verse sounds a lot like the riddles in 1:9 and 3:15. Interestingly, however, the difference is that we have the added element of “naming,” which indicates that what exists is possessed by or under the power of a higher being. Following this is a passive voice phrase affirming that the human being is known. Who, other than God, can know what the human being is? While this could conceivably refer to another human being who is wiser, stronger or more powerful, it is probably a reference to God, who is greater and stronger, and who created the human being. Only God knows what the human being is, and one cannot dispute with God or pretend to match God. This is essentially the recognition of one’s truth and the basic condition for revering God. In other words, Qoheleth’s notion of revering God is associated with a theology of divine transcendence. There is an unmistakable weight put on God’s essential Otherness: God is eternal, while humanity is confined to individual times and moments; God dwells in heaven, but the human being is forever earthbound. God’s ways and action are hidden and mysterious, and hence God is both distant and immanent, working in the depths of the human being through the gift of *עלם* placed in the human heart. Once again, we note a connection with the theology developed in the book of Job, where God is presented as the transcendent God of nature and power, the one who surpasses the limited human sphere and speaks from the greatness of his creation. Nevertheless, in Qoheleth the emphasis is placed on the subsequent reverence of God which this encounter of joy in the limited time of life instills in the human being.

Qoh 6:11 repeats almost word for word the phrase in Qoh 5:6: “For there are many words which increase הבל. What then is the advantage to a person?” Qoh 6:11 says, “For in

many dreams and in many words, there is הבל.” In both verses, the word הבל is parallel to “words.” The spoken word possesses the quality of temporality; once it is pronounced, it can only exist in the memory of the listener, and otherwise fades into the wind. Spoken words may be meant only for that moment of speech and can be soon forgotten. Finally, in reference to the final part of 6:12, the element of the future shows its face, and again we touch the human limitation of “not knowing” within the dimension of time. Once more, only God is capable of knowing or telling a person “what will be after him under the sun.”

The common theme in B 5:7–11 and B’ 6:7–9 is that of economic injustice and never being satisfied with riches. Qoheleth 5:7 begins by observing the oppression of the poor and the denial of justice. The economic perspective continues in the subsequent verses, which speak of those who have an abundance of material goods but are not satisfied. This love of money and dissatisfaction in 5:9 is said to be הבל, and therefore we can draw a parallel with 5:6, which spoke of dreams and words being הבל. The dreams and words of one whose worship is empty and lacks reverence of God is comparable with one who loves money and is not satisfied, while at the same time there is “oppression of the poor and denial of justice and righteousness in the province.” (5:7)

While 5:9 speaks of the wealthy person never being satisfied with what s/he has, 6:7 refers to one whose appetite is never satisfied. In addition, sections B and B’ pose questions pertinent to the contrast between the poor and the rich. While 5:10 asks what benefit are increasing goods to the owner, 6:8 asks what a poor person may gain by knowing how to conduct him/herself before others. Qoheleth 5:11 also affirms that the poor person is able to rest more peacefully than the rich person. B’ escalates the level of interrogation in 6:8 by introducing the element of wisdom and asking what advantage the wise has over the fool. Both B and B’ in some way or another address the question of that which is seen by the eyes. In 5:10, the answer to the rhetorical question of what is the benefit of “increasing goods” is that of feasting one’s eyes on them [אם־ראית עיניו], while in 6:9 the comparison being made puts “what the eyes are seeing” [מראה עינים] above what the appetite desires. Finally, 5:9 concludes with Qoheleth’s recurring theme: גם־זה הבל, in the same way that 6:9 does with a further addition, “and chasing after the wind”: גם־זה הבל ורעות רוח.

Sections C 5:12–16 and C’ 6:3–6 hold in common the theme of entering and leaving this world and the fact that we take nothing with us when we leave. Both 5:14 and 5:15 speak of how one enters this world naked and departs just as s/he has entered, taking nothing from one’s work. In the mirror section, Qoh 6:4 speaks of the stillborn child who comes without meaning, departs in darkness, and whose name remains shrouded in darkness. In 6:3, Qoheleth affirms that this child is better off than one who has great prosperity. We have the mention of “darkness” in both sections: בחשך יאכל in 5:16 and the two occurrences of ובחשך in 6:4. Finally, 5:13 and 5:14 both affirm that nothing remains for human beings at the end of their

lifetime. No matter how great the progeny and years of life one may have, if one cannot enjoy one's prosperity, Qoheleth, in 6:3 and 6:6, asserts that it is better that one does not come into this world.

Finally, sections D 5:17–19 and D' 6:1–2 bring us to the core of our chiasm. While both B, B', C, and C' leave us with the sensation that everything is הבל and bring us to question the reason for entering this world and the meaning of the labor and fatigue we undergo, D and D' home in on the reason for our existence: the enjoyment of life which is a gift from God. We are to live the present moment in that enjoyment, with what we have now, not dependent on the past or future. Qoheleth 5:17–19 forms a sort of paradox or antithetic parallelism together with 6:1–2; one statement being as true as the other, offering the same meaning from differing perspectives – the former underlining what is good, and the latter what is bad.²¹⁷ The core of the message is that God empowers the human person to enjoy the moment, and that one is not able to enjoy if not given this ability by God. Therefore, in order to fully understand 5:17–19, we must read it together with 6:1–2.

III. THE TEXT QOHELETH 5:17–19

We offer this text in its original Hebrew according to the BHQ²¹⁸ and the translation. We will study these verses in depth and allow them to shed light on the themes of time, joy and God, along with other themes that come up throughout the pericope and how they relate to other sections of the book of Qoheleth.

17	<p>הנה אשר-ראיתי אני טוב אשר-יפה לאכול-ולשתות ולראות טובה בכל- עמלון שיעמל תחת-השמש מספר ימי- חיו אשר-נתן-לו האלהים כיהוא חלקו:</p>	<p>Here is what I have seen to be good, that which is beautiful:²¹⁹ to eat, to drink and to see the good in all one's work in which one labors under the sun during the counted days of one's lifetime which God gives him, because that is one's portion.</p>
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²¹⁷ For more on parallelism see: Adele Berlin, *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

²¹⁸ The new discoveries of 4QQoh^a (5:14-18) have offered additional evidence for the new critical edition of the BHQ, and therefore this is the text I use. For an updated commentary on the textual criticism of Qoheleth see: Dominique Barthélemy, et al., *Critique textuelle de l'Ancien Testament. Tome 5: Job, Proverbes, Qohélet et Cantique des cantiques* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015), 794-880.

²¹⁹ The expression is quite awkward. "Delitzsch and Gordis defend it by referring to a similar phrase in Hos 12:9. The text of Qoh 5:17 becomes more fluent if we consider 'asher as introducing an object clause." Schoors, *The Preacher Sought to Find Pleasing Words I*, 139.

- 18 גם כִּלְהָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר נָתַן־לוֹ הָאֱלֹהִים עֶשֶׂר וּנְכָסִים וְהִשְׁלִיטוּ לֵאכֹל מִמֶּנּוּ וּלְשַׂאת אֶת־חִלְקוֹ וּלְשִׂמְחָה בְּעִמְלּוֹ זֶה מַתַּת אֱלֹהִים הִיא: Moreover, as for every person to whom God has given riches and wealth, God has also empowered him to eat from them and to receive his portion and rejoice in his work – this is the gift of God.
- 19 כִּי לֹא הִרְבָּה יִזְכֵּר אֶת־יְמֵי חַיָּו כִּי הָאֱלֹהִים מַעֲנֶה בְּשִׂמְחַת לְבוֹ: Indeed, he will not be mindful of the many days of his lifetime, because God answers by means of joy in his heart.

III.1. QOHELETH 5:17

Qoh 5:17 starts off with the particle הנה, which marks a clear beginning to this small pericope. The relative particle אשר comes next, drawing attention to what Qoheleth has “seen to be good.” Qoheleth has come to know through personal experience, and this is emphasized by the verb “to see” [ראיתי] and the personal pronoun אני, and this personal experience has led him to “that which is pleasing” or “beautiful” [אשר־ראיתי אני טוב אשר־יפה]. The Hebrew expression is awkward, but solutions such as “supreme good” might go a bit too far, while the translation: “Behold that which I have discovered is good, that it is becoming to eat and drink,” reduces the importance and emphasis of the word יפה for beautiful.²²⁰ Given the fact that יפה occurs only twice in Qoheleth, here and in 3:11, the use of this particular word is significant and intentional. In addition, the combination of the notions “good” and “beautiful” is current in Greek philosophy. Though similar parallels to Qoheleth are not present either in the Hebrew Scriptures or in other sources, it is probable that Qoheleth has carried out a hebraization of the Greek anthropological philosophy, which he was familiar with.²²¹ What is certain is that these two words טוב and יפה, used together, are very powerful and remit us to creational overtones,²²² and we are confronted once more with the theme of creation.

This second use of יפה in Qoheleth immediately points us back to the only other occurrence in Qoh 3:11. In the previous chapter, we saw how the adjective יפה was used to describe everything that God has made in its time, insinuating not only a “proper” or “appropriate” time, but also a “beautiful” time. We noted Qoheleth’s use of יפה in 3:11 instead of טוב, the adjective

²²⁰ Charles Francis Whitley, *Koheleth: his Language and Thought* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1979), 55; Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 447.

²²¹ “Da ähnliche treffende Parallelen zu Kohelet weder aus dem AT selbst noch aus anderen Bereichen vorliegen, könnte Kohelet hier eine Hebraisierung des ihm mit einiger Wahrscheinlichkeit bekannten griechischen Anthropologumenons vollzogen haben.” Braun, *Kohelet und die fruhhellenistische Popular-philosophie*, 55.

²²² Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 446.

repeated in the first creation narrative of Genesis, when referring to God's work of creation. The word *יפה* allows Qoheleth to present creation in a much broader sense, widening our perspective on God as creator and not limiting us to the idea of the creator God of Genesis. The word *יפה* transmits the sense of "right" and "appropriate" along with the meaning of "pleasing" and "beautiful" which transmit a creator God who works with order and harmony. In addition, God's creation is closely related to the concept of time. Not only is God's creation good, but it is "beautiful," "orderly," and "harmonious" in its time. Time adds the element of God's harmony and beauty to the work God does. Here in 5:17, both adjectives *טוב* and *יפה* are used, and while *יפה* continues to communicate the broader sense of God as creator, *טוב* also inevitably points us back to the creation narratives, particularly Genesis 1, which is set within the rhythmic framework of time. Each day of creation is marked by the passage of day and night and the words "God saw that it was good," referring to all which God had created. This creation narrative transmits a sense of the totality of God's creation. Therefore, the use of both *יפה* and *טוב* may underline that 5:17 takes 3:11 to its fullness along with the sense of fullness and totality expressed in Gen 1. Now, however, Qoheleth himself "sees the good," and sees it precisely in the enjoyment of "all one's work in which one toils" [בכל-עמלו]. The use of the noun *כל* in construct with "work" points to the entirety of the individual's work. In turn, this signals the human being as a participant in God's work of creation, in his/her own terrestrial realm "under the sun." The human being is called to imitate God's attitude towards God's own work in order for the human being to find fulfillment. This idea of totality implies that the experience of joy is to be complete and total as well. If joy is to be found in all human work, during the limited days that God has given to the human being, then joy is capable of essentially penetrating all of one's life and this is one's portion.

Here in 5:17, we have a series of three verbs: "to eat," "to drink," and "to see the good," *לאכול-ולשתות ולראות*. These three verbs are typical of the joy statements, and though the root for joy, *שמח*, is not specifically present in this verse, it will come up as a verb in v. 18 and as a noun in v. 19. The three verbs in the infinitive construct which describe that which is "good" and "beautiful" are each introduced by the preposition *ל*, reminding us of the poem on time in Qoh 3 where the verbs preceded by *ל* indicated finality. Each of the human experiences outlined in 3:2–8 had an active character, and a quality of decisiveness and conclusiveness. If we were to read this sense of finality in the verbs of 5:17, it would mean that these actions are intentional and continue keeping the human person in an active role, despite the fact that s/he cannot know or control joy since joy is a gift. Here again we find a common characteristic between these two verses which unite the themes of time and joy. In addition, as we have mentioned, "to see the good" is an expression used to denote joy, where in fact many translate it as "to enjoy." Therefore, that which is good and beautiful according to Qoheleth here in 5:17–19 is the experience of joy, and it is not just any joy, but the joy given by God in the totality of one's work.

While the word *יפה* was directly associated with the concept of time in Qoh 3, in Qoh 5:17–19 it points to the experience of human joy. In this sense, the word *יפה* serves as a bridge to link together the concepts of time and joy and bring us from the heightened emphasis on time in Qoh 3 to the increasing prominence of joy beginning in Qoh 5 growing as his discourse progresses. Part of the equation of time and joy is the concept of creation, which is God’s work. God is the one able to make “everything beautiful in its time,” according to Qoh 3:11. When God is active in the work of creation, time is harmonious, orderly and “beautiful.” Similarly, the human being is only able “to eat, drink and enjoy oneself in one’s work” if it is in the time that God has given him; joy is God’s gift and God is the one who empowers the human being to experience joy. Therefore, the concepts time, joy and creation point to each other, with God as the unifying animator of the trio. From the moment of creation to the present moment, God is intimately involved with the mystery of human time. God gives life and time; God holds the past, present, and future and even shares this mystery with the human being by means of the gift of *עולם*. Similarly, joy is repeatedly seen to be God’s gift to the human being. Hence, God who is the ultimate source of creation, of which time and joy are vital elements, involves the human being intimately in his work of creation by giving the gifts of time and joy. We may therefore conclude that the purpose of the human being is to participate fully in God’s creation by making the most of the gifts God has given him: living out the “joy” God offers in the “time” of life God provides. By doing this, the human being’s work participates in God’s work of creation, and the human being becomes a co-creator with God.

Next, we encounter one of Qoheleth’s frequent themes by means of a double use of the root *עמל*, first as a noun and then as a verb: *בכל-עמלו שיעמל* – emphasizing the work that the human being exercises “under the sun during the counted days of one’s life.” Here we have an example of how the theme of work is directly linked with both the experience of joy and the temporality of life for Qoheleth. When a human being has the opportunity to work, this occupation and activity offers meaning and purpose to his/her life, and consequently when one feels that one’s existence is worth living and offers something constructive to society and the world, this runs parallel to an authentic experience of joy. We might think that it is difficult if not impossible to connect toil and enjoyment,²²³ but as we will see below in Section VII.1., work and joy actually have a tight relationship. In addition, the reference to “the counted days of one’s life” implicitly points to the reality of death, which will only become more obvious and explicit in the coming joy texts.

Finally, we come up against our first occurrence in this pericope of *האלהים*, and the first reference to time. “God” is the subject of a subordinate clause; that is, God is the one who “gives the counted days of one’s lifetime” to the human person. There is a discussion of whether the verb *נתן* should be translated by an English perfect tense or a present tense; that is,

²²³ Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 447.

whether the verb נתן is to be considered as expressing a past decision concerning the predestined life span of a human being (English perfect tense) or just the present fore-ordaining will of God. Although both are possible, I tend towards the present tense,²²⁴ since God is the subject of the verb “to give” twelve times and each time it emphasizes the imperative that the human being should seize in each moment what God gives. Qoheleth is not a determinist²²⁵ nor does his interest lie in showing that the eternal God has pre-determined time before the beginning of the world. Therefore, the best argument for reading this verb in the present is the idea of *creatio continua*, in the same way that the verb עשה may be translated as a present tense in the suffix-conjugation in 3:11.²²⁶ Once again, we come up against the theme of creation in relation to the time that God “is giving” the human being. At the conclusion of this verse, we encounter one of the ways in which God is involved in the continual creation of the human being and in the mystery of human time. God gives to the human being “the counted days of one’s lifetime.” Time is one of God’s gifts to us. Therefore, the very gift of time is synonymous with the gift of life and human existence, and hence God’s creation. It is only because we live in the dimension of time and hence, have the gift of life that we can “eat, drink, and enjoy.” Without human life “in time,” these experiences – the very experience of joy – would not be possible. Therefore, if the starting point of life is God’s act of creation, it is logical that Qoheleth would begin his treatise giving a heightened emphasis to time, even though later it will switch over to an emphasis on joy.

The very last word of 5:17 is חלק, which comes up 8 times in Qoheleth. The first two times it was part of the parody of the king in 2:10 and 2:21, then it was included in the third joy text in 3:22, and the following two appearances are in our pericope in 5:17 and 5:18. Later it will reappear in 9:6, 9:11, and 11:2. It is one of Qoheleth’s key theological terms, meaning “portion” or “lot.” Seven of its eight occurrences are either within or in near proximity to a joy text: “In its primary meaning, חלק has social overtones. Its concrete referent, the “portion,” is something in which giver and receiver, the individual or small group and the community, have an equal interest.”²²⁷ The implication of this is that God is just as interested in giving us our portion as we human beings are in receiving it. The peculiar meaning of חלק in Qoheleth’s book is “the space allotted to human life.”²²⁸ Therefore, God, as our creator, not only wants to give us life, but also wants us to experience joy. According to Roland Murphy, “The portion that is God-given, according to 3:13 is described as enjoyment in human activities. Qoheleth recognizes nothing better for humans who cannot see any real future for themselves.”²²⁹ Von Rad agrees, stating that this “portion” is what we would refer to as “the meaning of existence”

²²⁴ Isaksson, *Studies in the Language of Qoheleth*, 83-84; Barton and Poddehard.

²²⁵ I will give more solid arguments that demonstrate how Qoheleth is not a determinist in chapter IV in the section referring to Qoh 9:11–12.

²²⁶ Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 448.

²²⁷ Matitiah Tsevat, “חלק,” *TDOT* 4:448.

²²⁸ Tsevat, *TDOT* 4:448.

²²⁹ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 37.

to which Qoheleth gives a positive response, since we can recognize God's propitious plan for the human being.²³⁰

III.2. QOHELETH 5:18

The גַּם in 5:18 is rhetorical and echoes הִנֵּה in 5:17, though its function is like that of 3:13, where the verse continues and completes the preceding one. The particle גַּם acquires an adversative force, "yet, but, though," by connecting two ideas which express or imply a contradiction,²³¹ and BDB cites 5:18 as an example. However, the difference between the emphatic and connecting function is a matter of slight nuance, and "it is best understood as expressing climax, i.e. as having a specific emphatic function."²³² Therefore, I have preferred to use "moreover" to express the climax. The same phrase used in 17b repeats in 5:18, אֲשֶׁר נָתַן לּוֹ הָאֱלֹהִים, putting a specific emphasis on *that which God gives*, which in 5:17b is "his portion," while 5:18 specifies it as "riches and wealth."

In 5:18 the word נְכֹסִים is most likely an Aramaic loan word, possibly from the cognate Akkadian *nikasu* or the Syrian *nekse* meaning "possessions" or "treasure." Placed together with "riches," these two words form a merism for "abundance."²³³ Our sage has repeated more than once that riches and wealth come from God (cf. 2:24-26; 3:13) and that we do not produce them ourselves, nor are they a product of our merit or labor.

The verb וְהִשְׁלִיטוּ has the causative force of the hiphil, and the root שִׁלַּט has a rich meaning which conveys in this specific case the nuance of "enable" or "empower." We will study this verb below in order to understand how it illuminates the relationship between God and the human experience of joy. For now, however, we point out that God's gift is not exclusively wealth, something that is temporal and passing, but it is the capacity to enjoy, a human experience which we will soon see is a doorway to encountering God.

Qoh 5:18 concludes with the exclamation אֱלֹהִים הִיא זֶה מַתַּת. This expression occurs only twice in the entire Hebrew Bible, and both of these in the book of Qoheleth, here and in Qoh 3:13. Just as a sovereign bestows a royal grant, God gives wealth.²³⁴ Similar to the case of יָפָה, therefore, its use is significant and intentional. In addition, it offers another reason to

²³⁰ von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, 298.

²³¹ BDB, "גַּם," sub 5, 169.

²³² A. Schoors, *The Preacher Sought to Find Pleasing Words I*, 132.

²³³ Anderson, *Scepticism and Ironic Correlations in the Joy Statements of Qoheleth?*, 16.

²³⁴ The divine grant is akin to a *dāšna*, Egyptian for "a royal grant." H.Z. Szubin and Bezalel Porten, "Royal Grants in Egypt: A New Interpretation of Driver 2," *JNES* 46 (1987): 39-48, 47.

believe that there is a strong relationship between 3:10–15 and 5:17–19. We will look closely at those links further ahead.

III.3. QOHELETH 5:19

Qoh 5:19 opens with a **כִּי**, which may be translated with an affirmative force as “indeed,” indicating that it is an explanatory clause as it presents the conclusion of 5:17–18. The scholarly consensus is that **זָכַר** is indicative, as it reinforces the affirmative quality of the sentence, and hence we have: “he will not be mindful of the many days of his lifetime.”²³⁵ The verb **זָכַר**, which generally means to “remember,” “recall,” “call to mind,” may have the added nuance “usually as affecting present feeling, thought or action,” since the immediate context deals with the state of mind or feelings of one who has been given the gift of joy by God.²³⁶ Furthermore, we may recall that the root **זָכַר** also has a salvific sense. Read with this shade of meaning, it would be interesting to apply this sense to one who is “not remembering the days of his life,” or in other words, one who is forgetting the passage of time, as if not considering or outright forgetting time one may find a glimmer of salvation. Here, we come across a second reference to time, similar in wording to the first reference in v.17, **אֶת־יְמֵי חַיָּו** “the days of his lifetime.” As we saw earlier in v.17, time is one of God’s gifts to us, and the gift of time is synonymous with the gift of life and human existence. It is as well an implicit reference to death, since the limited nature of time results in death. The second half of v. 19 explains the lack of remembrance of the passage of time, and it involves God’s gift of joy: “...because God **מַעֲנֵה** with joy in his heart.” Here, God “gives,” “deposits,” “occupies,” or “answers” with joy. There will be a more in-depth study of the word **מַעֲנֵה** to follow. Interestingly, the conclusion that we can draw from this statement, at this early stage, brings together once again the realities of time and joy here at the very heart of the book of Qoheleth.

The word **מַעֲנֵה** in 5:19 has always been a disputed verb in exegetical discussions. The verb form is clearly a hiphil masculine singular participle of **עָנָה**. The root **עָנָה** has two meanings: **עָנָה III** means “to be concerned about, worried about,” hif. “occupy, keep someone busy” whereas the root **עָנָה I** means “to answer, speak, reveal.” If we go to the ancient versions, the LXX reads **περισπῆσθαι αὐτὸν**, meaning “distracting him,” the Vulgate reads *occupet*, the Syriac *m’n’ lyh* means “engaged, occupied for someone with something,”²³⁷ while the Ugaritic equivalent *m’n* means “answer” or “response.”

²³⁵ Seow takes it as an injunctive instead and argues that precisely because people do brood too much and too often about their days, one *must not* call to mind the days of misery. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 209.

²³⁶ BDB, “זָכַר,” 269.

²³⁷ Michael Sokoloff and C. Brockelmann, *A Syriac Lexicon. A translation from the Latin: correction, expansion, and update of C. Brockelmann's Lexicon syriacum* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 1114.

In this verse, *מענה* has typically been interpreted with the *ענה* III hiphil meaning, “to occupy.” As Seow notes, “It has traditionally been associated with the root from which one derives *ענין* ‘preoccupation,’ and so it is assumed that God keeps humanity preoccupied with the joy that is in their hearts.”²³⁸ The verb *ענה* in both Qoh 1:13 and 3:10 appears as a qal infinitive construct and means “to be busy with;” in both cases, God “gives” the person a “task” *ענין* to be occupied with.²³⁹ However, the only two occurrences in the Hebrew Bible of *ענה* in the hiphil can both be understood to mean “answer.” One may argue, therefore, that the hiphil form was used with the same meaning as the qal, following the argument that in verbs with a first guttural, the hiphil form may be analogous to the qal.

The notion of being occupied with joy in the heart as a diversion from the painful finitude of life is found in Egyptian literature. The *Song of Antef*, one of the masterpieces of Egyptian literature of the 12th century BCE, is concerned with the transitory nature of existence, and urges the enjoyment of life, in a rhythmic form that resembles Qoheleth’s book: “May you be whole, as your heart makes itself forget.”²⁴⁰ Poems such as this one appear in mortuary scenes among Egyptian tombs, where people are “diverting the heart” by eating and drinking. The poet is calling the audience to avert the heart from the thought of mortality by enjoying themselves in the present. The basic message is as follows: “Life is short; death is the end, so enjoy yourself while you can.”²⁴¹ Although the poet expands on the pleasures one should enjoy in the here and now, he does not really exult in pleasure for its own sake. The value of joy is not so much the sense experience itself as the forgetfulness it provokes. The aim is in diverting the heart from the bitterness of the human tragedy.²⁴²

Lohfink interprets the verb *מענה* with the root *ענה* I meaning: “answer” or “one who gives a response,” and maintains that it indicates a form of divine revelation, a translation which F. J. Delitzsch also defends.²⁴³ Is it possible to understand its meaning in the sense that God gives a response, or better yet, reveals Godself through enjoyment in the human heart? Many scholars would disagree, but perhaps Qoheleth, in his characteristic manner, is making a play on words with the meanings occupy, answer, and reveal. Further on, we will show that it is

²³⁸ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 223.

²³⁹ A slight variation comes from Gordis, who believes that Qoheleth would not consider joy a narcotic but rather the fulfillment of the will of God, assigns this word the meaning of “provide”, therefore rendering the verse as: “God provided the joy in a person’s heart”. Gordis, *Koheleth*, 246.

²⁴⁰ This song is only thematically comparable to Qoheleth, since it is distinguished by a radically different conception of God. Mazzinghi, *Ho cercato*, 78.

²⁴¹ Michael V. Fox, “A Study of Antef,” *Or* 46 (1977): 393-423.

²⁴² Fox, “A Study of Antef,” 416.

²⁴³ Lohfink, “Qoheleth 5:17-19 - Revelation by Joy,” 625-35; Franz Delitzsch, Heinrich of Speyer Stadelmann, and Johann Gottfried Wetzstein, *Hoheslied und Koheleth*, *Biblischer Commentar* 4/4 (Leipzig: Dörffling & Franke, 1875).

plausible, but for now, we will study how the verb שלט informs our interpretation of the contested verb מענה and in doing so gain more clarity on the possibilities of its meaning(s).

IV. THE HEBREW ROOT שלט AND GOD'S GIFT OF EMPOWERMENT

Qoheleth's usage of שלט, because of his socio-economic context, may have a more specific connotation, of "to enable," "to empower," or "to have control over," in reference to one's property and income. When the verb שלט is used in the hiphil in 5:18 and 6:2, God is the subject of the verb and gives (or does not give) the human being "the ability to dispose of" the riches and wealth given to him/her in order to enjoy. The nuance of the meaning of והשליטו in this case may be expressed as "God enables one" to enjoy the fruit of one's labor, and in 6:2 ולא-ישליטנו as "God does not enable one." The verb ends with an object suffix, referring to the person God enables (or does not enable).

In this sense, God, much like a Ptolemaic sovereign, authorizes the human being to take up and enjoy the "portion" that is given to him/her as a grant.²⁴⁴ What God gives to the person is not only the capacity to work, to be fruitful and produce great things in this temporal realm of the world, but moreover the capacity to eat from the product of his/her hands and rejoice in the fruit of her/his hard work. It is for this reason that the human person has been empowered. If the human being in his work is a small reflection and participant in God's greater work of creation, then the theme "work" unites the human being and God. What use is there for the human being to work, labor, toil at, and produce so many good things in her/his lifetime when this hard work does not somehow bear its fruit here and now? Work, labor and toil, along with their fruits, are ephemeral, transitory, and fleeting. This in turn, implies that God participates by means of God's creation in the ephemeral dimension of work. After all, as we noted in the previous chapter when we studied 3:14, although God's work is described as עולם, it does not necessarily mean that it lasts "forever," since all created things also pass away with time. Nevertheless, this ephemerality does not take away from the completeness of God and the sense of fullness in God's work. In fact, we are invited to encounter a different quality of completion and perfection in that which is fleeting and passing. It is precisely in the "now," in the "present moment," where God empowers us to enjoy fully the experiences of life, whether this be work, eating and drinking, etc.

²⁴⁴ The socio-historical context of the Ptolemaic period may shed light on the relationship between grantor and grantee that is implied in Qoheleth's vocabulary. The very "entitlement" שליט to enjoy lasting wealth is a "divine grant." Just as a sovereign bestows a royal grant, God gives wealth. Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment*, 45.

The expression *והשליטו* is followed by three verbs in the infinitive construct preceded by the preposition *ל*: *ולשאת ולשאת ולשאת* that explicate God's gift to the human person. The fact that our sage is calling these three points to our attention is because perhaps we may easily forget that God enables us to live these gifts. The first object is *לאכל ממנו* "to eat from them." God enables the human being to eat "from them," understanding the *ממנו* as partitive. Often, those who have the material means do not know how to enjoy their wealth and in hunger and longing for more wealth, "starve" themselves. In other words, the miser only seeks to accumulate more wealth, and consequently rots in it and dies of hunger. Qoheleth asserts that the inner freedom from the accumulation of wealth that is required for one "to eat from them" is a gift.

The next object of the verb *והשליטו* is "to take his portion" *ולשאת את-חלקו*. In this specific case, "portion" refers to the pleasure or joy derived from wealth. "God must both grant (or at least allow) the means of pleasure and enable the recipient to experience it."²⁴⁵ However, if one is permitted to "take" *נשא* his portion, he himself must do so by actively making the choice. "There is where human freedom lies. In other words, God can give you a piece of the pie but you must eat it."²⁴⁶ The meaning of "the space allotted to human life" stands in contrast to the view of passages that are much more characteristic of the Hebrew Bible, namely, that one does not only receive one's portion passively, but can take possession of it by one's own initiative.²⁴⁷ Does the fact that Qoheleth reminds us of this signal that we cannot take for granted that we "take our portion in life"? Perhaps it is not something obvious that we do spontaneously. In other words, perhaps it is not as easy as it seems to receive and to accept one's portion or part. There is a double agency in the exercise of joy in Qoheleth's theology. According to Lee, "On the one hand, Qoheleth affirms that joy is entirely God-given. It is God who grants the means of joy, and it is God who enables one person to enjoy the things in one's possession while withholding it from another. At the same time, however, joy is urgently commended (second to last joy text), even commanded (as we will see in the final joy text)."²⁴⁸

Finally, the third object of *והשליטו* is "to rejoice in one's work" *ולשמח בעמלו*. Qoheleth truly challenges us, because we regularly lose the bigger perspective; we are caught up in our work and lose consciousness that it is only a "part" of life and not the whole of life. We may work because it is the only way to survive, or because we need money in order to pay off debts and get through life, but "to rejoice in our work" takes the understanding of the meaning and purpose of work a step further. To enjoy what we do and where we invest ourselves means that life and its purpose are on the same wavelength. The novelty in 5:17–18 is that riches, treasures, and goods are not enough to make one happy if God does not also concede "the ability" to enjoy them. We shall see the importance of the theme of work in relation to joy in Section VII.

²⁴⁵ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 111.

²⁴⁶ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 111. We will see an analogous theme in Qoh 11:9c.

²⁴⁷ Tsevat, *TDOT* 4:451.

²⁴⁸ Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment*, 135.

IV.1. THE MIRROR PASSAGES 5:17–19 AND 6:1–2

In order to better understand the joy text in 5:17–19, we will study the similarities and differences with its mirror passage in 6:1–2 where Qoheleth presents a reversal of the scenario described in the joy text. Qoheleth 6:2 uses a strikingly comparable series of words to 5:18.

5:18a גם ונכסים כל־האדם אשר נתן־לו האלהים עשר
6:2a איש אשר יתן־לו האלהים עשר ונכסים וכבוד

The introduction of the subject of Qoh 5:17 is delayed until 5:18, namely כל־האדם “all people,” which serves as the subject of the entire section Qoh 5:17–19. It forms a contrast with the subject of 6:1–2 which is איש “a person.” Therefore, the former concerns the universal, while the latter concerns the particular. This second scenario, which is introduced by Qoheleth as being an “evil” רעה that he has seen under the sun in 6:1, portrays the possible exception to the general rule of 5:17–19, which he has seen to be “good and beautiful.” Instead, in Qoh 6:2 we have a person who receives from God “riches, wealth, and honor” but is *not enabled* by God to partake of them; instead a foreigner איש נכרי enjoys them. Before moving on, I would like to explore the one difference in the object of God’s giving between both verses: namely that Qoh 6:2 includes כבוד. The noun כבוד meaning “honor” or “glory” occurs here and in Qoh 10:1. Often, this noun appears in connection with עשר “riches” and hence it may be used to refer to “wealth.” However, it is particularly noteworthy that the triad עשר ונכסים וכבוד is given by God to Solomon in 2 Chr 1:11–12. Here we have everything one can desire all in one place – “a symbolical representation of complete success of a lifetime”²⁴⁹ with a strong allusion to Solomon. Therefore, Qoh 6:1–2 which contrast with the joy text of 5:17–19, point back to the parody of the king in chapter 2 and to the frustration and futility of having “everything one can desire” and yet lacking the experience of joy. Qoheleth 6:1–2 is a succinct summary of this predicament. If God does not enable one to experience joy, one cannot rejoice. He might possess “honor,” but he is still an ordinary “man” איש and God does not enable him to eat from it.

5:18b והשליטו לאכל ממנו
6:2b ואיננו חסר לנפשו | מכל אשר־יתאוה ולא־ישליטנו האלהים לאכל ממנו

In addition, to describe God’s activity, 5:18 uses verbs in the perfect, thereby describing that which is, while 6:2 by using the imperfect, describes that which could be and keeps us in the realm of contingency. This too is interesting because the joy text presents the general norm, while 6:1–2 simply points to the exception – a possibility reserved to the few who are not enabled or empowered, where instead the foreigner “eats from it.”

²⁴⁹ Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 461.

5:18c ולשאת את־חלקו ולשמח בעמלו

6:2c כי איש נכרי יאכלנו

Finally, both verses conclude with sharply contrasting summary phrases: “this is a gift from God” and “this is הבל and a severe affliction.”

5:18d זה מתת אלהים היא

6:3d זה הבל וחלי רע הוא

The general and universal observation of God enabling all people is concluded to be a gift from God, while the exceptional and particular case is not only described as הבל but as a severe affliction. The contrast cannot be more poignant.

These five verses repeat אלהים six times, four times in 5:17–19 and twice in 6:1–2. God is once more the protagonist in the heart of this section, with a stronger presence in the joy text and a more limited action in Qoh 6:1–2. Although God gives “riches, wealth and honor,” that is all that God does. The only other use of אלהים is to point out that God does not empower the human being “to eat from it.” There is no parallel to the מענה verb used in 5:19, and we can conclude that there is simply no equivalent in the mirror passage. In addition, there is no mention of joy, and no talk of gift; it is simply הבל and a severe affliction. At this theological highpoint of his reflections, Qoheleth confronts the reader with a choice charged with ethical implications: individuals can preoccupy themselves with the greedy pursuit of more wealth, as we saw the king in Qoh 2, or they can respond appropriately to the opportunities granted by God: accept the times that God gives, accept the gift of joy and exercise the ability to enjoy.

IV.2. שלט’S INSIGHTS INTO 5:17–19 AND THE INTERPRETATION OF מענה IN 5:19

As noted earlier, the verb מענה in 5:19 is highly discussed amongst scholars. However, our study of שלט sheds light upon the shades of meaning that are implied by the verb מענה. I contend that מענה is connected to the meaning and interpretation that we give to the verb שלט, since the subject of both verbs is God and they sequentially denote the action that God is doing. That is, the action that God is doing “by enabling” is intrinsically linked to God’s next action, expressed by the verb מענה. In addition, we cannot ignore the verb נתן, of which God is also the subject. Therefore, the full sequence of God’s actions is: God gives counted days (v. 17), God gives riches and wealth (v.18), God empowers (v.18), and God answers or reveals (v. 19).

The root ענה III definition “to be concerned about, worried about,” hif. “keep someone busy” is the one typically used, as it is also attributed to the other two uses of this root in 1:13 and 3:10. A shade of meaning that we can give to ענה with the word “occupy” is a sort of occupation that “capacitates” or further enables one to enjoy. If, for example, we understood the heart to have a spatial dimension in a metaphorical sense, then we may interpret מענה with the sense of “filling the space of the heart” with joy, in a similar way as the tank is filled with fuel providing the energy that the motor needs to run. In this way, the human person is filled with the fuel that allows him/her to live a joyful life. The direct consequence of all of God’s actions directed towards the human being is joy, in addition to the further result of not noticing the “passing” of time. When God “occupies” the heart with joy, giving the human being the gift of joy, and “capacitating the heart to enjoy,” this deposit of joy is the same action that “enables” the person, and s/he is then free to receive this gift. Even the different times that rise and fall, the hardships and struggles of life that come and go, are not able to steal the experience of profound and deep joy that is present and occupies the heart. It is in this sense that I would take the verb מענה as God’s way of “filling” or “occupying” the heart, relying in turn on the openness and reception of the person. I do not think that Qoheleth here is using the verb in the sense of distraction or diversion, as the ancient Egyptian sources mentioned above would understand it. Furthermore, this interpretation would still make sense keeping in mind that Qoh 6:2 only uses the verb שלט and not ענה. As noted in the section above where we compared the two mirror sections, God’s role is limited in the second part, and hence it would preclude the need for further emphasis of what God gives. Since God does not “enable” or “capacitate” the human being to enjoy, then it follows that God does not fill the heart, and much less, reveal Godself.

On the other hand, a serious consideration of Lohfink’s proposal that מענה should be understood with the root ענה I meaning of “answer” or “reveal,” an interpretation common in medieval Jewish exegesis,²⁵⁰ illumines the theological perspective of the book. Picking up a thread from Qoh 3:10–15 the previously studied theological passage, Qoh 5:17–19 takes a step further to explain why joy is a divine gift.²⁵¹ While Qoh 3:10–15 speaks of the human difficulty in grasping and understanding God’s work (3:11), it nevertheless affirms that the human being can take action by eating, drinking and enjoying (3:12), considers this joy as a gift of God (3:13), and consequently, the human being’s only response is to revere God (3:14). The very fact that human beings struggle to grasp the sense that is in all things and is only known to God, paves the way for the possibility that God may respond or reveal Godself. It is likely that

²⁵⁰ Sara Japhet and Robert B. Salters, *The Commentary of R Samuel Ben Meir, Rashbam, on Qohelet* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1985).

²⁵¹ Numerous reasons support the relationship between 3:10–15 and 5:17–19, including the presence of the word יפה, אלהים מתה, the fact that they are highly theological passages and that they contain texts on joy.

Qoheleth is struggling against an early form of apocalypticism that expects God's true revelation only after death, so that earthly joy is something to be detested.²⁵² Qoheleth argues against that idea, reiterating the possibility of experiencing God's joy here during our "limited days under the sun." However, Qoh 5:17–19 now offers some insight as to *why* joy is God's gift. Joy is God's way of allowing the human being to truly value the years of his life and forget the passing of time.²⁵³ In a sense, it is a step that goes beyond just "revering God," since in essence one loses oneself in God's gift of joy and consequently in God's presence. It is, as Lohfink puts it, to touch "God in a higher degree than to just know the unknown, but to know that there is a sense even if we cannot grasp it."²⁵⁴ Hence, God enables the human being to experience joy and the human experience of joy allows God to reveal Godself.

If the previous verbs *נתן* and *שלט* describe how God interacts with the human being and gives us some insight into who God is, a God who gives the human being the "counted days of one's lifetime," that is the gift of time, in addition to enabling the human being to eat and enjoy, it would follow that the subsequent verb describes God's action positively in relation with the human being. Hence, the meaning for the verb *מענה* as "God revealing Godself to the human being" is possible. If God empowers or enables the human being by giving some sort of answer to the person or insight into Godself, God is leading the person to an experience of knowing God, if only momentarily or partially, in and through the experience of joy. Nevertheless, it is not an intellectual knowledge or answer that one grasps and can possess, but a knowledge that comes from experience and leads to wisdom.

Therefore, wrapping up this discussion of the word *מענה*, does God finally "occupy" and "fill" the heart with joy or "respond to" and "reveal Godself" through joy? I would argue that in Qoheleth's typical nature, he is taking advantage of the ambiguity of the term to further enrich his message and intends both meanings. Especially given the fact that God is the subject of this verb, there is no doubt that God can do both these things and more at the same time. Though both meanings are clearly not synonymous, they are also not contradictory. By filling and occupying the heart with joy, God's gift, God is revealing something about God's own nature and sharing something of God's essence. The gifts that we give say something about ourselves, and therefore God's gifts disclose a God who both empowers the human being and wants to see him enjoy "the counted days of his life." In addition, the meaning of the main clause still holds, whether the conditional clause means "God fills him with joy" or "God reveals Godself by means of joy." Either cause justifies the effect, namely that the human being

²⁵² Jerome N. Douglas, *A Polemical Preacher of Joy: an Anti-Apocalyptic Genre for Qoheleth's Message of Joy* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2014); Lohfink, "Qoheleth 5:17-19 - Revelation by Joy," 633.

²⁵³ "That joy deadens man's sensibility to the brevity of life is, to be sure, a perfectly sound idea, but it does not occur elsewhere in the book. Koheleth regards joy not as a narcotic but as the fulfillment of the will of God." Gordis, *Koheleth*, 255.

²⁵⁴ Lohfink, "Qoheleth 5:17-19 - Revelation by Joy," 634.

does not take notice of the passage of time. Therefore, if we accept that *מענה* in this verse holds both meanings, we might conclude that God's gift of joy, with which God fills the human heart, is the means by which God reveals Godself to the human being; it is God's specific answer and God's manner of revealing Godself.

The sequence of verbs attributed to God in vv. 18–19, God “gives,” God “empowers” and God “answers” and “reveals,” are contrary to the usual series of actions that God carries out in the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures in relation to God's people. It is customary to find the opposite sequence: first, God reveals, then God empowers and gives. This is seen clearly in the lives of the prophets, whom God first enlightens concerning their own identity or calling and a revelation of who God is together with a promise of faithfulness; then, in a second moment, they are usually empowered to fulfill the mission asked of them and given the gifts needed to live it. Here in 5:18–19, however, we note a reversal of this sequence. God gives the person time and life, then God empowers the person to enjoy life and all good things, and then God answers or reveals through this joy in the heart. We are not in the context of a special or specific mission, but rather, the scenario is life itself and the task is the daily work, the participation in God's creative enterprise in the world. I contend that this is God's more hidden or inductive way of acting in relation to humanity, and that Qoheleth opens a new and uncommon way of recognizing God's presence and action in the world. After all, he is characteristic for his eccentric and unique perception of faith and even of God. It would not be unlike Qoheleth to offer this alternative way. Many are undoubtedly empowered to enjoy life, but perhaps there are still less who in experiencing this joy perceive God's answer and the way God reveals Godself.

These verses in their immediate context point out that, in Qoheleth's view, happiness is not a form of possession but a form of present experience. “Vor dem Hintergrund der Relativierung traditioneller Güter entwirft er am Hohepunkt der Teilkomposition in 5,17–19 eine Phänomenologie des wahren Gutes (טוב אשר-יפה) al seiner von Gott gewährten Erfahrung von Glück. Diese Erfahrung ist letztlich Gotteserfahrung, die das Bewusstsein des Todes transzendiert (5,19).”²⁵⁵ I find this interpretation to be very evocative, since it implies that happiness or joy is not something that one can possess or grasp. Though joy is a gift that fills and occupies the human being, the person cannot take possession of it or control it. Instead, one can experience it in the present and seize the moment fully. This joy, in addition, is God's access point, that is, where God can enter the human experience. The human being is capable of experiencing joy and forgetting the limitations of life, touching for a moment the divine dimension that is

²⁵⁵ “On the background of putting into perspective the traditional values, he offers at the high point of the composition in 5:17–19 a phenomenology of the real good (טוב אשר-יפה) as an experience of happiness that is granted by God. This experience is after all an experience of God which transcends the awareness of death (5:19).” Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Nicht im Menschen gründet das Glück*, 147.

limitless. “When someone is happy, the thought of death – precisely the point to which Qoheleth wants to bring his readers – retreats from their consciousness. It becomes rare.”²⁵⁶ In this sense, “the good” is an experience that unites consciousness around joy. By allowing oneself to be filled with joy, one forgets oneself and the shortness of life as one is fully immersed in the present moment. Someone might ask: how is the joy that God places in the heart not an opiate which God gives to distract human beings from the brute reality of life? I would respond simply that an opiate offers momentary pleasure, distraction, and release from painful reality. It does not however give anything lasting or substantial. It definitely does not give meaning. While God’s “joy” may on one level, seem to have a lot in common with an opiate, it does not leave the human being empty or desolated, but instead provides meaning and purpose to one’s work. Nevertheless, as we all know from experience, the invitation to live in the present is challenging and often beyond us, but when one does live fully in the present, one is also enabled to experience and touch God through the gift of joy. Therefore, God can reveal Godself and share of God’s nature by means of joy.

IV.3. CONCLUSIONS REGARDING שְׁלוֹט IN QOHELETH 5:17–19

The root שְׁלוֹט whose meaning develops from the mostly economic sense that it had in the Persian period to a more generic meaning of power, domination, or control in the Ptolemaic period, points to this human desire to rule, to control, and to have power, whether it be over possessions, other people, or one’s own life. This desire expresses itself through the acquisition of goods and the experience of pleasure. A specific way in which human beings think that they exercise power and control is through the acquisition of money. The quest for more and more money was a concern both to Qoheleth’s historical period and is still a concern in our societies today. Especially with the increasing economic concerns around the world, we experience much uncertainty, insecurity, and economic risk that permit Qoheleth’s words addressed to his own socio-economic context to ring true in our time. Qoheleth is addressing those who were preoccupied with the acquisition of money, believe in its power, and perhaps even thought that it could provide an answer to everything (10:19). Nevertheless, Qoheleth challenges people’s conceptions about money by asserting that it is not a protection but rather a “shadow” or shade only providing temporary shelter and not long-term security (7:12).²⁵⁷ Money cannot buy happiness or joy. Money is especially fleeting because unless one buries one’s treasure underground (cf. Mt 25:24–27), one’s wealth is at constant risk of being lost, and to bury it means discarding any possibility of gaining interest or profit whatsoever. Therefore, the illusion that one can gain power and control through the acquisition of money is deceptive. This desire for power by means of money is further explained in 5:9–11. These verses warn against the disor-

²⁵⁶ Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 85.

²⁵⁷ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 22.

dered desire for money that becomes greed and where the desire for more is insatiable. Nevertheless, money, riches and the desire to possess them are something ephemeral and passing, as shiny as soap bubbles but as insubstantial as the air that fills them.²⁵⁸

Our understanding of the root שלט as empowering, enabling, capacitating, or authorizing, leads us to this question of power and control. Qoheleth does not name this topic explicitly, but it is relevant to the human experience and present within the experience of time, joy and God's involvement therein. Longing to be in control of something, human beings seek anyone or anything to hold onto, to grasp, and to take as a security. Amid this quest, and at the heart of chapters 5 and 6, God gives the ability, the *power* to enjoy whatever gifts or riches God has bestowed, whether they are many or few. While, we really do not have control over anything, we do have the God-given power of disposal over the present moment's means of enjoyment. We may liken the experience of joy to a butterfly that comes and sits upon one's hand: one cannot control how long it will remain, or when it flutters off; but while one sits in stillness one can savor the moment. Similarly, since enjoyment is a divine gift, one cannot secure or guarantee the length of its occurrence, nor how or when the experience of joy comes about. Just the same, one cannot control the way that God makes Godself known, but God does enable us to savor the experience.

The fragility of this enjoyment is underscored, however, by the reminder that the ability to enjoy goods lies not in one's own power but in God's hands. Efforts to manipulate it as a vehicle with a predetermined result are futile. This fragility underscores the need to enjoy goods presently when they are received as a gift.²⁵⁹ No matter how much the human being seeks power and control, he will always come to the realization that it is ultimately not in his hands. The tension remains, therefore, between the fact that God empowers the human being to enjoy and the essential lack of power and control which the human being has over joy and even over time, gifts upon which the human being depends on God. Therefore, the fact that God enables or empowers the human being with regards to the experience of joy is so radical. By means of wisdom, the human being discovers that his power lies in surrender and letting go, not in holding on or controlling.²⁶⁰

²⁵⁸ Cf. Vélchez Líndez, *Ecclesiastes*, 283.

²⁵⁹ Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment*, 280.

²⁶⁰ "Une subtile dialectique se développe dans ce passage. Elle tourne autour du motif du Don au cœur duquel l'existant se reçoit en son être et y découvre sa part. Cette dimension de don est d'emblée désignée à l'intime du temps, au nombre des jours de la vie que Dieu « donne » (*nâtan*). Cela signifie – comme nous l'avons explicité en Qo 3 – qu'une Origine créatrice insondable s'atteste de nous échapper dans l'incessant recommencement de l'instant où la temporalisation du désir humain se reçoit et se décide. Or cette dimension de donation au cœur de l'être – en soi insaisissable mais inscrite au fil du temps comme le mystère même de sa création – laisse affleurer dans les choses la signifiante d'une imperceptible bonté, d'un bien inscrutable qui perce l'évanescence première des apparences." Faessler, *Qohélet philosophe. L'éphémère et la joie*, 99.

V. INSIGHTS INTO 5:17–19 FROM THE LARGER CONTEXT OF QOH 5 AND 6

As we saw above, sections A (5:1–6) and A' (6:10–12) highlight the emptiness of a theoretical belief-system which is dependent on mere words or external actions and instead point to the importance of respect, reverence and fear of God. The joy text at the center of sections A and A' puts weight on God's gifts to the human being and the human experience of joy in eating, drinking, and working and hence forms a contrast to the text surrounding it. God is more pleased with this consistency and integrity of life than with empty words and ritualistic offerings that do not have flesh. Consequently, it may seem that Qoh 5:17–19 shows us the image of a generous God who gives riches, wealth and joy that opposes the idea that God should be revered and respected. The latter image may seem to imply that the human being is meant to honor God by paying one's vows in order to receive gifts, whereas the joy text seems to suggest a God who gives freely. Qoheleth 6:1–2 further defines the joy text by specifying that God can give riches wealth and honor but not empower the person to enjoy these same gifts. Qoheleth, however, does not tell us why God empowers some to enjoy but not others. He does not specify here whether it is because they have revered God and payed their vows. In any case, though these are not mutually exclusive images of God, they do show different views of God: A God who requires respect and asks to be revered, and at the same time a God who gives generously to all and empowers most. Qoheleth 6:10–12 concludes with the questions of purpose which have been driving the book forward, and these are the final questions of the book. Qoheleth 6:12 asks: "what is good for the human being during his lifetime, during the few years of his **הבל** life?", and we recall that this question has already been answered in the joy text in 5:17: "Here is what I have seen to be good, that which is beautiful: to eat, to drink and to see the good in all one's work in which one labors..."

Sections B (5:7–11) and B' (6:7–9) revolve around the poor and the rich, accentuating the fact that the human being is never satisfied with what one possesses or with the status or position that one has. Regardless of whether one is poor and hence has very little or nothing, or whether one has money or possessions, there is still no satisfaction. Even food and wisdom (6:7), which are seemingly praised by Qoheleth elsewhere, are of no use and offer no advantage. A further emphasis is made on the fact that these people "feast" with their eyes and yet are never satisfied. The focus on that which the eyes see introduces the aspect of idolatry, since one cannot eat, feast or be satisfied with that which is merely food for the eyes. The word *idol* comes from the Greek word for seeing, *εἶδον*. The sense of emptiness and insubstantiality that is transmitted by the word **הבל**, used in 5:9 and 6:9, continues to strengthen and reaffirm the idea of idolatry. After all, the word **הבל** in other places of the Hebrew Scripture is translated

as idolatry.²⁶¹ This sense of emptiness and insubstantiality, however, is directly opposed by the idea that God “occupies,” “fills,” or “reveals” Godself through joy in the heart at the focal point of this section in 5:17–19.

Although 5:17–19 does not explicitly mention death, despite pointing out the limited and temporal nature of life as the joy texts typically do, C (5:12–16) and C’ (6:3–6) touch on the all-important theme of death. Especially vv. 14–15 point out that the human being will “return” or “die” just as he “came” or was “born,” that is, with no possessions and with nothing from the fruit of his work. Essentially, the fruit of work is wind, and it seems as if there would be no advantage “to one who toils for the wind.” The few days of one’s life, the transient nature of human existence, one of Qoheleth’s favorite themes, ends with the inevitable conclusion of death. Human beings are given a limited number of days under the sun, and hence their “portion” is limited in space and time. Likewise, 6:3–6 notes that a miscarriage would be better than a long life of one with a hundred children whose soul is not satisfied with good things. In both sections, particularly 5:16 and 6:4, Qoheleth mentions the obscurity of one’s life that comes and goes without experiencing joy. This obscurity, as mentioned in 6:5, points to a dimension of life that is more attuned to death since “he never sees the sun...” It is as if one never inhabited this dimension of “life under the sun,” and hence never experienced life itself.

Qoheleth confronts this mortal culmination by insisting that regardless of its length, life is a gift from God. Tied closely to Qoheleth’s concern with human mortality is his assessment of human wisdom as ultimately valueless, despite its limited accomplishments in individual cases. The wise person indeed dies in the same way as the fool, and the wisdom gleaned from life goes with him to the tomb. This may seem individualistic and “the idea that the achievements of individuals might benefit future generations after their death never occurs to him.”²⁶² In addition, this reality of death which surrounds the experience of joy contrasts with the life-giving qualities of the experience of enjoyment.

In Qoh 5:15b we have the sixth question of purpose. The first half of the verse, v. 15a, says: “This also is a grievous evil-- exactly as a human being is born, thus will he die,” while v. 15b asks, “what is the advantage to one who toils for the wind?” Immediately following and offering a contrast to these rather negative verses and a response to the question of purpose, is our joy text in 5:17–19. It is also a response to the observation about evil made in 5:12. The advantage or profit which comes to one who toils for the wind, “that which is good,” is precisely to eat, drink, and enjoy oneself in one’s work. To follow and confirm this affirmation is the statement: “for this is his reward.” We see here the profound orientation of the human

²⁶¹ In the texts of the Deuteronomistic history (Deut, 1,2 Kgs, Jer), the word *הביל* is used as a designation for other gods in the accusation against Israel’s apostasy, and therefore it means ‘idols’ – again, something that is empty, illusory and limited. Fredericks, *NIDOTTE* 1:1005.

²⁶² Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 69.

person towards that which is good and beautiful, and this is made particularly clear in the turn from the realistic reflection on the fragility and instability of economic goods and impending death, since, regardless of these factors, Qoheleth does not give up on the possibility of experiencing joy. The act of enjoyment is directly associated with God, not only in that God gives joy but that God *enables* the human being to rejoice in his work.

The challenge of being empowered and yet powerless at the same time rings true throughout Qoheleth in the face of the reality that everything is הבל: insubstantial, evanescent breath that we cannot hold or possess. While the entire section surrounding the joy text, 5:1–16 and 6:3–12 (A, A', B, B', C, C'), leads us to question the reason for entering this world and the meaning of the work and fatigue we undergo, 5:17–19 and 6:1–2 (D, D') hone in on the reason for our existence: the enjoyment of life which is a gift from God. As we noted earlier, the subject of 5:17–19 is כל־הָאָדָם, “all people,” and the verbs are in the perfect tense as opposed to the subject of 6:1–2, אִישׁ, “a person,” which uses the imperfect tense. Therefore, 5:17–19 presents a universal statement of how God acts in relation with humanity, namely that God’s gift to humanity is that God has already permitted humans to enjoy what they have, giving them material possessions, and authorizing them to partake of what they have as their portion. On the contrary, 6:1–2 comments on a specific case describing some particular person who *may not* partake or enjoy this privilege, demonstrating that “there are instances when that gift is not evident, when the same God who gives material possessions may not give certain individuals the ability to enjoy them,”²⁶³ because a stranger enjoys them instead. In essence, Qoheleth invites us to learn the wise person’s capacity for detachment despite being presented with an abundance. It is this detachment that permits one to enjoy fully while recognizing that one can never be sated, as nothing is ever sufficient (5:7–11; 6:7–9).

V.1. THE ABSENCE OF עוֹלָם IN QOH 5:17–19

At this point we might ask ourselves about the absence of the temporal word עוֹלָם in Qoh 5:17–19. This word comes up a total of seven times in the book: 1:4, 10; 2:16; 3:11, 14; 9:6; and 12:5. These seven occurrences of עוֹלָם either appear in the first two chapters or in the important pericopes containing the joy texts. In fact, of all the significant pericopes we are studying in this dissertation, Qoh 5:17–19 is the only one which does not contain עוֹלָם. This absence is noteworthy and deserves attention; in fact, its absence is a further argument for the link between joy and time.

Qoh 3:11 uses the verb נתן “to give” to denote God’s action which places עוֹלָם in the human heart. The word לָב is introduced by the preposition בַּ and the third masculine plural

²⁶³ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 225.

pronominal suffix points to the antecedent בני האדם in v.10.²⁶⁴ A consequence of God's action is "so that the human being cannot find out the work which God has done from beginning to end." In other words, it seems as though the purpose of God's action of giving העלם is to continue keeping God's work a mystery for humanity. If we interpret עלם as a wordplay, "a time-span of indefinite duration" or "the everlasting," then it follows that the human being remains in a complete miscomprehension of this mystery.

However, here in 5:19b at the culmination of the fourth joy text, God is said to answer with joy in his heart. Again, this phrase is a subordinate clause to 5:19a, which states that the human being does not remember or recall the passing of time. It is notable that in the previous two verses, God is once again the subject of the verb נתן. In 5:17, God gives "the days of his life," in other words, time. In 5:18, God gives "wealth, riches, and the power to enjoy them;" in other words, the experience of joy. Finally, in the last verse of this fourth joy text God is no longer the subject of נתן but of the contested verb מענה, whose object is once more joy. The common elements to both 5:19b and 3:11b are the fact that God is the implied subject, either giving or responding/filling/revealing into the human heart. However, in 3:11b the object is עלם and in 5:19b the object is joy. In other words, in 3:11b God gives עלם, whereas in 5:19b, God "gives" (occupies, answers with, reveals) joy to the human heart. Here therefore we observe a clear link between time and joy. If we understand these gifts of God as parallel and reflective of each other, then we can conclude that there is a temporal sense to this gift of joy – it is something that may be experienced during our life-span, "eternal" in the sense that it has depth and weight, and at the same time, mysterious, as we might say that it possesses something of God's own essence.

Interestingly, the conclusion that we can draw from 5:19 brings together once again the realities of time and joy. Just as the word יפה had served as a bridge to link together the concepts of time and joy, God's action of giving serves as a bridge between the gifts that God puts in the human heart: עלם in 3:11 and בשמחה in 5:19. In 5:19, the human being forgets the passing of time because of the joy that God provides. This joy, in addition, is God's access point, that is, the point where God can enter the human experience. The human being is capable of experiencing joy and forgetting the limitations of life, touching *for a moment* the divine dimension that is limitless. Especially given the fact that God is the subject of this verb, there is no doubt that God can do both these things and more at the same time. It only further enhances the fact that the divine nature is to be revered and respected. By filling and occupying the heart with joy, God's gift, God is revealing something about God's own nature. God wants to see the human being enjoy "the counted days of his life." This would mean that the different moments and occasions that God gives to the human being are meant to bring the person into an experience of enjoyment, making the double meaning in 3:1 "there is a time for every 'joy' under the

²⁶⁴ Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 262.

heavens” ring true. Therefore, the question of purpose in the work that one does, finds its response in the way that the person lives each present moment. This has implications for our understanding of the whole book of Qoheleth, something we will explore in the final chapter, but for now, we may note that the repeated **הבל** refrain reflects not a futility or worthlessness to all things and all moments, but instead the affirmation that all moments are constantly fleeting and cannot be possessed or controlled (as God can and does), and hence must be taken advantage of to the full.

Briefly summarizing what we have seen in 5:17–19: in Qoh 5:17 the word **יפה** comes up a second time and points us back to 3:11, thereby serving as a bridge to link the concepts of time and joy. In 3:11 “God made everything beautiful in its time,” while here that which is “good and beautiful” is the experience of joy. Joy is also seen in this verse to be experienced in the context of the topic of work and in relation to the theme of creation. Qoheleth 5:18 points us to God’s generosity and abundance, perhaps in contrast to the previous vv. 9–16 leading up to this joy text. In addition, the very fact that the human being can experience joy is God’s gift. Finally, Qoh 5:19 points to the human experience of losing the awareness of the passage of time, of detachment from its ephemeral quality, and essentially of the freedom from controlling it. The passage of time escapes human consciousness when one is able to rejoice in their work. In the second half of 5:19, we have an explanation for the reason of the lack of remembrance or mindfulness, and it involves God’s gift of joy: “...because God **מענה** with joy in his heart.” Here, God “occupies” or better yet, “reveals Godself” and “answers” with joy. As we have seen from our study of the word **מענה**, we have learned that both interpretations are possible and complement each other. In addition, they inform our theological understanding of Qoheleth. The absence of **עלם** in this verse points us back to 3:13 where God had placed **עלם** in the human heart and we can draw the parallel between **עלם** and that which God now “gives,” joy.

Hence, the concept of joy in 5:19 to some extent now replaces the concept of **עלם** which came up in 3:11, while at the same time **עלם** may be understood as implicitly present in this divine joy of 5:19 that God gives into the human heart. The fact that **עלם** is mysterious, possessing something of God’s own essence, and “everlasting” in the sense that it has depth and weight informs our understanding of joy in this joy text, and hence the joy of which Qoheleth speaks in 5:17–19 is God’s way of entering the human experience. As we have already noted, this divine joy brings the human being into another dimension of time and allows him to touch this divine experience that is limitless. On the other hand, the concept of God’s gift of joy in 5:19 not only replaces but also informs our understanding of God’s gift of **עלם** in 3:11. Although we have identified that one of God’s purposes is to keep God’s work incomprehensible to humanity, it is not the only one. The joy contained or implied in God’s gift of **עלם** also leads the human being to acknowledge God’s distance and transcendence and hence points to the attitude of revering of God. God also wants to see the human being enjoy one’s short life, and in this superior joy, to learn detachment from the ephemeral quality of life, finding joy in the

freedom of controlling time. Hence, the emphasis placed on time in the earlier chapters of Qoheleth is now slowly being replaced by the accent on joy which replaces עלם here in 5:19.

VI. LINKS BETWEEN QOH 5:17–19 AND 3:10–15

As noted throughout this study, there are several significant connections between 3:10–15 and 5:17–19. Both are theological passages that contain a high concentration of the name God, as well as featuring or containing joy texts. We have observed vocabulary exclusive to these two passages including the word יפה that comes up only in 3:11 and 5:17, and the phrase מתת אלהים היא “this is a gift of God,” which only occurs in 3:13 and 5:18. There is, in addition, the theme of creation which has come up explicitly in 3:10–15 and which 5:17 alludes to through the use of the word יפה.

The word יפה present in both 5:17–19 and 3:10–15 connects the themes of time and joy, since 3:10–15 speaks of time as being “beautiful” and 5:17–19 speaks of the experience of joy as being “good and beautiful.” Furthermore, the word יפה is not only a bridge but it introduces the theme of creation that plays a pivotal role upon which these important texts of Qoheleth turn. As the pivot point, creation acts as the center and focus of both texts, being the underlying blueprint to better understand what Qoheleth wants to transmit. For a biblical book that seems more philosophical in nature and whose theology is often overlooked, if not all together ignored, Qoheleth’s theological passages point to a creator God at work in the world and inviting the human being to work alongside him. The perspective of creation is not foreign to the wisdom enterprise, and in fact, “the dialogue with creation may be termed the ‘wisdom experience.’”²⁶⁵ Its focal point is the present moment, there where the human being is and experiences life, and this is where God is and where God comes to meet the human being. In the next section we will see how joy and work seem to interact closely throughout Qoheleth.

We also noted how 5:17 listed three verbs, describing that which was good and beautiful, in the infinitive construct and each introduced by the preposition ל, reminding us of the poem on time in Qoh 3 where the verbs preceded by ל indicated finality. Whereas each of the human experiences outlined in 3:2–8 had an active character, and a quality of decisiveness and conclusiveness, the verbs of 5:17 also transmit a sense of finality. Hence, to eat, to drink and to see the good are intentional actions that keep the human person in an active role. The theme of time in 3:2–8, and the theme of joy in 5:17 are united by means of the human being’s active choice, although both the gifts of time and joy are beyond his control.

²⁶⁵ Roland E. Murphy, "Israel's Wisdom: A Biblical Model of Salvation," *StMiss* 30 (1981): 1-43, esp. 39-42.

The other common element to both texts is the phrase “gift of God” found in 3:13 and 5:18. In the second joy text, 3:12–13, the gift of God is described as “...every human being who eats, drinks and sees the good in all his work.” Now, in 5:17–19, our fourth joy text, Qoheleth escalates this gift to another level: “God has also empowered him to eat from them and to receive his portion and rejoice in his work...” Again, the two sources of joy are eating and/or drinking, and finding joy in one’s work, and God is the main subject of the consistent action of “giving.” However, the added elements in 5:18, the days of one’s life, riches and wealth, and finally, the ability to enjoy all point to God’s act of empowering the human being in order to experience joy. Therefore, there is a further emphasis on God’s role. Qoheleth 5:19 further confirms God’s active role, since God is the subject of the contested verb מענה which we have looked at in detail.

As we saw with time in Qoh 3, joy is both a gift and a task, and hence there is a double agency in the theology of joy. We may perceive joy as a “grace,” in other words, a pure gift, which we receive by no merit. Nevertheless, we also need to be open and available in order to receive it and allow it to work in us. As we noted in our study of 2:24–26, the “good” is neither entirely of one’s own making, nor is it available to everyone; rather, it is possible only to those who are already “good” before God. There is the aspect of “pure gift,” and yet there is also human agency. While the gift comes freely “from the hand of God” who gives “to those who are good,” it is up to human beings to see the good. “Indeed, there is double, if unequal, agency: enjoyment is a possibility for mortals only by the sovereign power of the deity but they can only have it when they make themselves “see.”²⁶⁶ This idea of double agency points to the collaborative effort of both the human and divine, which makes our lives and their fruitfulness possible, in other words, we find here once more the idea of creation and co-creation. Joy is not a question of the result of “good” behavior, something we may taste only in the future, but rather of an experience that is possible at any time in the present. “Anyone who takes on and enjoys as a gift of God what is good in the allotted time of one’s life, as well as life itself, no longer has to strive for an ‘extension’ of one’s life,”²⁶⁷ and hence the desire for infinity or eternity translates into living the present with depth and fullness.

VII. UNDERSTANDING WORK IN ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH JOY

A characteristic of the enjoyment that Qoheleth speaks of is that work may be the means or cause of enjoyment itself. The root עמל, one of Qoheleth’s key words, appears 35 times in our book, 22 times as a noun and 13 times as a verb, proportionally higher than in any other

²⁶⁶ Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment*, 37.

²⁶⁷ Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 162.

book of the Hebrew Scriptures that has 75 occurrences of the root.²⁶⁸ It appears in five of the seven joy texts. The original and primary meaning of this root is “work” or “labor,” though this root is also associated with the meanings “fatigue,” “exhaustion,” and even “product” and “possession.” It is most logical for the neutral meaning to be at the origin of the semantic development, and therefore two categories are derived from the primary meaning of “work.” The first category may go down the logical line of “effort,” “heavy labor,” “affliction” which leads to “fatigue,” and finally to “oppression.” The second category may follow from “efficiency,” “output,” “yield,” leading then to “product,” “goods,” “benefit” and “contribution.” The two meanings are strictly related to each other: the first gives rise to the second, according to a process common in Semitic linguistics.²⁶⁹ When the Semitic mentality wants to express a concept, all the aspects of that concept resound within it, although a specific emphasis of the concept may be in the foreground.

Six of the seven joy texts mention the general theme of work by means of the roots עמל and עשה. The expression that most frequently follows “eating and drinking” is “to see the good in one’s work” (2:24; 3:13; 5:17). Qoheleth 2:24 uses the expression והראה את-נפשו טוב בעמלו; 3:13 uses the similar expression: וראה טוב בכל-עמלו; and finally, 5:17 reads-ולראות טובה בכל-עמלו. The common sequence in these three phrases is the verb ראה, the noun טוב, and the noun עמלו “his work” with the 3ms suffix. A variant of these expressions is found in two of the other joy texts: 3:22 ישמח האדם במעשיו, “to rejoice in what one does,” and in 8:15 referring to joy: “this will accompany him in his work” והוא ילונו בעמלו. Finally, 9:7b notes: “God has already approved your works” כי כבר רצה האלהים את-מעשיך, while 9:9b mentions. “...This is your reward in life and in your work in which you have worked under the sun” כי הוא חלקך בחיים ובעמלך אשר-אתה עמל תחת השמש.

The use of the term עמל in Qoheleth does not necessarily transmit the negative idea of work as labor, toil or drudgery. Oftentimes, along with the negative interpretations of Qoheleth who is seen to complain about the meaninglessness of life, his talk about work also takes on a negative tone, as if it were something we human beings would rather not do. However, if we again study the contexts in which this term is used, along with its Late Hebrew meaning, it may be generally translated throughout the book as “work,” and it does not necessarily have the negative connotation of “labor” or “toil,” as it is often translated.²⁷⁰ Just as we have seen with the root שמח, the term for joy, which was dependent on the context for the meaning intended,

²⁶⁸ 1:3 (2x); 2:10 (2x), 11(2x), 18(2x), 19(2x), 20(2x), 21(2x), 22(2x), 24(2x); 3:9, 13; 4:4, 6, 8(2x), 9; 5:14, 15, 17(2x), 18; 6:7; 8:15, 17; 9:9(2x); 10:15. Some good studies on the root עמל are: W. E. Staples, “Profit,” in *Ecclesiastes*, JNES 4 (1945), 89-90; G. Bertram, “Hebräischer und griechischer Qohelet,” ZAW 64 (1952): 26-49, 35-38; Loretz, *Qohelet und der alte Orient*, 42s; Braun, *Kohelet und die fruhhellenistische Popular-philosophie*, 48s.

²⁶⁹ Fabrizio Foresti, “*āmāl* in Koheleth: ‘Toil’ or ‘Profit’,” *ECarm* 31 (1980): 415-30.

²⁷⁰ Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 72.

we may find that the connotation of עמל is similarly dependent on the context in which Qoheleth uses it. Having looked in depth at the parody of the king, we have seen the frustration and exhaustion that the king reached without gaining any profit, discovering in the process that everything he had accomplished was הבל. In the context of chapter 2, where שמח transmits the meaning “pleasure” more than joy, the term עמל is better understood in its negative sense of “labor” or “toil” rather than the more neutral term “work.” However, the references in the rest of the book, especially those found in the theological context of the joy texts, do not necessarily transmit a negative image of work as labor or toil, but instead speak of work as the activity that dignifies and gives meaning to human existence. Naturally, when one works hard one experiences fatigue, but it is a voluntary and motivated work that finds its fruit in the joy and satisfaction of doing something useful. In addition, Qoheleth’s invitation to joy is much more profound than just the superficial call to enjoy your toil while you can, if you can, since everything is הבל.

If “all” is הבל, work and its outcome included, if all is transient and will eventually end then the inevitable question is why do it in the first place? The question מה־יתרון “what advantage” which appears in 1:3 and 3:9 and its variation מה־יותר, which uses the same root as יתרון, namely יתר in 6:8 and 6:11, demands an answer regarding the purpose and motivation of work. This element is central to human work, since without a good motivation and a real purpose, why undergo such fatigue? It is understandable for someone to go through a tiring ordeal implying great fatigue and labor if one is certain that there will be a favorable outcome, however, what if one is not certain about the outcome? Is it worth it to go through all the trouble? In addition, even if one might be able to secure some sort of result or final product, if this outcome turns out to be הבל – something temporary and transient which will not last forever – what is the point of going to the trouble in the first place? After repeatedly questioning the meaning of work and its purpose, Qoheleth responds by means of the texts on joy. Vélchez insists on the paradoxical character of the relationship between work and joy. He says that Qoheleth finds motives for joy in work and in its fruits; and though passing, they show the loveable side of life. In all the passages where Qoheleth speaks of the joys of life, he speaks about work, which is valued positively: “enjoy work.”²⁷¹ In addition, work gives the human being meaning and purpose. Human beings are meant to enjoy what is most ordinary and fundamental in their lives, the work of their hands, their toil and labor. It is usually by means of work that one acquires the sustenance for one’s living and for one’s family and loved ones; therefore, the ability to work and the sense of accomplishment offers the human person joy and satisfaction. Qoheleth exhorts us to enjoy our work in the limited time of our lives “under the sun.” As we noted, the term עמל seems to have a more negative connotation at the beginning

²⁷¹ “Ni en tiempos de Qoheleth ni en los nuestros se concibe que una persona se encuentre a gusto si no es trabajando, es decir, realizando aquellas tareas que le llenan. Pero no puede decirse que el trabajo, aun el más gratificante, produzca una satisfacción absolutamente plena; en este sentido es un valor relativo y, por eso mismo, vanidad, según la forma de hablar de nuestro autor”. Vélchez Líndez, *Eclesiastes*, 441.

of the book, particularly in the context of the parody of the king. Given the relationship that we have observed between work and joy, the evolution in the meaning of the term used for work is likewise related to the development of the meaning of joy and the increasing emphasis on the joy that comes from God. We would be able to conclude therefore that in the measure that joy grows and takes precedence, the term עֵמֶל more certainly takes on a more neutral connotation.

It would be interesting to take this a step further. If, as we have previously noted, God's work is another way of speaking of God's creation, would it follow therefore for human work to be understood as an extension of God's work of creation? Reflecting on our active involvement under the sun by means of the task that God has given us, and the work we strive to accomplish, we would in fact be termed co-creators. In other words, the human task or work is to extend God's creative work in endless ways restricted only by God's gifts of skill, knowledge and imagination, and the limits set by God. Work is part of human life and essential to the way God created us to live in this world. It is the way we as humans can contribute to the common good. Our work or co-creation is what gives us purpose and hence, the direct consequence of finding purpose is the experience of joy for the human being. Therefore, both joy and work or, better yet, joy and creation come together beautifully as God has created us in order to experience joy. Hence, there is much reason for gratitude.

VIII. IMPLICATIONS FROM THE CONTEXT OF QOH 5:17–19

Sections A and A' (4:17 – 5:6 and 6:10–12) speak of the importance of revering God while at the same time pointing out the human search for power and control by means of the acquisition of money and wealth. Hence, there is an acknowledgement of one's smallness within the bigger picture as a characteristic of this reverence of God and this in turn demonstrates a certain wisdom about the human condition. If we first examine the way Qoheleth describes revering God in this context, it essentially has nothing to do with the emptiness of a piety based on mere words. Instead, it is a reverence based on fulfilling one's vow. When one lives truthfully and faithfully, the consequence is a sense of satisfaction and gratification. Likewise, God finds pleasure in those who fulfill what they promise (cf. Qoh 5:3). We may therefore conclude that in the measure that one lives a sincere piety towards God, revering God in one's life and actions, one finds that the experience of joy becomes more accessible. The attitude of awe and reverence disposes, opens, and enables one to receive God's gift of joy. In addition, the experience of joy provides a different kind of consistency and integrity to one's faith.

Next, in sections B and B' (5:7–11 and 6:7–9), we noted how one of the characteristics of money is that it offers the illusion that one can always accumulate more and more of it.

Sadly, it creates the false impression of being potentially infinite, and human greed is never filled; it is essentially an idol. However, when one realizes that these highly coveted material acquisitions result in no satisfaction, one can then begin to ask real questions: what gives and provides lasting satisfaction for the human being? What is the source of joy and satisfaction that the human being tirelessly longs for? In response to the human drive and restlessness for more wealth, again, Qoh 5:17–19, provides an answer. The emptiness and insubstantiality of that which the eyes merely see in passing contrasts with the joy that fills the heart, which God himself places there. The gift of joy and, more importantly, the gift of the capacity to enjoy, become a real and substantial experience that fulfills the person on a deeper level, to the point that the material goods and possessions lose their value and desirability. In addition, the divine aspect present in the gift of joy outweighs and overcomes the insatiable desire for more. We may conclude that God is the “more” that the human being has desired all along.

Looking at C and C’ (5:12–16 and 6:3–6), we are reminded of the reality of death and the limited portion due to the human being. This forms an opposition to God’s gift of joy, which has an implied unlimited aspect about it just because God is its source. As source of the gifts of time and joy, God is present and manifest in both of them. In fact, joy fulfills time and stretches it, making it “lasting” and eternal. In a sense, it makes the experience of time equivalent to eternity, and allows us to touch the divine by means of joy. We may even say that the human being is permitted to taste an experience of another dimension of time as defined by the word עולם even though it is not explicitly mentioned in 5:17–19. As we have seen, there is a parallel between “joy” in 5:19 and עולם in 3:11. We know from experience that when one is enjoying oneself, one is easily immersed and deeply engrossed in the moment. One does not keep track of time, but instead one loses all sense of time. When one fully experiences joy, it is as if time has stopped or time disappears, or perhaps another dimension of time opens up to us and we are plunged into its depths.²⁷² The word עולם encapsulates this dimension of time, it embraces the paradox of God’s distance and God’s immanence, but it also points to the human capacity to recognize God. Essentially, it is as close as we come to the experience of “eternity” in this realm “under the sun.”

VIII.1. HUMAN WORK AND CREATION

Just as God “saw that it was good” at the end of each day of creation in Gen 1, Qoheleth sees eating, drinking and enjoying oneself in all of one’s work to be good and beautiful in Qoh 5:17–19 and hence, the human being takes on a role comparable to God’s. Human work is not

²⁷² “Time perception” is in fact a field of study within psychology and neuroscience that refers to the subjective experience of the duration of the indefinite and unfolding events of life. Le Poidevin, R., “The Experience and Perception of Time,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2015 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2015/entries/time-experience/>>.

only a means of productivity but is also the means by which one can experience joy. The aspect of enjoyment in relation to work brings the human being into a special contact with God, not only by participating in God's work as co-creator, but also by receiving God's gift of joy through one's work. The most substantial implication of understanding the human being to be a co-creator is that it elevates the worth and dignity of human work. This is a strong statement with regards to human work, which is something fleeting and ephemeral. This would imply that even though work and its profit may be transient and will inevitably perish, they still have an inherent value in themselves. This therefore imbues work with a quality that is "lasting," regardless of its actual durability.

VIII.2. REVERING GOD AND WISDOM

While the human being is ever cognizant of his ephemerality and limitation, and God's infinitude and greatness, there is a point of union when God deposits both the mystery of time and the capacity to enjoy in the human heart. The human being is open to receive these gifts from God when s/he authentically reveres God.²⁷³ Our interpretation of revering God according to Qoheleth depends greatly on how one views the book in its entirety. If one agrees with those who see Qoheleth as a pessimist, then revering God is more like "fearing" God and is something terrible and horrendous and one must be constantly on guard, since God is undoubtedly oppressive and despotic.²⁷⁴ In addition, the apparent lack of retribution would signal an unjust and cruel God. On the other hand, if one perceives Qoheleth's thinking in a more positive light as we have been doing so in this study, the attitude of revering God is, instead, a consequence of recognizing God's goodness and greatness. A God who gives good things such as life, time, and joy inspires reverence and respect. In fact, the latter is a meaning that better coincides with the Hebrew understanding of *ירא אלהים*, "revering God." Therefore, it is the wise person who is capable of this insight into the true nature of God.

Revering God, the attitude essential to wisdom, involves a coming to terms with humanity's place "on earth," conditioned by its limitations. Human beings, no matter how wise they might be, cannot control or take hold of any knowledge or possession. Human beings can possess joy, but only when God enables them. The recognition of human limitation is at the same time the possibility of a deep freedom that comes from detachment; it is the freedom of not possessing and the freedom of receiving. Therefore, practicing wisdom and revering God for Qoheleth does not only include taking action as we saw in the previous chapter, but it means

²⁷³ "The close association between fear and joy in Qoheleth's rhetoric suggests that enjoyment is a vital aspect of Qoheleth's vision of piety." Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment*, 85.

²⁷⁴ Anyhow, "the connotation of actual fear is absent from most of the instances where fear of God is mentioned. Often it is self-evident that this significance was not even present subconsciously." Bamberger, "Fear and Love of God in the Old Testament," 50.

recognizing and embracing the possibility of enjoyment in human life. The wise person who reveres God recognizes the limitation of time, the preciousness of joy, and the importance of taking full advantage of each moment. Nothing may be under human control, but at the same time, one can trust in a God who empowers and even commands one to enjoy.

All of life – eating, drinking, and working – is the arena in which God’s presence can be experienced. Food, drink, and work become the tangible means by which God communicates his grace to the human being; they are, as well, the way of expressing one’s reverence towards God. After all, we must do our part in “accepting God’s gifts.” To refuse the gifts and the possibility to enjoy that come our way “is to refuse honor to the God who is giver of all.”²⁷⁵ “If fear and joy represent the two poles of the human experience of the divine, then Qoheleth’s portrait of piety puts a surprising twist on the practice of religion.”²⁷⁶ Qoheleth seems to put more of an accent on the authenticity and interiority of one’s faith rather than the external signs and symbols, words and promises, which may not be coherent with one’s choices and way of living life. The supposed distance between the divine and the human no longer seems so believable since we have seen how God has involved Godself very intimately in the human being’s life.

God’s action of giving joy and filling with joy and God’s revelation by means of the gift of joy is what stimulates and encourages the human attitude of revering God. This connection of God’s generous giving and the human response of “fearing” or “revering” highlights the co-creative and collaborative aspect of the human in his relationship with God. Therefore, the very response of revering God and hence the demonstration of wisdom is mainly due to the way in which God has manifest Godself by means of joy.

In addition, we might wonder why there is a separation between the mention of joy and God’s gifts outlined in 5:17–19 and the attitude of revering God, which is only mentioned in 6:10–12. Normally we have seen how Qoheleth mentions the theme of joy in proximity with the theme “revering God.” Here however, there is a gap formed by sections B (5: 7–11, 6:7–9) and C (5:12–16, 6:3–6) where the theme is focused on the material aspect of life, which is passing and fleeting, הבל. As we have seen, Qoh 6:1–2 is a mirror passage to the joy text in 5:17–19, however, 6:3–9 reiterate the points made in 5:7–16, that people may feast with their eyes and yet not experience satisfaction, people may have material wealth and yet not enjoy life and cannot take these riches with them when they die. Therefore, the succession of themes presented here in these verses is: gift and joy, הבל, revering God and the fleeting aspect of life.

²⁷⁵ Ellen F. Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs*, Westminster Bible companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 182.

²⁷⁶ Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment*, 121.

The aspect of *הבל* becomes the key element in order to understand the relationship between God's gift of joy and the human response of revering God. The very recognition and acceptance that life is short and fleeting may lead the human being to wisdom. Psalm 90:12 expresses this perfectly: "Teach us to count our days aright, that we may gain wisdom of heart." Consequently, the attitude of revering God follows this knowledge of the brevity of life where we do experience God's generosity by means of the gift of joy. It is not a superficial joy that we take for granted, but a precious gift that we value and treasure, precisely because we do not know how long it will last or when it will come or go. As Rita Azevedo notes in the film "Fragil como el mundo," the grandmother's advice to her love-struck teenage grandchild is that the great joy we may experience in life, which is pure gift, and which we cannot control, measure, or possess is precisely how God comes and touches our lives.

VIII.3. TIME AND JOY

At the conclusion of this second chapter, the themes of time and joy continue to shape our understanding of Qoheleth, and we might even say, condition it. The focus of this chapter has been the fourth joy text of the book, which more clearly supersedes the theme of time and escalates the divine quality of joy. Although there is a preeminence of joy in these verses, the references to time are no less important and, in fact, frame the joy text. Qoheleth 5:17 speaks of "the counted days of one's lifetime which God gives him" and 5:19 speaks of how the human being "will not be mindful of the many days of his lifetime" in other words, the brevity of life which has a connotation of death. The limited aspect of time and the sense that time is running out takes precedence. Qoheleth reminds us of the "limited days of life," indirectly speaking of death in 5:14–15, and the call to joy during the "counted days of one's lifetime which God gives him" in 5:17. This finitude of time enhances the urgency of the call to enjoy. In addition, Qoheleth points to the fact that human beings will not consider the "days of his lifetime" in 5:19, precisely because God responds and reveals Godself by means of joy in the heart. It follows, therefore, that for Qoheleth, the actual duration of life, whether it is long or short, does not have as much importance as it does in the traditional Hebrew mentality. What gives length, substance, and weight to our fleeting *הבל* life is the experience of joy and the fullness that it can offer to the human being. Interestingly *כבוד*, which means glory and weight, contrasts with the idea of *הבל*, the fleeting, "breath-like" nature of human life. Instead, the depth that we yearn for is provided by means of the experience of joy. The two themes, time and joy, continue to open a space for other themes that we have deepened such as human work and creation, and the wisdom of revering God.

CHAPTER IV: THE COMMAND TO JOY, AS TIME REACHES ITS FULFILLMENT IN DEATH QOHELETH 8:15 – 9:12

*"Por fin me acerco a lo que quería decirlos,
a ese casi nada que he visto hoy y que ha abierto todas las puertas de la muerte:
hay una vida que no se detiene nunca.
No podemos atraparla.
Huye delante de nosotros como el pájaro entre los pilares de nuestro corazón.
Raramente estamos a la altura de esta vida.
Pero ella no se inquieta por eso y no deja ni por un segundo
de colmar con sus favores a los asesinos que somos."
~ Christian Bobin, *El hombre alegría**

0. INTRODUCTION

Both time and joy have opened the way for a discussion of the themes of creation, work, and revering God in Qoh 3 and 5. The finitude of time enhances the urgent call to joy. Joy in fact, makes it possible for one to forget the passage of time and therefore enter a sort of experience of “timelessness.” Timelessness may be equated with the experience of being in the present moment, here and now. In addition, the wisdom which Qoheleth is describing is not that of knowing everything, but it is instead to surrender and accept that which is unknown. We will see that the relationship between the themes of time and joy grow and are enriched by the presence of these new themes. The following two chapters of the thesis which deal with Qoh 9 and Qoh 11–12 will additionally integrate the theme of death, together with the ideas of creation and revering God, and we will come to appreciate how Qoheleth’s thought develops and deepens by the end of the book.

I. DELIMITATIONS

The following section of the book that we will study is Qoh 8:15 – 9:12. It is composed of four distinct parts that are each pertinent to the discussion of these themes. It includes the fifth and sixth joy texts of the book (8:15; 9:7–10), a theological passage which deals with death and the limits of knowledge (8:16 – 9:6), and finally two verses focused on time, chance and again death (9:11–12). These individual sections build up upon one another and bring a fuller meaning to the themes that have been recurring throughout the book and in fact, begin to introduce the theme of death in a more evident way.

II. DISCUSSION OF ITS CONTEXT

As we have discussed in the introduction of this thesis, it is nearly impossible to determine one single structure for this section of the book, or for the entire book of Qoheleth for that matter. According to Lohfink, 8:16 – 9:10 would be a section parallel to the preceding section 8:1–15, where both sections end with a joy text, namely 8:15 and 9:7–10. However, “as is often to be found in polyphonic music, the limits of various parts differ according to changing points of view”²⁷⁷ which shift during the process of listening and reading. Therefore, though from one angle 9:11–12 may function as an introduction to the final portion of the book, Lohfink suggests that the end has already begun at 8:16 with the following structure:

Frame A 8:16 – 9:6 God / Death
 Frame B 9:7–9 Joy in living
 Frame C 9:10 Tenacious effort
 Corpus 9:11 – 11:3
 Frame C 11:4–6 Tenacious effort
 Frame B 11:7–10 Joy in living
 Frame A 12:1–8 God / Death

This structure places 9:7–9 parallel to 11:7–10, the final joy text, which we will study in the next chapter. Nevertheless, I include v.10 in the sixth joy text, because it prolongs the discussion of work in v. 9 and v.11 clearly starts a new section. According to this structure of Lohfink, all three texts on joy including 8:15 which is not included here, are either preceded or followed by a section on God and death. We will explore the importance of the theme of death further on in this chapter, in the next, and in the general conclusions.

Vittoria D’Alario, like Lohfink, places 8:15 at the conclusion of the section 8:2–15, sees 8:16–17 as a transitional unit, and then divides 9:1–12 very much along the lines of the following chiasm:²⁷⁸

A 9:1 the human being does not know
 B 9:2–6 one fate: death
 C 9:7–10 invitation to joy
 B’ 9:11 one fate: “time and chance” overtake all
 A’ 9:12 the human being does not know

²⁷⁷ Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 115-16.

²⁷⁸ D’Alario, *Il libro del Qohelet*, 157.

Considering the previously proposed structures to Qoheleth, we shall divide this section as follows: first, we will study 8:15 on its own, as it is an important joy text after which Qoheleth no longer asks the programmatic question of meaning. Qoheleth 8:16–17, instead, emphasize the limit to human knowledge, as even the wise person cannot know. Next, 9:1–6 brings together the sense that the human being cannot know what awaits him/her, but that there is one fate for all, which is essentially death. Qoheleth speaks of life in the perspective of its temporality and the inevitability of its cessation with death, and it is from this outlook that he leads into the imperative joy statement in vv. 7–10 at the very heart of this discussion. After the joy text, Qoheleth returns in vv. 11–12 to the incertitude of the themes already presented in vv. 1–6 highlighted by the key theme of time.

We will take a closer look at each of these sections of our text in their original Hebrew according to the BHQ, a translation, and finally, we shall comment on how they highlight and illumine the themes of time, joy, death, and how God ties them together.

III. QOHELETH 8:15 PRAISE TO JOY

<p>15 ושבחתי אני את־השמחה אשר אין־טוב לאדם תחת השמש כי אם־לאכול ולשתות ולשמוח והוא ילונו בעמלו ימי חייו אשר־נתן־לו האלהים תחת השמש:</p>	<p>Therefore²⁷⁹ I praised joy, because there is nothing better for a human being under the sun than to eat, to drink, and to be joyful. This will accompany him in his work through the days of life that God gives him under the sun.</p>
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The fifth joy text begins with a significantly decided affirmation which culminates the previous pericope: Therefore, I praised joy. First, we will take a quick look at the context which leads up to this conclusive exclamation. Chapter 8 begins by questioning human wisdom and in Qoh 8:5–6 when speaking of the wise heart, עת is paired with the word “judgment” in the following expression: ועת ומשפט²⁸⁰ in both verses. The way these two words are paired together looks very much like a hendiadys,²⁸⁰ and therefore the meaning, more than “time of justice” would be “just time.” In addition, Qoh 8:6 uses the word חפץ, which we studied in Qoh 3:1 and

²⁷⁹ This verse is the conclusion of the pericope that preceded it and therefore the *waw* at the beginning of the verse is a *waw conclusivum*. Gerhard Charles Aalders, *Het Boek De Prediker* (Kok: Kampen, 1948), 193.

²⁸⁰ A hendiadys is a rhetorical device in which two words joined by a conjunction express a single complex idea. For more on the use of this figure in biblical literature see: Wilfred G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to its Techniques* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2007), 324–328; Yitzhak Avishur, “Pairs of Synonymous Words in the Construct State (and in Appositional Hendiadys) in Biblical Hebrew,” *JSem* 2 (1971–1972): 17–81 78–81; Hendrik A. Brongers, “Merismus, Synekdoche und Hendiadys in der Bibel-Hebräischen Sprache,” *OtSt* 14 (1965): 100–14 100–114.

where we noted the possible play on words with “joy,” and hence the translation could be: “For there is a just time for every joy...” Here, once more we are reminded of this vital link between time and joy. Qoheleth 8:7–9 insist on the fact that the human being cannot know what will happen and no one has control or authority over the wind or over the day of death. Essentially, the message is that control escapes the human being, and not even wisdom can allow one to possess time or have power, but rather one must defer to a higher power. In many expressions, the word עַתְּ also plays the function of the word “while,” “when,” or “the time of” in reference to an event or experience.²⁸¹ Qoh 8:9 falls into this category with עַתְּ starting a subordinate clause which translates: “while one person tyrannizes over another for harm.” Even when one pretends to have a certain “power” abusing of the weaker one, life and death are still out of one’s hands. These verses, because of the word עַתְּ, remind us of the theme of time in Qoh 3 and the humbling realization that one is ultimately not in control or in power of anything, most especially not in control of the time of one’s death. However, one does have power over the choice to enjoy in the present moment and hence Qoheleth reaches this culminating point in praise of joy. Qoheleth 8:11–14 is a puzzling pericope that leads us to take a step beyond the traditional interpretations which render it as continuing the idea of a retributive God.²⁸² The theme of “revering God” invites us to take the theological dimension of this book seriously. The principal of ethics would therefore no longer revolve around being righteous or being a sinner, but around revering God.

The piel form of שָׁבַח occurs only 8 times in the Hebrew Scriptures. In six of the occurrences, those found in the Psalms and 1 Chron, the root שָׁבַח is understood as “praise” with God or God’s works as the object, hence it is used exclusively in theological pronouncements.²⁸³ The two remaining uses of שָׁבַח are in Qoheleth, where it is used to praise the dead in 4:2 and to praise joy in 8:15. Although, both objects of this verb in Qoheleth do not have God or God’s works as the object, it is significant to note that here in 8:15 the object is שִׂמְחָה, “joy.” Taking the overwhelmingly theological use of this verb elsewhere seriously, the concept of “joy” is elevated to a very high position, on par with God and God’s works. Then, in the final chapter of this thesis, we will draw a parallel between “joy” and “the dead” in the book of Qoheleth, since the object in 4:2 is the “dead,” and it will be significant in our examination of the development of Qoheleth’s thought. The two occurrences of the verb in Qoheleth do share a similar context, however. Both in 4:2 and 8:15, Qoheleth contemplates the abuse of power and the perpetration of injustices in human society. Nevertheless, the verb is used for radically different purposes in both places. In 4:2, the sage’s observation of human misery

²⁸¹ i.e. Jer 2:17.27.28; 8:15; 11:12.14; 14:8.19, etc.

²⁸² Luca Mazzinghi, “Esegesi ed ermeneutica di un libro difficile: l’esempio di Qo 8,11-14,” in *Biblical Exegesis in Progress* (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 2009), 173-207.

²⁸³ Ps 63:4; 106:47; 117:1; 145:4; 147:12; 1 Chr 16:35; Qoh 4:3; 8:15. Clines, “שָׁבַח,” *DCH* 8:230; Franz Josef Backhaus, *Denn Zeit und Zufall trifft sie alle: Zu Komposition Gottesbild im Buch Qohelet* (Frankfurt am Main: Anton Hain, 1993), 164-5.

precipitates the bitter declaration: “I praise [שְׁבַח] the dead who have already died...” The language of praise is used to lament the plight of the afflicted and therefore Qoheleth expresses a very negative attitude towards life. However, as the chapters progress, Qoheleth’s persistent focus on the redeeming value of enjoyment marks a pronounced change in tone. The enthusiasm with which he acclaims enjoyment intensifies, and in 8:15 we reach a culmination of praise for joy.²⁸⁴ The language of praise is now reclaimed to affirm what is “good” and we might say “divine,” raising joy to its divine quality.

The fifth joy text Qoh 8:15 brings us back to the expression “there is nothing better than” אֵין־טוֹב that we saw in the first three joy texts. The formula literally means “there is no good” and because of the presence of כִּי אִם, it has a comparative sense.²⁸⁵ This joy text restates in similar words the elements that we had in the first three texts: “eating and drinking,” the mention of “the work throughout the days of one’s life” and the fact that these are “given by God.” In addition, it points us back to the very first mention of joy in 2:1 where Qoheleth says, “Come now, I will test you with שְׂמֵחָה...” Both 2:1 and 8:15 give the word שְׂמֵחָה special prominence.²⁸⁶ First, Qoheleth presents שְׂמֵחָה as a means of testing and in 8:15, Qoheleth offers a resolution of sorts: “Therefore, I praised joy.” The particle אֵת and the article הַ in front of the word שְׂמֵחָה give it a distinct emphasis.²⁸⁷ This should signal to us the importance that Qoheleth attributes to joy at this point of culmination in the book. According to Gianto, 2:1 and 8:15 introduce two different stages in the development of the theme of enjoyment, namely, 2:1 – 8:14 and 8:15 – 11:9. The praise in 8:15 undoubtedly points to the idea of שְׂמֵחָה mentioned for the first time in 2:1 and developed in what follows up to 8:14. The expression “I said that also this is הַבֵּל” [אִמַּרְתִּי שְׂגִם־זֶה הַבֵּל] at the end of 8:14 forms an inclusion with the very first *hebel* phrase in 2:1, “I said ... also that is הַבֵּל” [אִמַּרְתִּי ... אִגַּם־הוּא הַבֵּל]. It seems that verses 2:1 and 8:14 mark the beginning and end of a long exposition where Qoheleth presents שְׂמֵחָה as a response to הַבֵּל, after which, the repeated הַבֵּל formulas disappear.²⁸⁸ Only the following new expression כֹּל־שְׂבָא הַבֵּל “all that is to come is הַבֵּל” appears in Qoh 11:8, which incorporates the aspect of future, an expression we will study within its context in chapter V. Therefore, the joy text in 8:15 marks the end of a long section of the book where Qoheleth has been presenting joy as a response to הַבֵּל. We may therefore conclude that joy replaces the temporal aspect of הַבֵּל after 8:15. We will further explore and develop this thought in chapter VI.

²⁸⁴ Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment*, 59.

²⁸⁵ Ogden, “Qoheleth’s Use of the “Nothing Is Better”-Form,” Loader, *Polar Structures in the Book of Qoheleth*, 106; M. Zer-Kavod, *Koheleth*, Hamesh Megillot: Rut, Shir hashirim, Kohelet, Ekhah, Ester (Jerusalem: Massad Harav Kook, 1973), 55.

²⁸⁶ Gianto, “The Theme of Enjoyment in Qohelet,” 529.

²⁸⁷ “It is surprising that the determinateness of the object, marked by the particle אֵת and the article הַ in this verse has received little attention.” Gianto, “The Theme of Enjoyment in Qohelet,” 529.

²⁸⁸ Gianto, “The Theme of Enjoyment in Qohelet,” 529.

As previously noted, the element of time surfaces in the context of the texts on joy, along with the presence of the divine. God is repeatedly giving joy, wisdom, knowledge, and even trouble, but here in 8:15 God gives the human being “the days of life” ימי חייו in order to eat, drink and be joyful in his/her work.²⁸⁹ God’s gift here is time. This is one of the numerous ways that Qoheleth expresses time and in this instance the phrase “the days of life” transmits the idea of the temporal length of one’s human existence.²⁹⁰ Once more, we have seen how the theme of time is inseparable from joy.

IV. QOHELETH 8:16–17 THE HUMAN BEING CANNOT KNOW GOD’S WORK

- | | | |
|----|--|---|
| 16 | כאשר נתתי את-לבי לדעת חכמה ולראות את-
הענין אשר נעשה על-הארץ כי גם ביום ובלילה
שנה בעיניו איננו ראה: | When I applied my heart to know wisdom
and to see the task that is done on earth,
though neither by day nor by night do one's
eyes see sleep, |
| 17 | וראיתי את-כל-מעשה האלהים כי לא יוכל האדם
למצוא את-המעשה אשר נעשה תחת-השמש בשל
אשר יעמל האדם לבקש ולא ימצא וגם אם-יאמר
החכם לדעת לא יוכל למצא: | then I saw all the work of God: that no human
being can find out the work that is done un-
der the sun. However much ²⁹¹ humankind
may toil in searching, they will not find out; |

²⁸⁹ The word יום is by far the most common expression of time in Hebrew being the fifth most frequent noun with 2,304 Hebrew and 16 Aramaic occurrences in the MT, 53 in the Hebrew text of Sirach, 525 in the DSS, and 15 in Hebrew Inscriptions. There is a significant difference between the singular יום and its plural form יָמִים, namely that יום always designates some fixed point in time, while יָמִים often expresses temporal duration by indicating periods of time of various sorts. The plural can also sometimes mean ‘time’ in general. Clines, “יום,” *DCH* 4:166-186. “The plural can thus move in the direction of a general (and abstract) notion of time, although it is usually held that such a notion does not appear to be present in the OT.” Magne Sæbø, “יום,” *TDOT* 6:21-22.

²⁹⁰ The words יום and יָמִים are seldom syntactically independent; therefore, their semantic content can be seen more directly and more clearly in their various combinations with other words and their extended semantic field. “They are usually associated closely with another word or word element, more frequently as subject (182 times) or as object (81 times). The compound expressions are multiform and can express various shades of meaning. Sæbø, *TDOT* 6:14.

²⁹¹ According to the scholars, בְּשֵׁל אֲשֶׁר is an expression from late Hebrew that has been translated in different ways. The ancient versions seem to have read כל אשר (ב), as the LXX translates it ὅσα ἂν. Gordis translates it as “for the sake of which.” Cf. Gordis, *Koheleth*, 299; Whitley, *Koheleth: his Language and Thought*, 77. According to Schoors, “since” is the meaning that seems to be preferable. Schoors, *The Preacher Sought to Find Pleasing Words I*, 145-146. The translation which I have chosen is the concessive “however much.”

and even if the wise person should claim to know, s/he cannot find it out.²⁹²

These two verses summarize quite well the previous reflections on the king's search for wisdom in Qoh 2 that have ended in total disaster. At the same time, they prepare us for the reflections of 9:1–6 and therefore act as a bridge.²⁹³ The interpretation of these two verses, however, is not straightforward and the syntactical situation of וְרֵאִיתִי at the start of v.17 is rather complicated. I would read vv. 16–17 as one long sentence in which v. 16a is the protasis and v. 17 the apodosis, with v. 16b being a descriptive interjection.²⁹⁴ We notice that the word עֵינִן “task” makes its last appearance here in 8:16 and we are reminded of our discussion back in Chapter II about “task” in 1:13; 2:23, 26; and 3:10. In 8:16, Qoheleth is observing the task that is done on earth, namely the action or work of the human being. As we noted earlier, task most probably refers to the endeavor for wisdom and knowledge which so often does not reach its goal.²⁹⁵ Then, what Qoheleth actually sees in 8:17a is “all the work of God,” which he is unable to fully comprehend in addition to “the work that is done under the sun” in v.17b. If the object of רֵאִיתִי is “all the work of God” and כִּי introduces a new conclusive clause,²⁹⁶ then the כִּי clause would render more explicit what Qoheleth understands by the work of God, that is, the incapacity of the human being to find out what happens under the sun, though clearly the work of God is not limited to this. This would imply that Qoheleth attributes the impossibility for the human being to come to know God directly to the action of God.²⁹⁷ This is not a new idea, as we already saw this in 3:11, when God placed עֵלֶם, “the mystery of time,” in the human being so that s/he should *not* know God's work from beginning to end. As we noted in Chapter II, the gift of עֵלֶם is not an understanding of the totality of time by means of reason. It is instead, precisely the contrary, since עֵלֶם seems to be the very cause for this incapacity of finding out. In the next joy text, Qoh 5:17–19, when we see how God fills and reveals Godself by means of joy in 5:19, it does not appear to be a kind of revelation which satisfies the intellect or reason. It is an existential experience of joy which leads one to forget the passing of time and inevitable death. We

²⁹² For an excellent study of Qoh 8:16–17 cf. Pahk, *Il canto della gioia in Dio*, 75-128. Mazzinghi, “The Verbs מָצָא ‘to find’ and בָּקַשׁ ‘to search,’” 112.

²⁹³ See Michel Diethelm and Reinhard G. Lehmann, *Untersuchungen zur Eigenart des Buches Qohelet* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1989), 262; Aarre Lauha, *Kohelet* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1978), 160.

²⁹⁴ Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 643.

²⁹⁵ Schellenberg, “Qohelet's Use of the Word עֵינִן,” 152.

²⁹⁶ Aalders, *Het Boek De Prediker*, 194-5; John Barton, *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1996), 158; Isaksson, *Studies in the Language of Qoheleth*, 177; James L. Crenshaw, *Theodicy in the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 157; Pahk, *Il canto della gioia in Dio*, 121; Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 644.

²⁹⁷ Schoors makes use of Schellenberg's translation (cf. *Erkenntnis als Problem*, 131-135), but criticizes her interpretation. See the review of Schellenberg's book: Antoon Schoors, “Erkenntnis als Problem. Qohelet und die alttestamentliche Diskussion um das menschliche Erkennen (OBO 188) by Annette Schellenberg,” *Bib 85* (2004): 278-81.

cannot always put words to the experience of joy, but it provokes a deep reverence and gratitude. For this reason, Qoh 8:17 does not contradict the conclusions reached in 5:19 about the experience of joy and God's manner of revealing Godself, but instead seems to follow in its stead. The human being cannot discover the work of God by means of one's own task or initiative, it is gift and therefore, there remains a dimension of God's which will always be a mystery to the human being.

Nevertheless, we might also say that there is a bit of cross-over in these verses between human work and God's work. While some scholars consider that Qoheleth here equates the work of God with the work that is done under the sun,²⁹⁸ others do not think they coincide.²⁹⁹ Being so close together, one may easily assume that they are the same "work," however, Qoheleth does not state this clearly. While "all the work of God" may be included within "the work that is done under the sun," it is not necessarily limited to this, and in addition, "the work done under the sun" may also include human work. Therefore, the boundary between human work and the work of God that is done under the sun is blurred.

The desire to know wisdom and see the task done on earth is characteristic of the human being's search. The human being yearns to see and understand and is often even willing to give up sleep in order to reach this knowledge. However, no matter how much effort one exerts, the human being cannot find out the work that is done under the sun, even if he is conceded the ability to see "all of the work of God." While there is something that the human being can "see," there is something more that s/he is unable to comprehend. As we have noted in the previous chapter, the human being's work may be understood as part of God's work of creation and hence the human being is a co-creator. Nevertheless, even this collaboration is not fully comprehensible to the human being. In fact, the human work may be seen in opposition to God's work as he stubbornly pursues the task of acquiring a knowledge too great for him.

Qoheleth emphasizes the human search for knowledge but, especially in the second half of the book, Qoheleth underscores the limits to human knowledge. In chapter VI of this thesis, we will see how in the surrounding context of the joy texts from 8:15 onwards, Qoheleth replaces the programmatic questions with a different sort of statement: our sage admits that we cannot know God's work. There is a limit to our knowledge. In addition, the word עֵינַי which

²⁹⁸ Whybray, "Qoheleth, Preacher of Joy," 139; C. D. Ginsburg, *Qoheleth, commonly called the Book of Ecclesiastes: translated from the original Hebrew, with a commentary, historical and critical* (London: Longman & Co., 1861), 408; Braun, *Kohelet und die fruhhellenistische Popular-philosophie*, 68; Friedrich Ellermeier, *Qohelet: Untersuchungen zum Buche Qohelet* (Jungfer: Herzberg, 1967), 299-303; Fox, *Qohelet and his Contradictions*, 255; Hans Wilhelm Hertzberg and Hans Bardtke, *Der Prediger. Das Buch Esther* (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1963), 175.

²⁹⁹ Annette Schellenberg, *Erkenntnis als Problem. Qohelet und die alttestamentliche Diskussion um das menschliche Erkennen* (Freiburg: Freiburg Universität Verlag, 2002), 134; Aalders, *Het Boek De Prediker*; Loader, *Ecclesiastes*.

refers to the human endeavor for knowledge also ceases to appear after 8:16.³⁰⁰ Therefore, the very fact that Qoheleth reiterates this point of the human inability to find out the work done under the sun prepares us for the discussion about the one fate for all and the final end being death. In fact, the wisdom gained by contemplating God's work under the sun is the realization that one cannot find out. It is a recognition and surrender to one's limitations. Perhaps then, Qoheleth has given up on asking his repeated question of meaning: "what advantage does the human being have in all his work under the sun" (1:3) because he has now reached a place of acceptance and surrender. There is an aspect of mystery in our lives that cannot be fully understood or explained by our limited reason. That is why, "even though the human being may toil in searching, s/he will not discover; and even if the wise person should claim to know, s/he cannot find it out." (8:17)

V. QOHELETH 9:1–12

We now begin 9:1–12, a new unit in which Qoheleth will speak of four important themes: the lack of retribution for the righteous and wicked, death, the limitations of wisdom, and our sixth joy text. The inevitable reality of death at the end of human life and the vagueness about everything related to what comes afterwards does not stop Qoheleth from continuing to search and question, and in these verses to come he will put his faith in the justice and goodness of God to the test. Before studying the individual sections vv. 1–6, vv.7–10, and vv. 11–12, we will first take a brief look at 9:1–12 as a whole, in order to understand how these different themes interweave with each other in this section. This will offer some insight into our analysis of the relationship between joy, time, God, and other important themes such as death and God's justice at the conclusion of this chapter.

The following is a chiasmic structure largely based on the one offered by Wright for this section of the book:³⁰¹

³⁰⁰ Schellenberg, "Qoheleth's Use of the Word ענין", 153.

³⁰¹ Addison G. Wright, "Ecclesiastes 9:1-12: An Emphatic Statement of Themes," *CBQ* 77 (2015): 250-62.

A v.1 **No one knows** the future

B vv. 2–3 *one fate* happens to all (5 pairs of opposites)

C vv. 4–6 Life is better than death

vv. 4–5a life, with one fate for all is better than death

vv. 5b–6 seven negative statements about the dead

C' vv. 7–10 Life is better than death

what the living should do; seven commands to enjoy

B' v.11 *time and chance* happen to all (5 categories of wise and talented)

A' v.12 **No one knows** his time

The themes in the center of the chiasm, C and C' are enjoyment and death. Here joy is related to the theme of death, a central theme of the book and described in detail in this section of Qoheleth. The bookends of this chiasm, vv.1 and 12, highlight the general human ignorance of the future. “No one knows” the future, the “evil time” [לעת רעה] that may suddenly come upon human beings, like fish or birds who are caught, no one controls time. This further encases the discussion of the one fate that applies to all (vv.2–3; v.11), whether righteous or not, or wise and talented. One cannot control or in any way seek out or avoid the fate that one is to receive, since it is something completely out of human hands.

V.1. QOHELETH 9:1–6 THERE IS ONE FATE FOR ALL

- | | | |
|---|---|--|
| 1 | כי את־כל־זוה נתתי אל־לבי ולבור את־כל־זוה אשר הצדיקים והחכמים ועבדיהם ביד האלהים גם־אהבה גם־שנאה אין יודע האדם הכל לפניהם: | All this I have kept in my heart and all this I examined: the righteous, the wise, and their deeds are in the hand of God. Also love and hatred, the human being does not know. All is before them. ³⁰² |
| 2 | הכל כאשר לכל מקרה אחד לצדיק ולרשע לטוב ולטהור ולטמא ולזבח | Everything is the same for everybody: the same fate for the just and the wicked, for the good (and the evil), ³⁰³ for the clean and the unclean, for the one who |

³⁰² I have chosen to translate לפניהם as “before them” which expresses temporally and spatially the possibilities that the future holds. In the temporal meaning, one cannot tell ahead of time what the outcome of anything will be, since it would all depend on God’s will. In the spatial meaning, Qoheleth would be saying that people do not always recognize everything that they see. That is, God’s judgement may turn out to be radically different from what one perceives in the present. Both possibilities, in fact, quite accurately concord with Qoheleth’s way of thinking.

³⁰³ All the ancient versions, with the exception of the Targum, add the phrase “and the bad”: καὶ τῶ κακῶ. One may either take the MT as it is, admit the hypothesis of dittography, or restore the omission of the second term as the ancient versions have, which is what we have done.

- ולאשר איננו זבח כטוב כחטא הנשבע
כאשר שבועה ירא:
- 3 זהו רע בכל אשר-נעשה תחת השמש
כי-מקרה אחד לכל וגם לב בני-האדם
מלא-רע והוללות בלבבם בחייהם
ואחריו אל-המתים:
- 4 כי-מי אשר יבחר אל כל-החיים יש
בטחון כי-לכלב חי הוא טוב מן-האריה
המת:
- 5 כי החיים יודעים שימתו והמתים אינם
יודעים מאומה ואין-עוד להם שכר כי
נשכח זכרם:
- 6 גם אהבתם גם-שנאתם גם-קנאתם כבר
אבדה וחלק איז-להם עוד לעולם בכל
אשר-נעשה תחת השמש:
- offers sacrifice and the one who does not. As it is for the good, so it is for the sinner; as it is for the one who takes an oath, so it is for the one who fears an oath.
- Among all the things that are done under the sun, this is the worst, that there is one fate for all. Hence the hearts of human beings are filled with evil, and madness is in their hearts during life; and afterward-- to the dead!
- For whoever is chosen among all the living has hope: "A live dog is better off than a dead lion."
- For the living know that they are to die, but the dead no longer know anything. There is no further recompense for them, because all memory of them is lost.
- For them, love and hatred and rivalry have long since perished. Never again will they have part in anything that is done under the sun.

This pericope maintains a certain unity because of the consistency of the topic, but also because of the clear inclusion with the words love and hate; in 9:1 we have *גם-אהבה גם-שנאה* and in 9:6 with the 3ms suffix *גם אהבתם גם-שנאתם*. This word pair, love–hate, has already appeared in Qoh 3:8, closing the poem on time: “a time to love, a time to hate...” As the times listed in Qoh 3:2–8 are all times referring to human events and actions, this may give us a clue for the interpretation of Qoh 9:1 and 6.

V.1.1. QOHELETH 9:1

From the start, Qoheleth notes that God holds the just, the wise and their deeds in his hand, *ביד האלהים*. This expression gives the impression that God is involved in human life, as opposed to the typical image of a distant and indifferent God, and scholars have drawn diverse interpretations from it. Eaton, for example takes *ביד* to mean “in the care of.”³⁰⁴ However, Schoors regards it as similar to “from the hand of God” *מיד האלהים* in 2:24, which according to him denotes “divine predestination.”³⁰⁵ He argues that since Qoheleth never speaks of a proximate God, then this expression cannot mean that God protects them, referring to 5:1 “God

³⁰⁴ Cf. Prov. 21:1; Job 12:6, 10. Michael A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes: an Introduction and Commentary* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1983), 124-5.

³⁰⁵ Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 655.

is in heaven, and you are upon earth.”³⁰⁶ I would oppose this view, however, since we have just noted above when speaking of 8:16–17 how God is shown to give the human being joy and life, while in 2:24 and in numerous other occasions throughout Qoheleth they come from God’s hands. In a completely different sense, D. Michel argues that this expression affirms Qoheleth’s belief in the afterlife.³⁰⁷ Although Schwienhorst-Schönberger does not explicitly state the idea of existence after death, he does not necessarily exclude it.³⁰⁸ He admits that it is typical of Qoheleth in his mysterious fashion to be ambiguous, and instead asserts that what Qoheleth does not represent is the doctrine of absolute death.³⁰⁹ Schwienhorst asks, what is absolute death really about?³¹⁰ The tradition of the Hebrew Bible has always believed in forms of survival beyond death, through one’s name, through one’s descendants, and even Sheol is a place of diminished existence not of total annihilation.³¹¹ Nevertheless, the message that Qoheleth wants to communicate is that we must take death seriously, as a closing final moment of earthly existence.

Qoh 9:1 is a *crux interpretum*.³¹² Some scholars think v. 1 refers to God, and therefore that the human being does not know if God welcomes or refuses love or hate, but this would mean admitting that “it is the divine psychology that is obscure.”³¹³ However, the repetition of “love” and “hate” may mean that Qoheleth is referring to the spiritual activity of the human being and therefore the translation should be: “the human being does not know what love or hate are,” in other words, s/he does not know his own emotions and passions.³¹⁴ Given the fact that love and hate are amongst the list of human actions and emotions in Qoh 3, it would follow that they also point to the human being here in Qoh 9. By stating that the actions of human beings are “in the hand of God,” Qoheleth is saying that no matter what people choose and act

³⁰⁶ Antoon Schoors, "Kohleth: A Perspective of Life after Death?," *ETL* 61, no. 4 (1985): 295-303, 297.

³⁰⁷ Michel argues that there are linguistic and thematic links between Qoheleth 9:1 and Wisdom 3:1–3 which consequently sheds further light on the meaning of Qoheleth 9:1. Diethelm and Lehmann, *Untersuchungen zur Eigenart des Buches Qohelet*, 177-178, 180. This interpretation is also defended by Seizo Sekine, "Qohelet als Nihilist," *AJBI* 17 (1991): 17-18. However, we must point out that the text of Wisdom 3 is 250 years later and is written in Greek.

³⁰⁸ Ludger Schwienhorst-Schönberger, "Vertritt Kohélet die Lehre vom absoluten Tod?," in *Auf den Spuren der schriftgelehrten Weisen: Festschrift für Johannes Marböck anlässlich seiner Emeritierung* (ed. I. Fischer, et al.; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2003), 207-19, 209.

³⁰⁹ "Es ist das grosse Verdienst von Thomas Krüger, das Thema Mehrdeutigkeit und Sinnoffenheit in die Exegese des Kohéletbuches eingebracht zu haben." Schwienhorst-Schönberger, "Vertritt Kohélet die Lehre vom absoluten Tod?," 209.

³¹⁰ Schwienhorst-Schönberger, "Vertritt Kohélet die Lehre vom absoluten Tod?," 217.

³¹¹ However, it is erroneous to consider the “non-life” of *sheol* as some kind of afterlife. Roland E. Murphy, "Death and Afterlife in the Wisdom Literature," in *Judaism in Late Antiquity. Death, Life-after-death, Resurrection and the World-to-Come in the Judaism of Antiquity* (ed. A.J. Avery-Peck and J. Neusner; vol. Part 4; Leiden: Brill, 2001), 102-16, 109.

³¹² Pahk, *Il canto della gioia in Dio*, 142-153.

³¹³ Fox, *Qohelet and his Contradictions*, 257.

³¹⁴ Mazzinghi, *Ho cercato*, 202.

on, they are sustained and upheld by God. In the same way, we saw that all the times of the human being enlisted in Qoh 3 are opportunities, occasions and moments which God provides, but which the person must ultimately choose (except for birth and death). It follows, therefore, that the human being does not know, because regardless of the endless choices before him, s/he is incapable of fully understanding the work of God which has been done under the sun (8:17). Finally, the verse ends with the phrase that states: “all is before them.” This may very well mean that everything is yet to come and is in the future, again unbeknownst to the human being. This same idea closes this section in v. 12 where Qoheleth says that the human being does not know “his time” [עתו], a time in which human beings may unexpectedly be ensnared like fish or birds who are trapped. The focus lies on the limitations of human knowledge. The presence and repetition of the love-hate pair is significant, and it points to the likelihood that Qoh 9:1–6 holds some relation to Qoh 3:8, since it is the only other place in the book with this pair. Consequently, we may link 9:1–6 to the entire poem on time. Its location in the poem is also significant as it is in the final and climactic verse, which as we noted in chapter II, differs from the rest in that the four actions are positioned in a chiasmic structure. Hence, the times for love-hate and war-peace bring all times to their fulfillment and closure. Just as all times and events are possible and open for all people equally, there is one and the same fate which is for all in 9:1–6.

V.1.2. QOHELETH 9:2

In v. 2 Qoheleth affirms, “Everything is the same for everyone” and explains that no retribution exists in the moral order, by using five antithetical pairs belonging to the religious-ethical sphere. To begin, we have the traditional categories of the “just” and the “wicked” which are repeated throughout wisdom literature. This opens the way for the subsequent pairs. The “clean” and the “unclean” refer to those who scrupulously follow the legal purity code in relation to cult and those who do not. Connected to these are those who offer sacrifices in the Temple and those who do not. Then we return to the basic moral categories of the “good” and the “sinner.” Finally, the last pair puts together the terms “one who makes an oath” and “one who hesitates to make an oath.”³¹⁵ Taking an oath was a serious matter since not keeping it would traditionally provoke God’s wrath and punishment. Qoheleth seems to be of this opinion when in 5:1–5 he makes a similar statement using the word נדר “vow.” In the Hebrew Scriptures, a vow is a promise made to God on the condition that God should first fulfill the worshiper’s request, and it should not be confused with biblical oaths, nevertheless we cannot deny

³¹⁵ In this last case, most scholars seem to be of the opinion that the first is negative and the second positive, therefore inverting the usual order, positive – negative. However, the root שבע “to swear,” “to make an oath” has to do with “the assurance that one would faithfully keep his or her word.” T.W. Cartledge, “שבע,” in *NIDOTTE*, 4:32.

some relation. Therefore, one who dares to make an oath is one who intends to keep his/her word, one who, in the end, reveres God.

As he does so elsewhere, Qoheleth questions the act-consequence scheme by means of his observations, and here in 9:2 he does so by stating, “It is the same for all.” Whatever one does, whatever way one chooses to take, there is one fate for the righteous, the wicked, the good, the clean and unclean. Though many exegetes understand *מִקְרָה* to refer to “inevitable death” here and elsewhere in Qoheleth, the word is a neutral term elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible meaning the good and bad coincidences of life, not excluding death.³¹⁶ Therefore, according to its context “one fate” in v. 2 does not refer to death exclusively but may also point to the events of one’s lifetime. There is simply no formula that allows people to determine the consequences of their works, nor rules that will guarantee a certain desired result, because what seems to be good to humans may be regarded as bad in the eyes of God and vice versa.³¹⁷ In the end, all people are brought before the one ultimate judge, God, and the one fate is eventually death.³¹⁸ Qoheleth’s conclusion is that ethical considerations have nothing to do with the way things turn out for human beings. The common element between the just, the clean, the one who offers sacrifice, the good, and the one who makes an oath are that traditionally they would merit God’s blessing typically seen through material prosperity, whereas the second of each pair: the wicked, the unclean, the one who doesn’t offer sacrifice, the sinner, and the one who does not make an oath, should expect failure and curse in life as a consequence. Clearly, Qoheleth opposes the dominant current of his time and of the wisdom tradition which believed in these standard criteria.

³¹⁶ For Qoheleth, *מִקְרָה* is “a type of occurrence befalling humans that is beyond their control and understanding, or as a characteristic of humans and animals that marks their activities.” Peter Bruce Machinist, “Fate, *miqreh*, and Reason: Some Reflections on Qohelet and Biblical Thought,” in *Solving Riddles and Untying Knots: Biblical, Epigraphic, and Semitic Studies in Honor of Jonas C. Greenfield* (ed. Z. Zevit, et al.; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 159-75, 170.

³¹⁷ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 303.

³¹⁸ Machinist defends that Qoheleth uses the term *מִקְרָה* not just to denote any unforeseen and uncontrolled occurrence, but exclusively with death, and hence “death becomes, then, the predetermined defining point of an abstract notion: *miqreh* as the pattern of time that each individual lives out.” Machinist, “Fate, *miqreh*, and Reason: Some Reflections on Qohelet and Biblical Thought,” 170; However, according to Wright, in this text the term *מִקְרָה* “clearly means not death but rather what happens during life to the righteous and the wicked.” Wright, “Ecclesiastes 9:1-12,” 253.

V.1.3. QOHELETH 9:3

While repeating the same conclusion, v. 3 goes a step further than v. 2 by saying that the one fate for all human beings is something evil, and “afterwards they go to the dead.” Some scholars interpret v. 3b to be a moralizing explanation of human sinfulness and the reason for human mortality. However, I would argue that Qoheleth is not moralizing, but is simply recognizing facts; just as in 8:11 he had already noted that the failure to execute justice moves people to do evil.³¹⁹ “The reference to evil in the human mind is reminiscent of the reason given for the destruction of the world by the great deluge (Gen 6:5). Destruction would have been total had it not been for the righteousness of one good person, Noah.”³²⁰ Qoheleth repeats this reference to evil in humanity by stating, “all human beings are full of evil and foolishness is in their hearts while they are living.” However, Qoheleth challenges tradition since righteousness makes no difference whatsoever in humanity’s efforts to avert the fate of death. Death is the end that will come to all, regardless of whether they are righteous or unrighteous. No one is spared this judgment, and all face the same fate. There are other instances throughout the book where Qoheleth mentions the “one fate” such as Qoh 2:14 where both the wise and the fool have one fate *מקרה אחד*, as well as humans and animals in Qoh 3:19. The conclusion of 9:3 is that after the time of life, human beings “go to the dead.”

V.1.4. QOHELETH 9:4–6

The belief in the afterlife is further elucidated by the confrontation between life-death in vv. 4–6 where we repeatedly see the opposite adjectives *חַי* and *מֵת* which dominate the problem of life and death exposed in v. 3. As opposed to the dead, the living are said to have “trust” *בַּטְחוֹן* a word also understood to mean “hope.” Interestingly, the substantive belongs to the same root *בִּטַח* that means “security” or “certitude.” Lohfink suggests that this word points towards “the possibility which humans enjoy only before death, to lead one’s life in an attitude of trust.”³²¹ Trust and consequently hope, are fundamental reasons to want to continue living. Hope offers an open horizon, and provides a light that illumines that human horizon, a force that irresistibly attracts to a future full of promises – a very powerful impulse towards an uncertain but promising future. Either as trust or hope, this word implies something to come in the future, and nevertheless an element absent to one who is dead. The only knowledge that the living can truly possess is the certainty that they will die (v. 5) whereas the dead can know absolutely nothing and there is no reward for them. “To know that we will die is the achievement that, above all, the book of Qoheleth desires for its readers. That is the way that leads to

³¹⁹ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 91.

³²⁰ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 304.

³²¹ Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 112.

the highest grade of insight possible to humans, which places us before mystery, and holds us in mystery. The value of such human knowledge is to be fully grasped only when profiled against what death brings: the annihilation of consciousness.”³²² In addition, to know that one must die is to situate oneself before a mystery. This is the mystery of time and its ephemeral nature. To be aware that we will die is to recognize that our time is running out, it is in a constant movement towards a terminal point. “Only a life lived with the perspective of death acquires all of its seriousness and only the thought of death can give consistency to the invitation to joy.”³²³ The awareness of death is not more valuable than the awareness of time, instead, the recognition that we will die heightens our sensitivity to the here and now. In Rindge’s words: “Qoheleth insists that reflection on death’s inevitability is a sine qua non for living meaningfully.”³²⁴ One who is fully aware of the brevity of life, does not waste time, but learns to live in a quality of time containing the implicit dimension of עולם.

Qoh 9:6 strongly emphasizes the destruction and end that come with death. Love, hate, and rivalry are already destroyed כבר אבדה, and “never again” עוד לעולם will the dead take part in the earthly realm. “Never again will they [the dead] have part in anything that is done under the sun.” In this context, the word עולם is used to emphasize the exclusion of those who “forever” leave the realm of the living. A clear break is intended between this life and that which takes place when one dies. The vocabulary used serves to accentuate the fact that death brings a definitive end. It is interesting that Qoheleth uses the word עולם precisely in this context. They will “never again” have part in the earthly realm. Again, Qoheleth does not mention whether they continue to exist in some other realm and this is not the focus of the message he wants to transmit.

As we saw earlier, the nouns love and hate also appear in the poem on time in Qoh 3:2–8, referring to the times of human events and actions. Therefore, it follows that in 9:1 and here in 9:6 love and hate also refer to human events. The presence of the word עולם in 9:6 is another common factor linking the poem on time and its theological commentary 3:10–15 to this section at the start of Qoh 9. Qoheleth 9 reiterates that as human deeds are in the hands of God, so too are love and hatred, and therefore all the times that make up human existence. All times are the same for all, regardless of whether they are good or evil, and hence there is one fate. All these times will end with inevitable death, which brings human existence to a close.

It is interesting to note that in 1:10, 2:16, and 9:6, עולם is used in proximity to the word כבר meaning “already,” “long ago.” In 1:10 and 9:6, the word is found in the very same verse as עולם, emphasizing the meaning as something that has forever existed from the past. In 1:10 we are at the very conclusion of the opening poem on the cyclical nature of creation emphasizing the “eternal return,” the repetition of all realities and processes which exist under the sun.

³²² Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 112.

³²³ Bonora, *Qohelet: la gioia e la fatica di vivere*, 176.

³²⁴ Rindge, “Mortality and Enjoyment,” 275.

In our limited human awareness, though something may seem new to us and we may feel inclined to acclaim its novelty, Qoheleth affirms that it “has already existed in the ages that preceded us.” It is here where God puts the human being in his place, amid the great and magnificent creation. This reminds us of the way that God responds to Job by showing him the grandeur and infinitude of all creation. Qoheleth 2:16 reminds us to the same topic that we have been grappling with in these first verses of chapter 9, namely the same fate of death to both the fool and the wise person. The word עולם is used to modify “remembrance” and hence, Qoheleth states that “there is no enduring remembrance” for the wise and the fool, as both will die. Finally, 9:6 again points out the dimension of עולם that in this case is made equivalent to the reality of death. The dead will never again taste life, therefore, seize the day, and live your life before death comes upon you!

V.2. QOHELETH 9:7–10 KNOWING THAT THE END IS DEATH – LIVE JOYFULLY!

- | | | |
|----|--|---|
| 7 | לך אכל בשמחה לחמך ושתה בלב־טוב יינד כי
כבר רצה האלהים את־מעשיך: | Go <i>then</i> , eat your bread in happiness and drink your wine with a joyous heart; for God has already approved your works |
| 8 | בכל־עת יהיו בגדיך לבנים ושמן על־ראשך אל־
יחסר: | Let your clothes be white all the time and let not oil be lacking on your head. |
| 9 | ראה חיים עם־אשה אשר־אהבת כל־ימי חיי הבלך
אשר נתן־לך תחת השמש כל ימי הבלך כי הוא
חלקך בחיים ובעמלך אשר־אתה עמל תחת
השמש: | Enjoy life with the woman whom you love all the days of your fleeting life which He has given to you under the sun; ³²⁵ all your fleeting days, ³²⁶ for this is your reward in life and in your work in which you have labored under the sun. |
| 10 | כל אשר תמצא ידך לעשות בכחך עשה כי אין
מעשה וחשבון ודעת וחכמה בשאול אשר אתה
הלך שמה: ס | Whatever your hand finds to do, do <i>it</i> with <i>all</i> your might; for there is no activity or planning or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol where you are going. |

³²⁵ Many manuscripts and the Syriac version lack the expression “אשר נתן־לך תחת השמש כל ימי הבלך.” This phrase is probably a homeoteleuton of a copyist.

³²⁶ Many scholars see in this phrase a dittography, however it is not a pure repetition and Qoheleth often uses repetition, which is why I have chosen to translate the MT.

V.2.1. QOHELETH 9:7

Aware of the limited nature of human life and the unavoidable end that all people will encounter, Qoheleth makes a series of exhortations to the living in the sixth joy text, Qoh 9:7–10. A more positive tone immediately follows the seemingly negative series of affirmations about death and its definitive closure to our existence in the previous verses. Time within the realm of life is the only “time” we possess and in the midst of death’s reality we find one of Qoheleth’s repeated odes to joy: “Go, eat your bread with joy and drink your wine with a joyous heart, because it is now that God favors your works.” This is the first time Qoheleth uses an imperative לך to climactically begin the command to enjoy. The roots הלך and עשה frame this joy text. Verse 7 begins with the imperative of הלך and ends with the word מעשיך meaning “your works.” Verse 10 uses the imperative of עשה and concludes with the participle הלך, remarking that one’s final destination is death. It is noteworthy that both roots belong to the semantic field of creation and salvation. Both עשה and הלך are key in the Pentateuch. First, עשה is the verb denoting creation, and in the negative sense, when speaking about what the human being does or makes, it indicates idolatry when the human being pretends to be god and fashions his idols – his replacements for God. On the other hand, הלך is the verb which denotes the people of Israel walking and journeying in the desert, an essential part of the history of salvation. Hence, the use of these two verbs here in the context of Qoh 9 remits us to God’s work of both creation and salvation and therefore, human participation in God’s work of creation and salvation. This is particularly telling after vv. 3–6 which introduced the discourse on death. In contrast, however, this joy text focuses on the origin of life and that which gives life back to the human being: namely creation and salvation. These two events give and restore life, in complete opposition to death. The affirmation in v.7, “God has already approved of your actions,” places the human being in a very important role with regards to the command to live the experience of joy, and to some extent we can say that the human being has been redeemed.

Immediately after the reality of death expounded in vv. 1–6, we have the promise of new beginning, new creation and life, and ultimately a renewed possibility of joy. The sense behind these verses and specifically the parallel use of these roots עשה and הלך draw attention to the human being’s participation in creation by means of action or “making” or “doing” with one’s hands. In addition, the human being is set into motion in this joy text with the imperative “go!” which is synonymous with “live!” The dynamic life motion is carried throughout the joy text and culminates with the final word of verse 10, the participle “going.” The destination is Sheol, the end of one’s life and one’s time. The theme of work, which is central throughout the entire book of Qoheleth, is especially related to the theme of enjoyment in Qoheleth as we saw in section VII “Understanding Work in its Relationship with Joy” of chapter II and is here accentuated within this joy text by the triple use of the root עשה. In this penultimate text on joy, it appears that our sage is directing us to “go enjoy our work” before our time runs out and we reach the end of our journey at death and Sheol. In these final verses, “Qoheleth repeats as

additional reasons what he has already adduced elsewhere: the certainty and finality of death and the fact that toil is not a burden if one adopts the right attitude towards it.”³²⁷

In addition, this joy text is also more elaborate than the previous joy texts adding new elements. The verb “to eat” is complemented with the direct object “your bread” and the adverbial phrase “in happiness,” while the verb “to drink” is followed by the direct object “your wine” and the adverbial phrase “with a joyous heart.” The elements of bread and wine often occurring together in the rest of the Hebrew Scripture are symbolic of the good life and “may represent not only physical sustenance but also nourishment of the mind that cultivates understanding and fortitude of character.”³²⁸ Joy is additionally characterized by putting on white garments. This symbolic use of white garments is found only here in the Hebrew bible, but is more widely attested in rabbinic literature where those celebrating the Passover “rejoice with clean clothes and old wine.”³²⁹ In addition, anointing with oil is a common sign of joy and well-being in the Hebrew Scriptures.³³⁰ Finally, there is the commendation to enjoy life “with the woman one loves.”³³¹

As in the other texts on joy, God is mentioned but this time instead of saying that God is the giver of joy or time, God is the subject of the verb רצה, which means “to be pleased with” or “to be favorable to.” In the Hebrew Scriptures, this verb is often used to indicate divine pleasure in sacrifices,³³² or the sacrifices themselves,³³³ or divine compensation for different reasons.³³⁴ However, in the context of Qoheleth’s continuous rejection of the act-consequence scheme, whereby he denies any connection between human deed and divine reaction, in this verse, this verb can only refer to divine generosity.³³⁵

The second part of this verse “God has already approved your works,” may seem to be contradictory to what we have just heard in v. 3b, namely, that “the hearts of human beings are filled with evil, and madness is in their hearts during life.” Can God be pleased with the works

³²⁷ Whybray, “Qoheleth, Preacher of Joy,” 91.

³²⁸ Cf. Proverbs 9:5–6; Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment*, 63.

³²⁹ b. Pesahim 71a.

³³⁰ Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 671; Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment*, 64.

³³¹ “El detalle de *los vestidos blancos y del perfume en la cabeza* pertenece a este elevado nivel de cultura en el ambiente determinado de Palestina. El disfrute de la vida *con la mujer que amas* no tiene fronteras ni en el orden social ni en el nivel de cultura alto o bajo; es simplemente humano.” Vélchez Línchez, *Ecclesiastes*, 361. This passage is also often seen in confrontation with other literary sources of the Ancient Near East, particularly the Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh, object of Pakh, *Il canto della gioia in Dio* and the Egyptian *Song of the Harper*.

³³² 2 Sam 24:23; Jer 14:10; Ezek 20:40–41; 43:27.

³³³ Deut 33:11; Jer 14:12; Am 5:22; Mal 1:10.13; Ps 51:18; 119:108.

³³⁴ Ps 40:14 “for liberation;” Ps 85:2 “to the earth;” Prov 3:12: “to the child;” Prov 16:7 “to the human conduct;” 1 Chron 29:17: “to righteousness.”

³³⁵ Cf. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 92.

of someone who has evil and madness in their heart? Why not? Does this not merely concede that God knows and understands human nature, accepting that no person is perfect? This in fact may remind us of what Qoheleth has stated in 7:15–18, “I have seen all manner of things in my *hebel* days: the just perishing in their justice, and the wicked living long in their wickedness. Be not just to excess and be not over-wise.” Qoheleth here refers to the two themes that surface repeatedly: wisdom and justice and notes that any extreme is to be avoided. With regards to justice, only God can be just and with regards to being over-wise, Qoheleth is most probably referring to the traditional understanding of wisdom as one who seemingly knows, controls and comprehends almost without limits. However, God knows human nature, and Qoheleth concedes that human beings are limited and imperfect. Therefore, there is no reason why God should not approve of the toil and work done upon this earth or at least that done by the reader of Qoheleth by this point of the book.

Another issue with this part of v.7c is the word כִּבֵּר, which means “already” or “from eternity.” As in the other places where this word comes up in Qoheleth, it has a temporal sense and cannot therefore adopt other meanings such as “on the contrary” or “perhaps” which follows the Aramean.³³⁶ To say that God takes pleasure in human work regardless of their behavior would imply that the share of happiness has already been determined beforehand, which is why some exegetes speak of determinism. I, however, would not take it that far and think that Qoheleth is speaking to those who have been the recipients of his exhortations to joy. He is affirming that the gift of joy is something God wants to give to the human being. He here states explicitly that it is independent of our moral behavior. This thought has gradually developed throughout the joy texts. In 2:26 God gives joy amongst other things to “a person who is good in his sight” while to the sinner he gives the task of gathering and collecting. In both the second and third joy texts, 3:13 and 5:18 joy is said to be a “gift of God.” The very word “gift” signifies something given willingly without the expectation of payment or compensation, yet nevertheless, it can still be something conditional on behavior and hence be likened to a reward. The joy text in 8:15 seems to follow directly after a blatant acknowledgement of the reality which denies the traditional idea of a retributive God, which would indirectly communicate that the gift of joy can be given to someone undeserving. Finally, in the current joy text 9:7–10 Qoheleth explicitly affirms that joy is a gift expecting no behavioral compensation in return.

V.2.2. QOHELETH 9:8

These verses are filled with words and allusions to time and the fleeting nature of life, as for example v. 8 begins with the words “at all times” בְּכָל־עֵת. Schoors raises an interesting point when he asks whether this opening formula can be understood as “a simple temporal

³³⁶ Frank Zimmermann, *The Inner World of Qohelet* (New York: Ktav, 1973), 155.

adjunct, meaning “always” or does *תע* refer to the proper time, here too?”³³⁷ Since God has already approved human actions in v. 7b, this occasion would be the equivalent of “God’s gift” in the other joy texts and therefore, it is God who once again provides the opportunities for joy in these verses and the human being should seize them. This also implies that nobody can *always* be enjoying.

...dass der Mensch zu jeder Zeit bereit sein soll, dass von Gott zuvor gebilligte und geschenkte Glück zu geniessen und es nicht zu verpassen. Bedenkt man, dass die glückliche Stunde als solche zu den von Gott determinierten Zeiten gehört, wird deutlich, dass Kohelet mit dieser Textergänzung seine Schüler dazu auffordern wollte, die Gabe der Freude anzunehmen, wann immer sie Gott ihnen gewährt.³³⁸

V.2.3. QOHELETH 9:9

In v. 9 the word *יום* is used to express the temporality of life, as is also the case in Qoh 2:3; 5:17; 5:19; 6:12; and 7:15. In five of these six verses the word “day” *יום* is in construct with “life” *חי*, thereby expressing the “days of one’s life” or the time of one’s existence. It would seem here that time is synonymous with life. After all, one can only experience time while one is alive, since with death comes the cessation of time as we can experience it. The only exception is 7:15 where the word “life” is not used in construct with *יום* but “the time of life” is understood just the same. Interestingly, in Qoh 2:3; 5:17 and 6:12 the adjective *מספר* is used to modify “days” whereas in Qoh 6:12, 7:15 and 9:9 the word *הבל* is used as an adjective to describe life. The expression used in v.9 is, “the days of your *hebel* life.” If we accept a neutral meaning for *הבל* in this case, such as breath, then the translation could be something like: “the days of your breath-filled life!” This wording emphasizes the fact that life is passing like a breath. The fact that it passes is not necessarily a negative thing, instead this temporality of life is a reality that we must learn to accept. Schoors agrees by stating that “in 9:9, the meaning of *hebel* seems to be ‘short duration, ephemerality, transitoriness.’ This is particularly suitable, since the transitoriness of life adds to the urgency of the admonition to enjoy what one has and to do what one can.”³³⁹ “...la véritable et ultime raison pour laquelle on doit jouir de la vie vient du fait que tôt ou tard arrivera la mort, là où il n’y a plus rien de tout ce qui se fait sous le soleil.”³⁴⁰ In other words, life is nothing more than a journey towards death. Death, in turn, is the motor that leads Qoheleth to promote enjoyment and celebration. “Meaningful liv-

³³⁷ Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 671.

³³⁸ Alexander A. Fischer, *Skepsis oder Furcht Gottes? Studien zur Komposition und Theologie des Buches Kohelet* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1997), 143-4.

³³⁹ Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 674.

³⁴⁰ Jean-Jacques Lavoie, "Bonheur et finitude humaine. Étude de Qo 9,7-10," *ScEs* 45, no. 3 (1993): 313-24, 317.

ing...is made possible by a willingness to face one's own mortality. Qoheleth insists that reflection on death's inevitability is a *sine qua non* for living meaningfully."³⁴¹ The indirect mention of death, by means of the temporality of life in this verse connects smoothly with our previous joy text in 5:17–19 where we also saw two indirect references to death in vv. 17 and 19 when Qoheleth spoke of the “days of his lifetime.” Therefore, this joy text in 9:7–9 connects with Qoh 5:17 – 19 by means of these references to joy and the indirect mention of death.

V.2.4. QOHELETH 9:10

At the conclusion of this invitation to enjoyment in v. 10, Qoheleth makes the final positive exhortation: “Whatever your hand finds to do, do *it* with *all* your might.” This is a call to action while one is able, while one is alive. It is as well a call to work, to participate in God's creation with all of one's effort and strength, especially because after death, there is only death and there will be no more possibility for the human being to take action. The fact that one can work “with might” is perhaps the strongest affirmation that one is alive, the greatest good of the human being and the condition for enjoyment and happiness.³⁴² The element of finality is accentuated and the reasoning given is that “there is no activity or planning or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol where you are going.” In Qoh 9, as was also the case in Qoh 5, “the specter of death's inevitability functions as the rhetorical warrant for Qoheleth's admonition to enjoy oneself.”³⁴³ After death, the only certainty that we are offered is Sheol as our destination, and there is nothing to be found there. So, it is either now or never.

This fifth joy text demonstrates, once more, the integration of the themes of time and joy, or more specifically death and joy. While in Qoh 2:24–26, 3:12–13 and 5:17–19 the joy texts describe Qoheleth's observations, namely what he has seen to be good, in addition to the affirmation that joy and life come from God's hand and are gifts from God, now we find ourselves in another moment of the book and a very different context. Qoheleth 9:1–6 speaks of the inevitability of death and the one fate for all. Apart from the short discussion in Qoh 3:18–22, Qoheleth here confronts us more directly and explicitly with death. Time is running out and moving towards the reality of death, and hence the emphasis on joy grows. This undoubtedly colors the text and the call to enjoy. In fact, while Qoheleth is exhorting the listener to enjoy life, he is simultaneously emphasizing the temporality of life. There is an increased urgency to enjoy and it is by far the most exuberant endorsement of enjoyment thus far. The movement from the indicative to the imperative is pronounced as he offers a series of imperatives and

³⁴¹ Rindge, "Mortality and Enjoyment," 275.

³⁴² Vílchez Líndez, *Ecclesiastes*, 363.

³⁴³ Rindge, "Mortality and Enjoyment," 276.

jussives: go, eat, drink, let them be white, let it not be lacking, enjoy life, act! The new perspective is the connection that vv. 1–6 have with vv. 7–10. The proximity of these texts and the way their themes blend into each other and overlap, offer a new insight into the nature of joy and how it is experienced in this realm “under the sun,” within time. It is more crucial and urgent than it was in earlier chapters.

There is a striking similarity between this joy text and a similar counsel in the *Gilgamesh Epic*.

As for you, Gilgamesh, let your belly be full,
 Enjoy yourself day and night.
 Find enjoyment every day,
 Dance and play day and night.
 Let your garments be clean,
 Let your head be washed; bathe in water.
 Look upon the little one who holds your hand,
 Let your spouse enjoy herself in your embrace!
 (Gilig M iii 6–14)³⁴⁴

As the text in Qoheleth, this passage from the Epic of Gilgamesh points out that since mortals cannot live forever, they must make the most of the present. However, beyond the dimension of *carpe diem* is the behavioral dimension of joy that is specialized and ritualized in ancient Israel and other ANE cultures. The activities of eating, drinking, anointing with oil, wearing festal garments, and conjugal relations are vital to the ritual of terminating a mourning cycle, and are the signs of the living in contrast with the dead.³⁴⁵ This nuance is very important as we contemplate this joy text in its surrounding context which deals with the theme of death.

One final observation with regards to the joy text in 9:7–10 is that Qoheleth no longer emphasizes God’s role in the gifts of joy and life, as they are assumed and taken for granted. While in both Qoh 3 and Qoh 5 Qoheleth had made it a point to state that joy and life were gifts from God and came from God, here it is not even necessary to speak of God explicitly. “...all the days of your fleeting life which *he* has given to you under the sun.” Qoheleth also notes the long-expected reward after all the human being’s work under the sun: namely, to “enjoy life with the woman whom you love...” The mention of the woman, as friend or companion to love, is a new element indicated in the passage of time – the fleeting life.

³⁴⁴ Nancy K. Sandars, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (London: Penguin, 2006).

³⁴⁵ Gary A. Anderson, *A Time to Mourn, a Time to Dance: The Expression of Grief and Joy in Israelite Religion* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), 74-77.

V.3. QOHELETH 9:11–12

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|----|---|--|
| 11 | שִׁבְתִּי וְרָאָה תַּחַת־הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ כִּי לֹא לְקָלִים
הַמְרוּץ וְלֹא לְגִבּוֹרִים הַמְלַחֵמָה וְגַם לֹא
לְחַכְמִים לֶחֶם וְגַם לֹא לְנֹבְנִים עֶשֶׂר וְגַם לֹא
לִידְעִים חֵן כִּי־עֵת וּפְגַע יִקְרָה אֶת־כֻּלָּם: | Again, I saw under the sun that the race is not
to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor
is bread for the wise, nor riches to the intelli-
gent, nor favor to the knowledgeable; but
time and chance happen to all alike. |
| 12 | כִּי גַם לֹא־יֵדַע הָאָדָם אֶת־עֵתוֹ כַּדְּגִים
שֶׁנֶּאֱחָזִים בַּמְצוּדָה רְעָה וְכַצְּפָרִים הַאֲחֻזּוֹת
בַּפַּח כֵּהֶם יוֹקְשִׁים בְּנֵי הָאָדָם לְעַת רְעָה
כִּשְׁתִּפּוּל עֲלֵיהֶם פְּתָאִם: | Human beings no more know their own time
than fish taken in the fatal net or birds
trapped in the snare; like these, people are
caught when an evil time suddenly falls upon
them. |

The last two verses close off this larger section in a notably poetic and rhythmic manner and deal primarily with the theme of time and the specific characteristic that it is “running out.” I have chosen to include vv. 11–12 in this study as they may further illumine the interaction of the themes we are studying in this thesis. Qoheleth first begins by making an observation in prose and then points out that the swift, strong, wise, intelligent or knowledgeable have no extra advantage since “time and chance” come to all alike, *כי־עֵת וּפְגַע יִקְרָה אֶת־כֻּלָּם*. The following verse once more begins with a prose observation and continues with poetic imagery, all in order to emphasize that we do not have the power to “achieve joy and to assure success by our effort.”³⁴⁶ Qoheleth uses the expression “one fate” *אֶחָד מִקְרָה* in Qoh 9:2–3 and then in 9:11 he says, “time and chance happen to all” *עֵת וּפְגַע יִקְרָה*. According to the chiasmic structure offered above when speaking of 9:1–12, section B’, v.11 would be parallel to section B, vv. 2–3 and therefore “one fate happens to all” is parallel to “time and chance happen to all.” It follows “that ‘one fate’ in vv. 2–3 and ‘time and chance’ in v. 11 are practically synonymous.”³⁴⁷ As we noted earlier, fate does not necessarily refer to death and therefore in v. 11 the phrase “time and chance” is not necessarily limited to death, either. “Human efforts and hopes are often thwarted by the unforeseen and unpredictable factors of time and chance *פְּגַע* that can befall anyone,”³⁴⁸ and these lines reinforce the judgment above, that “one fate” in vv. 2–3 refers to events during life. The phrase “time and chance,” though not a hendiadys, expresses distinct aspects of that which refers to events during the life of all people (race, battle, bread, riches, favor).³⁴⁹ In addition, the meaning of the word *פְּגַע* defined as chance, occurrence, or accident, sheds some light on the nuance given to the word “time” in this case.

³⁴⁶ Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 121.

³⁴⁷ Wright, "Ecclesiastes 9:1-12," 255.

³⁴⁸ P. Maiberger, “פְּגַע,” *TDOT* 11:475.

³⁴⁹ Il ne s’agit pas d’un hendiadys mais de deux termes distincts, qui détonent des aspects différents de la même réalité; le mot *עֵת* désigne dans ce passage l’heure; *פְּגַע* signifie l’événement qui tombe tout à coup sûr l’homme

The constants present in Qoheleth's arguments about the one fate for all humans are the following. 1) Death is the final destiny of all living beings and it cannot be avoided. 2) The effect of the one fate is to eliminate all differences on the biological, ethical and religious levels, since the focus is on the expression "one fate." 3) The theme of destiny, which connects with the problem of knowledge of the future is not the principal focus of Qoheleth's reflection, rather, he wants to present bases for the ethics of joy and of daily life. 4) The anthropological discussion is strictly tied to the theological discussion and especially the theme of the mystery of God.³⁵⁰ "Qohélet se sert par contre des mots עת et פגע; peut-être parce qu'il n'est pas si intéressé à l'idée de la prédétermination de la mort comme il l'est à exprimer le sens du moment opportun et en même temps imprévisible dans lequel l'événement arrive. מקרה est le destin naturel de tous les hommes, puisqu'ils participent à un cycle auquel toutes les générations sont soumises."³⁵¹

On the other hand, the words עת and פגע are tied to the idea of unpredictability that emphasize the human limits of knowledge and at the same time make the human being understand that fate is not an automatic mechanism that is predetermined. The favorable outcome of the event defined as chance, would normally be associated with those people who are wise, intelligent, quick, and victorious. However, here Qoheleth is deconstructing all these human categories of success and instead is stating that they come short and cannot guarantee favorable events. Again, the act-consequence theory seems to fail us. Though Qoheleth does not ask the question about justice directly, we find here the elements to formulate it, although he does not bring God explicitly into the picture. Nevertheless, if we assume that everything is the work of God, it might seem that the human being's justice or iniquity is a fruit of God's action. This touches on the problem of human freedom and how it relates to God's freedom, however, we continue to stand behind the idea that Qoheleth is not a determinist.³⁵²

There is a profound equality amongst all human beings, and Qoheleth emphasizes this by noting that this "fate" (vv. 2–3) or "chance" (v. 11) is for *all* people without distinctions. Time has a universal quality that all human beings experience and do not control. The inevitable future which is beyond our knowledge ends in the only surety that comes to all, death. Like

et il a souvent une connotation négative. Vittoria D'Alario, "Liberté de Dieu ou destin?," in *Qohelet in the Context of Wisdom* (ed. A. Schoors; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1998), 457-63, 459.

³⁵⁰ "...le Dieu du Qohélet ne se fait pas bloquer dans des schémas interprétatifs trop rigides. Le message de l'auteur vise à sauvegarder, par le mystère, la liberté de Dieu. Il agit en dehors des règles, sans que l'homme puisse comprendre le sens d'événements, puisque toute la réalité est impénétrable. À notre avis le concept de hasard פגע, qui est familier aux Grecs mais inconnu aux apocalypticiens, est employé par Qohélet pour souligner avec emphase que les événements sont incontrôlables et qu'ils sont encore plus imprévisibles." D'Alario, "Liberté de Dieu ou destin?," 461-462.

³⁵¹ D'Alario, "Liberté de Dieu ou destin?," 462.

³⁵² Sacchi defends this idea. Sacchi, *Ecclesiaste*, 198.

8:17 at the start of our section, 9:12 again emphasizes the fact that the human being “does not know,” but here Qoheleth specifies that s/he knows not what is to come in the future. Qoheleth 9:11 may infer something that is before us spatially or temporally but given the emphasis on time in this chapter and in the entire book, the temporal meaning makes more sense. In addition, the clear reference to “his/her time” in 9:12 further supports the attribution of a temporal meaning in 9:11. Of the 40 times that the word **עַתָּה** comes up in Qoheleth, it refers to the time of death in 7:17 and in both occurrences of 9:12. As we have already discussed, the use of time in 9:11 is not necessarily limited to “death,” however, in 9:12 the human beings’ “own time” is compared to that of fish who are caught or birds trapped in a snare, implying their imminent death. The second occurrence of **עַתָּה** in this verse is modified by the word **רָעָה**: “like these, humankind is caught when an evil time suddenly falls upon them.” Apart from being described as evil, the specific time cannot be foreseen as it is said to fall upon them suddenly. In this verse, Qoheleth conceives death and the person’s “time” as something negative. Jer 27:7 uses the word **עַתָּה** along the same lines. However, it does not refer to the end of a person, but “the end time” of a land that is to be handed over to subjection. This time marks the moment when the human being is trapped by the clutches of death and ceases to have freedom over the future.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

We began our study looking at the fifth joy text Qoh 8:15 and noting how the word for joy **שְׂמֵחָה** is given special prominence. We have seen a development from its initial mention in 2:1 best interpreted as “pleasure” up until this culminating point where Qoheleth praises “joy.” The repeated **הַבֵּל** formulas, the last of which was mentioned in 8:14, disappear from this point onwards and joy offers a definitive response and resolution to the reality of **הַבֵּל**. The answer which Qoheleth offers seems quite clear: when life is recognized to be *a passing breath* and when the purpose or profit in life is called into question, one finds meaning and strength in the experience of joy. This brings joy into a special relationship with our mortality, the fleeting dimension of life, in addition to the existential relationship with God manifest in the attitude of revering God. In 8:15 God gives the human being the days of his life under the sun, essentially, the gift of time. At the same time, an essential characteristic of this “time of life” is that it will one day end and therefore death is inevitable.

We find a parallel idea present in the book of Job where the topic of joy is frequently presented in the context of the brevity of life. Though in the case of Job the root **שְׂמַח** only appears once as a noun and 5 times as a verb, we see the topic of joy in other words or expressions such as “shouts of joy” **רִנְנָה**, and “seeing the good” **רָאָה טוֹב**. Towards the beginning of the book where a more desperate and desolate Job predominates, the idea is that life is so brief and the days so swift, he’ll never see happiness again. In fact, Job even goes as far as telling God to turn away from him, since his days are few, so that he can have a moment’s joy (Job

10:20). Towards the end of Job in chapters 33 and 36, however, the accent changes and there is a sense of “living to enjoy the light of life” (Job 33:28) and spending their years in happiness (Job 36:11).

As we saw in our study, Qoh 8:16–17 remind us of the limits to human knowledge especially with regards to God’s work and how it relates to human work, regardless of whether one is wise. The human being seeks wisdom and understanding of all that takes place under the sun. The question therefore arises with regards to what it means to be wise and what advantages may come from it. Qoheleth transmits a sense of surrender and acceptance before the mystery of God, as God is the one ultimately in control of our life and time. Consequently, this attitude of acceptance and surrender offers us a clue as to what it means to be wise. Wisdom is not about control or comprehension of mysteries that go beyond human capacity, but about the humble recognition of our limitations and the courage to surrender.

Finally, Qoh 9:1–12 tie together several important themes repeated throughout the book. The chiasmic structure, as we saw earlier on, builds up from the reality of human ignorance in vv. 1 and 12. The righteous, wise and their deeds, along with love and hatred are in the hand of God; there is at least a certainty that the good deeds are not lost, and that one’s emotions, whether love or hatred are not wasted, as they are said to be in God’s hand, however, the human being does not know what will come from that. No one knows neither the future nor the time of misfortune and these are essentially a reality which escapes the full knowledge, comprehension and control of the human being. Once again, humanity finds itself at the mercy of a greater and more powerful being who it can only fear and revere.

Verses 2–3 and 11, however, highlight the one certainty that we do have: one fate and one “time and chance” happen to all regardless of whether they are righteous or not, wise or not. Here we have an explicit statement of Qoheleth’s belief that retribution does not exist and that there is an absence of the traditional moral order in this terrestrial life. In vv. 2–3 Qoheleth enumerates a list of moral categories in five pairs of opposites and concludes that there is one and the same fate for all regardless of their conduct. Likewise, in v.11, he observes that the swift, strong, wise, intelligent and knowledgeable (again five classifications of people expected to succeed) do not always have the better share, as time and chance happen to all alike. Here in this verse time does not necessarily refer to death, but Qoh 9:3 does explicitly point out that the ultimate fate is death, as this is where all human beings are headed. These conclusions oppose the dominant current present within the wisdom tradition of Qoheleth’s time but also reflect the reality which Qoheleth observes. What he sees in the world around him is that sometimes the evil prosper and the just suffer. In a second part to this conclusion, we will note how this critique to the idea of a retributive God is curiously found prior to 8:15 and 9:7–10, both joy texts we have studied in this chapter.

Finally, at the core of this section is the point that Qoheleth intends to drive home: life is better than death and while we are alive, we must enjoy life. Qoheleth 9:4–6 confronts life and death by repeatedly using the opposite adjectives חַי and מֵת and Qoheleth argues that only the living can have hope, and can at least know that they will die, whereas the dead no longer have the possibility of sharing in all that is done under the sun. The word עוֹלָם is used here to emphasize the definitive end that comes with death. “Never again will they have part in anything that is done under the sun.” To know that one must die is to situate oneself before a mystery; we could say that it is the mystery of time and its ephemeral nature, which is both lasting and passing. We have already seen “the everlasting” expressed by means of the word עוֹלָם in Qoh 3:11, and therefore here in 9:6 we cannot help but remember the profound theological discussion of 3:10–15. The human being is imbued with עוֹלָם and hence unable to understand the completeness of time. Nevertheless, he is surely aware that death is on the horizon and that our time is running out, as it is in a constant movement towards a terminal point. Qoheleth 9:7–10 point us to the only solution possible to this inevitable outcome, “go then and enjoy.” This is the focal point of Qoheleth’s message. We have for the first time a statement which no longer commends or praises joy, but which commands it by means of imperatives. It is more elaborate than the previous commendations to joy, complementing the verbs “to eat and drink” with objects and adverbial phrases: “eat your bread in happiness and drink your wine with a joyous heart.”

It is significant that the roots הִלַּךְ and עָשָׂה frame this joy text and point us in the direction of creation and salvation – it is almost as if there is a hidden promise that death will not have the last word, but that creation surrounds the experience of joy and salvation culminates it. Joy is the main emphasis and together with work, the human being’s possibility to participate in God’s work of creation and salvation, they are the only elements that the human being has in his hands and within his control. Time is synonymous with life, and with death comes the cessation of time as we can experience it. However, here, the novelty is that joy becomes the focal point of these verses. As we have seen, the priority of joy has been growing throughout the book of Qoheleth, especially after the focus on time in Qoh 3. In this text joy reaches a climatic point. Interestingly, creation and salvation both seem to correspond to time and joy respectively. The reference to creation made in the context of this joy text offers a contrast to the creation narrative of Genesis 1 where time is the dominant characteristic framing the different elements of creation. The foundational text of Genesis puts time in a primordial position, making God’s creation dependent on the concept of time. On the other hand, the reference to salvation reminds us of numerous passages from the Psalms and Isaiah which speak of “the joy of God’s salvation.” (for example, Ps 9:14; 13:5; 20:5; 35:9; Is 12:3) In these verses of Qoh 9, Qoheleth places joy as the unifying element over and above time. Joy, therefore, symbolic of salvation becomes the central element and the *raison d’être* of God’s creation.

This entire section that begins with the joy text in 8:15 and ends with the joy text in 9:7–10 ties together the main themes of joy and death and manages to weave in several others. Joy is the dominant theme, overshadowing all the other aspects of human life, which are apparently less desirable, including mortality and ignorance. Qoheleth is making a radical statement by uniting these themes since they would seem most contrary to each other. Why should one find joy when confronted with the reality of death and how can one enjoy when fully aware of one's ignorance of the future and one's limitations? First, Qoheleth praises joy in 8:15 and then commands it in 9:7–10. We witness the ever-growing emphasis that Qoheleth places on joy, and hence the importance of joy overshadows the other things in this life that the human being may want to experience or acquire. In this section, Qoheleth has taken a qualitative step in not only praising joy, but in commanding it. This imperative coincides nicely with the sense of urgency present in the human awareness of the limitation of time. This escalation is no coincidence in the mouth of a Sage, rather it shows that God has destined us for a life of joy and intends for us to live this joy fully.

The desire for happiness or joy orders and directs the human being in his/her search for meaning and is the moral goal of life according to philosophers such as Aquinas and Augustine;³⁵³ since joy is something immaterial it has greater transcendence and reach. At the same time, Qoheleth plunges us into the depths of awareness of human mortality, which includes the implication that there are real limits to human knowledge, mystification before God's works, and ignorance of the future. The unification of these two themes is no coincidence as we will study in the next section.

VI.1. TRANSIENCE, DEATH, AND JOY

Up until this point in the mid-third century BCE, death is not particularly a topic of interest in the writings of ancient Israel. Death is simply the necessary conclusion to life. Human mortality in the Israelite point of view consisted in the view that life was ephemeral. Sheol is the agreed-upon destination of the dead, a vaguely envisioned place for the souls of the dead in the afterlife, the "house appointed for all the living" (Job 30:23), but it is almost a metaphorical way of speaking of non-existence.³⁵⁴ The thinking often typical of the psalms and wisdom writings that speaks of one who escapes death and walks the path of life, is not a literal message of life after death, but rather the idea that one can choose the way one lives life and one basically has one shot at it. This is nowhere in the Scriptures a cause for crisis, but simply accepted fact.

³⁵³ "All human beings have the same nature, that is, the same human essence equipped for normal human operations. Therefore, all men have the same last end, the same ultimate goal. This last end is complete and enduring satisfaction or fulfillment; such fulfillment is called *beatitudo* or happiness." Aquinas, Leftow, and Davies, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, IIae, 1.

³⁵⁴ Longman, "Metaphor," 548.

The first mention of death in the Hebrew Scriptures is as the ultimate punishment for the disobedience of Adam and Eve. "...but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die." (Gen 2:17) The implication of this is that if the human being had listened to and obeyed God's command s/he might not die. There was a possibility of "everlasting life" from the moment of creation. However, as we know, in Gen 3:6 both Adam and Eve eat from the tree, disobeying God's command and the consequence is a life of hard work and inevitable mortality. Therefore, the themes of creation and death are linked from the very beginning of the Scriptural accounts. To be created is to know that one will die, and one can only die if one has been created. From this narrative, death took on a connotation of "punishment" because of disobedience, wherefore God ceases giving the gift of our days upon the earth. Life is finished and there is a sense that it is because one did something wrong which deserves the punishment of death.

Death comes up repeatedly in Qoheleth and his view of death is surely a product of a gradual evolution that began in Israelite thought sparking from the Babylonian Exile.³⁵⁵ A belief in resurrection was most likely cultivated in Israel from this traumatic experience together with its radical understanding of God's justice, though Qoheleth does not yet show evidence of this.³⁵⁶ "If Qoheleth had somehow discovered that human destiny is projected beyond death, he would have affirmed this discovery in his book, but the fact that he did not discover this in his investigations paradoxically gives a transcendental value to his many thoughts: everything that exists and that can be done under the sun becomes relative. Everything that exists, except God, has a relative value. This is expressed by Qoheleth by means of his favorite formula: *hebel hebelim*, also this is *hebel* and chasing wind."³⁵⁷ Qoheleth opens the way for an emerging trend amongst other writings of his period in the Ancient Near East who begin to place death in the limelight.³⁵⁸ Qoheleth's view is one answer amongst many offered in the Hebrew Scriptures, namely "that death is the defining and insurmountable ground of existence."³⁵⁹ From the

³⁵⁵ According to Shannon Burkes, death is the "driving theme and main concern of Qoheleth." Shannon Burkes, *Death in Qoheleth and Egyptian Biographies of the Late Period* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1999), 74. For Fox, "Qoheleth reveals an obsession with death unparalleled in biblical literature." Fox, *Qoheleth and his Contradictions*, 294. Rindge argues that the topic of death is central, defending the thesis that it intersects with the theme of enjoyment. Rindge, "Mortality and Enjoyment," 265.

³⁵⁶ The only mention of the afterlife in Qoheleth is the idea of Sheol. Joel B. Green, *Body, Soul, and Human Life: The Nature of Humanity in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 150. For more on this topic, see also: John Day, "The Development of Belief in Life after Death in Ancient Israel," in *After the Exile* (ed. John Barton and D. J. Reimer; Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1996), 231-57.

³⁵⁷ Vilchez Líndez, *Ecclesiastes*, (my translation), 43.

³⁵⁸ It has often been argued that Qoheleth was influenced by Greek, Egyptian and Babylonian writings and thought. Paul Humbert, *Recherches sur les sources Égyptiennes de la littérature sapientiale d'Israël* (Neuchâtel: Delachaux & Niestlé, 1929), Loretz, *Qoheleth und der alte Orient*.

³⁵⁹ Shannon Burkes, *God, Self, and Death: The Shape of Religious Transformation in the Second Temple Period* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 6.

הבל phrase, that transmits evanescence, ephemerality, and ultimately the transience of life, Qoheleth invites us to perceive the reality of death from another perspective. It is everywhere around us, if we dare to notice it. Everything is הבל and therefore, everything will end. The animating breath in all creatures, human and animals, is the same. All come from the same dust, to which they return. Thus, whatever one acquires during one's lifetime is useless at death, since one can take nothing from one's labor of life (5:15–16). Mortality is the final stroke that conquers all the qualities that one might expect to give any lasting distinction to life. Qoheleth insists on the fact there is one fate for all, and all will die alike, since death does not depend on whether one has been good or bad (9:2). Death is a part of life and one of the many times of our lives (3:2) and therefore death should not be understood as a punishment but as an opportunity to wake up, to become aware and alert. Since we do not know or control the time of death, it is imperative to live joy here and now.

It is significant that all the joy texts incorporate in one way or another the aspect of the temporality of life. Joy is a human experience that can only be perceived in our conscious realm of time, and it can only be fully appreciated considering its own relationship to transience, a recognition of the fleeting nature of a life that is limited by death. Joy “takes place with the specter of death ever looming in the near horizon. The window of opportunity for enjoyment is small because, as Qohelet frequently reminds his reader, life is bounded by death. Enjoyment like all things under the sun, is ultimately *hebel*.”³⁶⁰ The thought of death, more than taking joy away, should make it more precious still. This turns the perspective on the meaning of death around completely. Death is not something to focus on, look forward to and dread; instead, it is the inevitable result of living and part of our human existence. To ignore or deny death would be to deny life and the reality of time inherent to life. In addition, to deny our limited time and unavoidable death would mean to live a very shallow existence without any perspective of finality or termination point, deprived of purpose or meaning. Therefore, awareness of death invites us to live with a greater depth and conscience. The knowledge that we will die is a call to awaken and live more intentionally and more intensely. Nevertheless, joy is still the focal point above and beyond death. In fact, one might say that the reality of death enables the human being to recognize the importance of joy in the present and welcome the occasion.

This quality and intensity of life, in turn, offers us a clue concerning the quality of time that Qoheleth insinuates with his invitation to joy. An essential characteristic of experiencing joy deeply in the present moment is that we somehow lose our sense of time. Qoheleth is aware of this existential aspect of the experience of joy when he exhorts us to enjoy during this short lifetime. As we noted in the previous chapter, it seems as though time has stopped or time disappears, and another dimension of time opens to us. The experience of joy unlocks the possibility of experiencing a sort of timelessness or eternity, here and now. It is true, as we have

³⁶⁰ Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment*, 129.

noted above, that Qoheleth does not believe in life after death; nevertheless, there are many hints that the yearning for a reality that is permanent or lasting is present in the human being. Qoheleth's repeated use of the word עולם is one of these hints, for example, along with the repeated question of meaning and the desire for profit and lasting fruit. According to Qoheleth, the element of "eternity" which the human being yearns for and seeks is provided in and through the experience of joy. Since joy is a gift of God, it thereby contains within it something of God's essence. Joy is the concrete manner in which the human being comes into contact with the mystery of God, where God becomes manifest in time. Joy therefore overlaps with the "eternal" or "lasting" quality of the dimension of time; in other words, joy stretches time. Just as an unceasing division between numbers in mathematics results in an infinite number of values between two integers, the collection of "present moments" between birth and death or any two points in time, acquire an eternal and never-ending quality by means of joy. Joy is the factor that makes this division possible, and hence, makes this experience of eternity possible.

Furthermore, being fully present here and now is only possible if one has acquired a certain degree of detachment both from life and from seeking success, profit, or חלק, as these are things one cannot control. Death is the one guarantee we have in life; all the rest cannot be secured. Even if one is intelligent, strong, beautiful and clever, success is no guarantee. Nevertheless, one must not lose time worrying about this because there is nothing that one can do about it. The only way one may find a minimum of joy and peace is to not cling to outcomes but find meaning in one's actions and decisions alone: a more conscious existence in the present moment. If we move out of the present and begin to fear losing joy, we move into the future and consequently *lose* the present. If we move into the past and recall previous experiences of joy, we again lose the present and it is impossible to experience joy now. If one does all one can in the present moment, there is nothing more one can do other than step back and await the call of the next moment. In this alone one may find satisfaction and fulfillment. However, one should not imagine that doing all that is within one's power in the present moment would prevent or delay death in the next. The wisdom of acknowledging the fact that death is inevitable and that its timing is unknowable, gives one the freedom to engage in the present moment without fear and anxiety. When this uncertainty and fear is gone, then joy is present.³⁶¹ Therefore, Qoheleth's message consists in the call to live the present moment with intensity. This intensity consists in receiving and living the gift of joy in the awareness that life is short, and we must make the most of it. Qoheleth's challenge is to stay in the present with freedom and detachment. Those moments of joy should not only be "brief moments" – Qoheleth exhorts us to make the whole of our life an experience of joy. In this sense, we may conclude that joy takes precedence over time, displacing time in order to fill the human life.

³⁶¹ Shapiro, *Ecclesiastes*, 86.

Therefore, while joy is lived and experienced in the concrete and punctual moments of human life, moments that in themselves are passing and fleeting, those simple, ephemeral, and concrete moments acquire an eternal dimension because of the very presence of joy. Those “times” of true joy would be the human being’s access point to the divine reality and to the eternal dimension in life. This would be another way of saying that “eternity steps into time,” and joy is helping to re-dimension time. Thus, both the reality that joy is ephemeral and fleeting and yet also lasting and permanent are not only compatible but can be combined. Each moment of joy, while limited and passing, opens the person to a dimension of the divine that is limitless and everlasting, and hence it is not impossible to touch eternity in the here and now thanks to the presence of joy.

There is a certain humility to Qoheleth when he admits that the human being cannot know, and he does not pretend to guess about what happens after death. Death is complete and final. This is evident. Nevertheless, Qoheleth’s attitude is not “amoral.” The finality of death invites us to have a heightened awareness of the *now* of life “under the sun” upon this earth and hence connects us in a privileged manner to the sacredness of the *now* and God’s gift of joy that is immanent. In addition, this sense of the sacredness of God in connection to the present moment puts a strong emphasis on “revering God.” By means of revering God, we do not “behave” in a certain way in order to have a happy afterlife or out of fear of punishment. Rather, we are meant to live with reverence for God and “behaving” here and now, because this is the way to live a meaningful and joyful life “under the sun.” In this sense, reverence of God, joy and time are connected. In the measure we live revering God, we find joy and fulfillment, and therefore our limited time on earth brings us to the experience of living joy *now*. If we focus too much on the world to come and the possibilities that the future holds, we may miss out on the *now*, and if we do not learn to cultivate our life in this present world, then surely something is missing.

VI.2. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN QOHELETH’S CRITIQUE OF A RETRIBUTIVE GOD, REVERING GOD AND JOY

Death is the only clear and certain point that humans can know by the application of their reason. The reality of death as the divinely predetermined point in all existence is so overwhelming that “while it does not eliminate notions of good and evil human behavior, it loosens their attachment to any scheme of reward and punishment and so moves to relativize their value to one another.”³⁶² It therefore makes sense that Qoheleth often appears to critique the image of a retributive God. In both sections 8:11–14 and 9:1–6, he contradicts the traditional thinking that God punishes the bad and rewards the good. Both texts speak of the essential equality of

³⁶² Machinist, “Fate, miqreh, and Reason: Some Reflections on Qohelet and Biblical Thought,” 172-173.

all people in life regardless of their moral behavior, death being the one common fate for all. Interestingly, both texts precede the fifth and sixth joy texts respectively: 8:15 and 9:7–10. This therefore has led us to question the relationship between these texts, the rejection of the traditional belief in a retributive God, and the invitation to joy.

The fifth joy text 8:15 begins with a strong affirmation: “Therefore, I praised joy,” which closes the verses that lead up to it.³⁶³ As we noted earlier, Qoh 8:11–14 is a complex passage that gives witness to the internal contradictions within Qoheleth. That which our Sage affirms in 8:11–12a and 8:14 does not seem to be coherent with 8:12b–13. In vv. 11–12, 14 Qoheleth notes how reality contradicts the act-consequence theory, while in vv. 12b–13 Qoheleth appears to affirm the act-consequence theory while purposefully shifting our attention from the “sinner” to one who “fears or doesn’t fear God.”³⁶⁴ Though many scholars argue that the intervention in vv.12b–13 is a later addition, it may also be part of Qoheleth’s use of irony to convey his message. The value of revering God is unlinked from any form of retribution in the book of Qoheleth prior to this, and now he is introducing the theme of “revering God” as the principal of ethics.³⁶⁵ In other words, one should choose to act out of a sense of reverence of God, not on the basis of some expected punishment or reward, regardless of the outcome that might come from one’s action, since Qoheleth is making the point that we cannot predict or control this. Hence, recalling what we concluded about wisdom and revering God in chapter II, we may affirm that wisdom grows together with this sense of revering God and consequently, wisdom becomes the source of the decisions and choices one makes in life.

I would like to point out that v. 14 begins and ends with the word הבל. “There is *hebel* which is done on the earth, that is, there are righteous people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked. On the other hand, there are evil people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous. I say that this too is *hebel*.” Here, Qoheleth links the failure of traditional ethics to his belief and teaching about הבל: its existential flavor, its ephemeral nature, everything including judgment is passing and transitory as it escapes our control and understanding. Being this the last הבל phrase that has been repeated throughout the first part of the book, we reach the culmination of all that is הבל here with the apparent failure of a predictable system of retribution. Hence, Qoheleth intimates a different sort of relationship with God. Though Qoheleth does not explicitly state this, we can deduce that if revering God is no longer tied to the observance of the law and is not considered an action for which the human being

³⁶³ Hertzberg and Bardtke, *Der Prediger*, 175; Loader, *Polar Structures in the Book of Qohelet*, 99.

³⁶⁴ Actually, the contrast between 12b-13 and the rest of the text comes from the idea, accepted by most scholars that those who revere God are identical with the righteous spoken of in v.14. Cf. Sacchi, *Ecclesiaste*, 196-197.

³⁶⁵ Cf. Mazzinghi, "Esegesi ed ermeneutica," 173-207.

expects some sort of recompense, it is a gratuitous act.³⁶⁶ We have already seen this in Mazzinghi's studies of Qoh 7 and 8.³⁶⁷ The human being reveres God for the very sake of revering God, recognizing that God deserves to be revered and respected without thinking of himself.³⁶⁸ This selflessness leads to wisdom and culminates in the openness to receive God's gift of joy, and hence the praise of joy, as there is nothing better than to eat, drink and enjoy. Although these daily moments are fleeting and ephemeral, nonetheless, joy transcends time and points towards a stable experience that will stand by the human being in his work throughout the days of his life. Just as time runs out and walks towards death, joy, which is fleeting and passing, walks towards fullness. Therefore, the end of joy is fullness and completeness.

Similarly, Qoh 9:1–6 affirms that all people regardless of the way they act or behave, share one fate and all will eventually die. Whether one is righteous or wicked, good, clean or unclean, all share the one fate, namely, death. Therefore, ethical considerations may seem to have nothing to do with the way things turn out for human beings. While the just, clean, and good would traditionally merit God's blessing, the wicked, the unclean, and the sinner should expect failure and curse in life. By opposing this dominant thinking of his time, Qoheleth brings all human beings to one equal level. All who live can expect only to die. At this point of climax, Qoheleth exhorts his listeners to joy in 9:7–10 with the most enthusiastic endorsement of enjoyment so far. "It is as if the awful contemplation of death stirs him to embrace life all the more and to urge his audience to do the same."³⁶⁹ Qoheleth explicitly affirms in 9:7–10 that the gift of joy is a gift expecting no behavioral compensation in return. The only response required is acceptance of this gift. Whether one is righteous, and it happens according to the deeds of the wicked or vice versa, the one secure way is to enjoy. The exhortation is to eat and drink while giving the assurance that God has already approved his works. The implicit message is that they are good works. White clothing and oil on the head speak of purity, anointing, and faithfulness to God's laws and teachings. Furthermore, to enjoy life with one's companion in the limited time given by God is the reward for all of one's work. Finally, one is called to do whatever one's work is with all of one's might. It sounds like an exhortation to give one's maximum not because one must, or because God foreordains it, but rather because the work and its satisfaction are in-themselves the reward.

Therefore, Qoh 9:1–6 is paving the way for joy in the following joy text, vv.7–10 to supersede "revering God" as the principle of ethics. The motivation is clear and leads to the command: "Go then and enjoy!" This links the principle of ethics that we saw in Qoh 7–8,

³⁶⁶ "Non siate come gli schiavi, che servono il padrone per il pensiero di ricevere una ricompensa, ma siate come quegli schiavi che servono il padrone con il pensiero di non ricevere ricompensa. Sia in voi il timore di Dio." Antigono di Soko. Cf. Mazzinghi, *Ho cercato*, 279.

³⁶⁷ Cf. Mazzinghi, "Qohelet tra giudaismo ed ellenismo," 90-116.

³⁶⁸ "Il temere Dio colma quella frattura drammatica tra la scoperta dello *hebel* del vivere e la certezza che esiste la possibilità di avere una 'parte' di gioia donata da Dio." Mazzinghi, *Ho cercato*, 430.

³⁶⁹ Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment*, 62.

namely “revering God” with the command to joy. Revering God and joy are two important themes that are not antithetical to one another, but rather positively correlated in Qoheleth’s theological rhetoric. The conception of joy is often misunderstood, misrepresented and disassociated with the concept of revering God. However, by claiming that the enjoyment of life is a matter of religious duty, Qoheleth redefines the meaning of both enjoyment and piety. Qoheleth speaks to the dangers of his time and ours, which are overly focused on hedonism and a culture fixated on material gains beyond healthy boundaries, to define what true enjoyment is from his theological point of view. “By correlating enjoyment with the fear of God, Qoheleth not only affirms what humans may have by the grace of God, he also establishes what they *cannot* appropriately have.”³⁷⁰ Nevertheless, we cannot leave out the theme of time. As we noted in previous chapters, the very attitude of revering God comes from encountering and touching that which is everlasting. Both the realization that our life is fleeting and temporal, but also the recognition of the weight of something more permanent and lasting, infuses this sense of reverence and awe. Hence, the attitude of revering God comes from the human awareness of the sense of sacredness of the mystery of time and joy and further instills it. In addition, in the measure we live revering God, we find joy and fulfilment in our limited time on earth and we learn to live joy in the present. If we focus too much on what might come and the possibilities that the future holds, we miss the now.

Due to the nature of our unpredictable and fleeting life, human beings are incapable of possessing anything inalienably. Qoheleth observes a race and insatiable hunger for more – more possessions, more control, more power, more knowledge, and more wisdom, in an attempt to gain profit. However, Qoheleth observes that the tempting attraction of something more and something better only distracts them of the experience of joy that is present here and now. The point he wishes to drive home is that when one learns to live a balanced life revering God – in other words, when one gains wisdom – one is more able to experience joy fully. Joy is consequently both a gift and an experience that one must strive to obtain throughout life.

Qoheleth’s chief crisis is how to reconcile the apparent lack of justice. When, where and how will God do justice for the good? These questions remain unanswered. When speaking of the clear discrepancies of the so-called “theory of divine retribution,” the implication of his thinking must be that there is a “time” beyond the “times” of life in which justice can be made. If it does not take place in the realm of this life, and all people have the same end regardless of their behavior, namely death, then when does God show justice? As we have seen in this chapter, there is a general silence about death and the afterlife in the Hebrew Bible and, though most scholars would argue that Qoheleth holds true to the Jewish belief of his time that there is no such thing as an afterlife, we can no longer be certain of this. As shown by archeological evidence, necromancy was popular in Israel and it is likely that there was an accepted belief in the afterlife that was muted by the priestly group. In addition, during this historical context, the

³⁷⁰ Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment*, 127.

Greeks also begin to question the reality of afterlife. Qoheleth makes no mention of what, if anything, takes place in “the beyond,” but he also does not explicitly deny it. He only hints at a possible difference between animals and humans at the end of his discourse in Qoh 3:19–21 where he asks: “Who knows if the life breath of mortals goes upward and the life breath of beasts goes earthward?” This question leaves an open door in Qoheleth’s thought.³⁷¹ Though there is no explicit statement of belief in the afterlife, Qoheleth does not exclude the question of a distinction between human beings and other living beings at the moment of death. Qoheleth never explains how, but simply “expresses his confidence in the moral nature of the universe while noting various data that bring this into apparent question. Unable finally to resolve the puzzle himself, he then characteristically advocates that the reader get on with life and not worry too much about the details, which lie with God.”³⁷² If, as we have observed, Qoheleth denies the validity of the act-consequence theory and nevertheless seeks or questions where justification will come from, and whether a God of justice, a God who will judge, exists, perhaps God will judge us on how we live joy. This will become clearer and more apparent in the next chapter, especially when we study Qoh 11:9. We are not only called to constantly seek joy trusting that God wants to give it to us, since joy is a gift of God, but we are commanded to enjoy in 9:7–10, and therefore it is to some degree a choice.

This reading offers a new lens through which we may contemplate the invitations of the sage, Qoheleth. We are invited to adopt a different kind of wisdom that emphasizes the importance of revering God and values God’s gifts and grace, as well as ceding control. In the end, it comes down to who one believes God to be. If one doubts for any second that God is good, just, and generous, one is bound to live a miserable life. However, if one chooses to trust radically and leap with faith into the arms of the creator God, one who has given us the gift of life, the possibility to enjoy, and who empowers us to enjoy, this story may play out differently. One may not know how or when, but justice will come about. Qoheleth is inviting us to a deeper and truer faith, to a real and existential trust, to a radical and detached freedom. We will return to these topics after having studied Qoh 11:7–12:8 and bring together all the conclusions drawn throughout this thesis.

As we have seen, Qoh 9:1–12 has proven to bring to a culmination the various themes we have studied throughout this thesis. While admitting to a profound human ignorance with regards to time and future, there is a certainty and emphasis on the one fate and equal death that comes to all people regardless of their ethical behavior. At the core of this is that life is better than death and the fullness of this life is experienced through God’s gift of joy. Therefore, everything seems to be fulfilled in vv. 1–12, a decisively climatic section of Qoheleth after the conclusion of the *הבל* phrases in Qoh 8:14. It is the introduction to the final section of the book

³⁷¹ For more on these questions which reveal Qoheleth’s fascination with human ignorance, see: James L. Crenshaw, “The Expression *mi yodea* in the Hebrew Bible,” *VT* 36, no. 3 (1986): 274–88.

³⁷² Iain W. Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 168.

that will continue to unravel Qoheleth's thoughts on death. The centrality of 9:1–12 would imply that nothing can take away the emphasis that Qoheleth places on joy, not even the definitive closure which death brings to human life.

VI.3. THE JUSTICE OF GOD

We have already begun to touch upon the problem of God's justice in the previous section, and it has opened for us an array of questions. Qoheleth does not explicitly offer any answers to these questions, but he sets in place several clues that we can draw upon in order to presume that Qoheleth's God is just. Although we cannot pretend to understand or explain God's justice, the main proof that God is good is that God chooses to encounter humanity through the gift of joy, a joy that we do not deserve or cannot merit but which leads us ever deeper into the possibility of revering God. In turn, the very act of revering God grows and matures with one's awareness of the temporal finitude of life in death. One of the certainties that Qoheleth leaves us with is that human beings cannot judge and therefore cannot do justice. This action is reserved to God alone. Not only do we stand before the mystery of God in God's infinite mind, but we also stand before the many little mysteries that surround us, our fellow human beings. Although it may seem utterly unfair and appalling, there is apparently one and the same fate for all (9:3) regardless of how they have lived their lives, and that is death. In addition, it seems ever clearer especially from the imperative to joy in 9:7–10, that it is God's will for the human being to enjoy. Therefore, as we noted above, God may possibly judge us on how much we have taken advantage of God's gift of joy. This judgment will become apparent in the final joy text that we will study in the next chapter, so we shall leave the discussion and proof of this affirmation until then.

CHAPTER V: JOY AND TIME – THE FOUNDATIONS OF A NEW CREATION QOHELETH 11:7 – 12:8

*“The fear of death follows from the fear of life.
A man who lives fully is prepared to die at any time.”*

~ Mark Twain

0. INTRODUCTION

As the book is running out, so too time is running out and death is again on the horizon. When one is aware that time is running out, it is admittedly difficult to enjoy the moment. One is full of anxiety and often anger at the time that has escaped through one’s fingers and which one cannot recover or ever get back. It is easy to get paralyzed with fear or with the sensation of helplessness that what is lost is forever lost. Joy seems far and distant. This is why Qoheleth’s call is so challenging and ever new. Reaching the end of one’s life is the ultimate test, but we have endless opportunities to learn our lesson and modify our ways. Whether it is the time one has in order to complete a project, or the time to save someone’s life, one can only do anything and everything that is within one’s power and possibility. Often our sense of limitation and helplessness makes us believe that we can do very little if anything at all, however we forget the power of connecting to the present moment. If we are still living and breathing, it is because God is still giving us the gift of his breath and the power to live, and hence there is still possibility.

We begin the final exegetical study of this thesis on time and joy, on the final poetic section and last great pericope of the book of Qoheleth. The seventh joy text, Qoh 11:7–10, introduces the final and conclusive section of the book, the passage and poem which most famously speaks of the culmination of life in death: Qoh 11:7 – 12:8. The theme of joy is evident in Qoheleth’s final imperative to enjoy life as one confronts the reality of human mortality that consequently highlights the theme of time, here presented through both memory and death. In addition, we will see how the theme of creation encompasses this entire section of the book, bringing us back to where we began and essentially closing a complete circle. This will be the framework for our study of the themes of time and joy in this section and how they have evolved throughout the book as they inform our unique perspective on Qoheleth.

I. DELIMITATIONS

This pericope begins at 11:7, as the theme and style changes radically from what came before.³⁷³ In terms of the end of this pericope, there is debate between whether it concludes at 12:7 or 12:8.³⁷⁴ Clearly, 12:8 mirrors the הבל refrain of 1:2 and ends the book before the added epilogue.³⁷⁵ Nevertheless, I believe that it also concludes the poem as this passage is marked by the presence of הבל in 7:8 and 7:10, which in turn suggests that we may divide the entire poem into three parts: 11:7–8, 11:9–10, and 12:1–8.³⁷⁶ For the sake of this study, we shall study 12:8 separately. This pericope splits easily into two distinguishable parts: 11:7–10 and 12:1–7. Qoheleth 11:7–10 constitutes the seventh and final joy text of Qoheleth, connecting the theme of joy with death, the main theme of the poem in 12:1–7.

II. DISCUSSION OF ITS CONTEXT AND STRUCTURES

The text that precedes this section is Qoh 11:1–6, a well-defined literary unit, and as we mentioned before, 11:7 breaks with what came before in terms of theme and style. However, there are also connections to the previous unit.³⁷⁷ The natural terminology which is used in 11:1–6, sea, earth, clouds, rain, a tree, the wind, morning, evening, and a specific reference to the Creator, binds with 11:7 – 12:7 which has an equal interest in the natural world and the theme of creation. In the latter, in place of morning and evening (11:6), Qoheleth speaks of their attending degrees of illumination, light (11:7 and 12:2), and darkness (11:8 and 12:2) and about the sun (11:7 and 12:2). The clouds, rain and earth that we have encountered in 11:3 are repeated once more in 12:2 and 12:7. Finally, the beginning, middle, and end processes of agriculture unify this entire section, namely: sowing, reaping (11:4, 6), and milling (12:4). They are the very basis to produce food and a primal example of the theme of work, which is one of Qoheleth's characteristic sources of enjoyment. Therefore, both as work and as the product that they insinuate, food, they point to the end which comes from them: joy. Hence, we see clearly

³⁷³ According to M. Gilbert, the majority of modern exegetes agree on this beginning to the end. Maurice Gilbert, "La description de la vieillesse en Qohelet XII, 1-7 est-elle allégorique?," *VTSup* 32 (1981): 96-109, 97.

³⁷⁴ "El termino en cuestión: 'vanidad' es el *leit-motiv* de Qohelét y 12,8, en mi opinión, no cierra el poema sino el conjunto del libro." Jose Ramon Busto Saiz, "Estructura métrica y estrófica del 'Poema sobre la juventud y la vejez'," *Sef* 43 (1983): 17-25, 19s.

³⁷⁵ To follow in 12:9–14 is an epilogue commonly believed to be an addition, mainly due to different mentality and vocabulary. "The final comments of the 'frame narrator' in 12:9–14 compose an easily distinguishable epilogue to the whole book." Daniel C. Fredericks, "Life's Storms and Structural Unity in Qoheleth 11.1 - 12.8," *JSOT* 52 (1991): 95-114, 96.

³⁷⁶ At the same time, other scholars such as Fox, include and exclude 12:8 interchangeably. See for example Fox who Michael V. Fox, "Aging and Death in Qohelet 12," *JSOT* 42 (1988): 55-77, 62, 71.

³⁷⁷ Fredericks has presented arguments in favor of this. Fredericks, "Life's Storms," 95-114.

both the theme of creation and the theme of work, which is the human being's manner of collaborating as a co-creator.

As we have mentioned before, multiple overlapping structures exist throughout Qoheleth's text, demonstrating his artistry and musicality. Fredericks proposes a chiasm that begins at 11:3 and which overlaps with a parallel structure offered by Witzernath and Ogden that reaches forward to the culmination of the section and the entire speech in 12:8. Witzernath's thorough analysis of 11:7 – 12:7 establishes an outline by means of her lexical, syntactical, thematic and rhetorical investigations, highlighting Qoheleth's artful speech. She notes the repeated words, the syntax, and the themes and semantic fields.³⁷⁸ Ogden presents the following structure based on her study:³⁷⁹

11:8	If a man lives many years let him rejoice and remember the days of darkness will be many all that comes is הבל	Time Phrase Theme A Theme B Time Phrase Conclusion
11:9-10	Rejoice (in your youth)... in the days of your youth for youth... is הבל	Theme A Time Phrase Conclusion
12:1	Remember in the days of your youth Before...	Theme B Time Phrase
12:2	before...	
12:6	before...	
12:8	<i>habel habalim...</i> all is הבל	Conclusion

³⁷⁸ Hagia Hildegard Witzernath, *Süss ist das Licht: eine literaturwissenschaftliche Untersuchung zu Koh 11,7 - 12,7*, Arbeiten zu Text und Sprache im Alten Testament (vol. 11; St. Ottilien: Eos, 1979), 6, 20.

³⁷⁹ Graham S. Ogden, *Qoheleth* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2007), 193-194; Fredericks, "Life's Storms," 100.

II.1. STRUCTURE PLACING GOD IN THE CENTER

I would like to offer two more possible structures, which highlight different elements present in this text. The following is a chiasmic pattern partly based on the one presented by Fredericks' which extends the rhetorical unit to commence at 11:3, ends at 12:2, and at its core is the invitation to know God.

11:3–7	A Clouds and Rain; Light and Sun
8	B Consider the days of darkness; All that comes is breath
9ab	C Enjoy your Youth
9c	D Know... the God of Judgement
10a	C' Enjoy your Youth
10b – 12:1	B' Consider God before days of darkness/evil; All of youth is breath
12:2	A' Clouds and Rain; Sun and Light

This chiasm begins at 11:3 in order “to draw into a unity the theme of laboring wisely in spite of the clouds and the theme of joy in life in spite of the clouds that will eventually obscure the brighter sides of life.”³⁸⁰ This structure is particularly convincing and the natural elements of terrestrial life, God’s creation, which include the clouds, rain, sun and light (A, A’), embrace the themes of time (B, B’), joy (C, C’) and finally the experience of God, at the core (D).

Section A and A’ deal with the elements of nature and creation which in their own way allude to the reality of time. The particular elements used here, in particular the wind and the sun are not new, as they are repeated throughout the entire book both in the expression רעות רוח, “chasing after the wind,” and the spatial dimension in which Qoheleth situates his treatise, namely, תחת השמש “under the sun.” The imagery of the clouds pouring rain down upon the earth and the mysterious wind points to an unpredictability that only God can know and govern. In contrast, the sun and its regular cycle cannot be more predictable and is a reliable way of keeping time. The introduction of the rain and clouds in 11:3 is followed by 11:4–7, a section which emphasizes the human being’s lack of control over nature and its forces. The human being is far from commanding the surrounding nature and therefore, the natural elements of the created world demonstrate that there is something beyond the human being, which is out of his hands. Hence, the human being is even less able to know, understand, or control God’s creative activity (11:5). Qoheleth’s call is to work despite the unpredictability of the fruit, to sow one’s seed in the morning and not be idle in the evening (11:6), for one does not know if either one will succeed or if both may be fruitful. The mention of light and sun in 11:7 brings a clarity,

³⁸⁰ Fredericks, "Life's Storms," 103.

peace and regularity: “the light is pleasant, and it is good for the eyes to see the sun,” immediately introducing the joy text to follow (11:7–10). While the sun and light offer the predictability of their life cycle and establish time, marking a regular rhythm to our days and years and highlighting the symbolic aspect of joy, the clouds, rain, wind, and storm symbolize desolation or sadness and emphasize the unpredictability of nature and stress how the human being cannot control or understand God’s creative action. The former in some way paint the picture of *creation* and the latter offer a glimpse of *chaos*. Qoheleth 12:2b once more notes the unpredictability of the clouds and rain, as in this case “clouds return after the rain” when one would instead expect the clouds to clear after the rain. We notice a tension in the elements of nature themselves. Furthermore, though beyond the scope of this structure, the symbolic images in 12:3–7 point to the reality of death.

Sections B and B’ allude to the theme of time. Qoheleth 11:8a introduces the conditional phrase: “if a human being should live many years...” and to follow it are two jussives introducing the two topics that will be spelled out in the verses to follow: *ישמח* “let him rejoice in them all,” and *ויזכר* “let him remember the days of darkness, for they will be many.” Here the element of time as expressed in the phrase “many years” is linked with both joy and remembrance. First, one is invited to rejoice in *all* the many years of one’s life, but, in addition, the person is invited to be aware of the days of darkness that are to come, for they will be “many.” What exactly these days of darkness refer to is not clear. Some scholars believe they refer to one’s old age, and others to the existence after death in Sheol. Qoheleth 12:1 picks up on the theme of remembrance and the temporal terms “days” and “years.” Qoheleth invites his listener: “Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near when you will say, “I have no delight in them.” Time is emphasized by means of this imperative where the “days of your youth” are to be taken advantage of, in the remembrance of God before the “time,” the evil days and years, when joy may cease. Qoheleth invites us to “remember” and hence recognize the presence of God amid the experience of joy.

Qoh 11:8b concludes with the familiar phrase, this time in the imperfect tense: “everything that is to come will be *הבל*.” The word *הבל* can sometimes take on a temporal sense and with the imperfect used here, Qoheleth transmits the idea that not only is everything from the past and present a fleeting reality, but all that which is not yet complete, what is to come in the future, will also be ephemeral. As long as one is within the reality of time, one can be assured that everything will pass. This idea accurately describes the reality of death, since it is a certain future for all living beings, and it comes after both the call to rejoice and to remember. Qoheleth 11:10b repeats the idea of *הבל* but limits it to describing “childhood” and “the prime of life.” The transience of youth is often the interpretation of *הבל*, and the invitation is to enjoy life while one is young, since youth will certainly pass.

Sections C and C' bring us to the topic of joy. Qoheleth 11:9a has the imperative שמח "rejoice" and יטיב לבך "let your heart be good" in the days of your youth, which is an idiom that means "let your heart rejoice," while 11:10a contains the antonyms to the terms of 11:9a: רעה "evil" and כעס מלבך "anger from your heart." In addition, I would like to highlight that sections B and C blend together the themes of time and joy. The youth are called to enjoy because time is fleeting, and time runs out. It is an injunction to live the present moment; to enjoy now.

The heart of this chiasm is Section D (11:9b) which puts God in the spotlight. The theological dimension cannot be separate from the themes of time and joy and essentially holds them together as demonstrated here by being at the core of this particular structure. "Know that God will bring you to judgement for all these things." It is a phrase commonly discarded as a pious and corrective gloss and as an idea foreign to Qoheleth's worldview,³⁸¹ and yet significant scholars hold that the statements of retribution are warnings against the "sin" of not enjoying what God has made available.³⁸² This interpretation rings true with the general feel of the book. In addition, God is frequently the subject of the verb "to judge"³⁸³ making it not at all unlikely for Qoheleth to say something of this nature. We will take a closer look when we specifically study the joy text Qoh 11:7–10.

II.2. STRUCTURE PLACING JOY IN THE CENTER

The second chiasm is relatively simple consisting of three themes: 1) clouds, rain, storm, 2) Creator God, 3) and the joy text at its core.

11:3–5a	A Clouds, Rain, Wind
11:5b–6	B Creator God
11:7–10	C Joy text
12:1–2a	B' Creator God
12:2b–5	A' Clouds, Rain, Storm

³⁸¹ Amongst the scholars who consider 11:9b as a redactional gloss inserted by the author of 12:12–14 are: Emmanuel Podechard, *L'Ecclésiaste* (Paris: Victor Lecoffre, 1912), 452; Ginsberg, *Koheleth*, 128; Witzernath, *Süss ist das Licht*, 4; Lauha, *Kohelet*, 208-9; Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 139; Diethelm and Lehmann, *Untersuchungen zur Eigenart des Buches Qohelet*, 167; Fischer, *Skepsis oder Furcht Gottes?*, 150; Vélchez Líndez, *Ecclesiastes*, 399-400. Even Fox admits that "of all the proposed glosses in the book this is the most likely." Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 318.

³⁸² Gianfranco Ravasi, *Qohelet*, La parola di Dio Serie 1 (Cinisello Balsamo: Paoline, 1991), 337; Gordis, *Koheleth*, 336.

³⁸³ L. Gorssen, "La coherence de la conception de Dieu dans l'Ecclésiaste," *ETL* 46 (1970): 282-324.

Section A: Clouds, rain, and wind introduce this section, highlighting elements of nature and creation, which as we previously studied, human beings do not control and cannot easily predict. In contrast, the sun which we equally do not control, is however, predictable, repeating its cycle day after day, a reliable source for keeping time as we have already noted, however it does not appear until 11:7, the center of this particular structure. Qoheleth 11:3–5a does not explicitly mention a storm but does imply it indirectly. “If the clouds are full, they pour out rain upon the earth; and whether a tree falls toward the south or toward the north, wherever the tree falls, there it lies.” We think of a downpour in conjunction with extreme weather, and the only reason a tree falls is if lightning strikes it or heavy winds knock it over. Qoheleth 11:4 notes that, “He who watches the wind will not sow and he who looks at the clouds will not reap.” If one is paralyzed by what one cannot control, merely observing the power of nature, and allowing precious time to pass, s/he does nothing and neither sows nor reaps. It is not a fruitful or productive use of one’s time or energy and one feels it has been wasted. With this experience of waste comes disillusionment and sadness. Hence, by not working, the experience of joy becomes difficult if not impossible. One must surrender the fact that one cannot know the path of the wind and take the risk of sowing and reaping.

The concluding section A’, 12:2b–5 notes that the “clouds return after the rain.” After the rain, one might expect the sky to clear up, however, the clouds which have left, return and it seems as if with more severity. These verses detail the results of the clouds and rain and we have an expanded description of the storm’s disastrous effects.³⁸⁴ According to this interpretation, therefore, 12:3–5 would not be a description of old age, as most scholars see it, but of a disastrous storm.³⁸⁵ As we have seen in the previous structure, the same meteorological concerns appear in 11:3–6. In addition, a clear syntactical connection also suggests this reading of a storm. The unique temporal clause **ביום ש** that introduces 12:3, follows immediately after the phrase “clouds after the rain” and begins an infrastructure within the larger form marked by the **לא אשר עד** clauses in 12:1, 2, and 6. Therefore, “it governs the largest part of the poem, connecting the clouds and rain with what follows in 12:3–5.”³⁸⁶ This is clearly one way to interpret 12:3–5, reading the series of occurrences through the lens of a storm, however, we will study this section much more in depth further on. For now, let us note that if we look at the themes highlighted in 11:3–5a where one may be paralyzed by what one cannot control, merely observing the power of nature, and allowing precious time to pass, we may in turn read 12:3–5

³⁸⁴ Fredericks, "Life's Storms," 103.

³⁸⁵ “This reading revives a neglected and very suggestive meteorological interpretation of 12:2–6, which F.W.C. Umbreit, C.D. Ginsberg, M. Leahy and O. Loretz have offered. Their emphasis on the role of the darkening weather of 12:2 in determining the meaning of 12:3–6 has been overshadowed by readings preferring either bodily or property decay which do not consider the text seriously enough.” Fredericks, "Life's Storms," 107. Cf. Friedrich Wilhelm Carl Umbreit, *Koheleth des weissen Königs Seelenkampf* (Gotha: Beker'schen Buchhandlung, 1818); Ginsburg, *Coheloth*; Michael Leahy, "The Meaning of Ecclesiastes," *ITQ* 19 (1952): 297–300; Loretz, *Qohelet und der alte Orient*.

³⁸⁶ Fredericks, "Life's Storms," 108.

through the lens of 11:3–5a and conclude that the guardians, strong men, grinding women, and those who look through the windows essentially cease to work, unable to invest time or energy, debilitated by fear. Hence, by not working, the experience of joy ceases to be possible and life gradually ends. One must surrender the fact that one cannot know the time of death.

Section B: This section consists of B, 11:5b–6 and B', 12:1–2a, two small sections which directly or indirectly point to God as Creator. Section B begins with God who forms the bones of a human life in the womb of the mother. Qoheleth compares our ignorance of the powers of nature, represented by the wind, to God's creative power, which makes all things. In recognizing a Creator God, we are then called to participate in the work of creation, by passing from passivity to activity, sowing our seed both in the morning and evening. Though we sow and reap, it is ultimately God's action which brings about the growth and fruit. Once again, we note the theme of work which is very important for the human experience of joy as we have seen in *Chapter II*. Section B' on the other hand, explicitly mentions "the Creator" in 12:1.

Finally, the center of this chiasm is the final joy text of the book of Qoheleth which we will study in the next section. At the conclusion of this chapter, we shall take a closer look at the implications of the elements highlighted within these structures and what this may tell us for the overall study of 11:7 – 12:8.

II.3. EVALUATION OF THE TWO STRUCTURES

These two structures highlight different focal points. I do not prefer one over the other, because it is possible and likely that Qoheleth interweaves more than one structure throughout his text. In addition, both offer us points of view that are pertinent to the arguments of this thesis. While the first highlights the invitation to know God, this core experience of God holds together both themes of time and joy. The second structure which places the joy text at its center, highlights the escalated importance of joy which we have seen growing throughout Qoheleth.

III. QOHELETH 11:7–10 JOY TEXT

We begin our study of the final joy text in Qoheleth, continuing to study the interaction of the themes of joy and time, which in this final chapter becomes apparent through the themes of creation and death.³⁸⁷ We may consider these verses a joy text due to their positive tone, exhortative nature and similarity to other joy texts, principally because they contain the verb שמח twice, first in the jussive form in v. 8 and then as an imperative which begins v. 9. Another reason is that Qoh 11:9 includes the phrase לבדך ויטיבך,³⁸⁸ lit. “let your heart do good to you,” but which may be interpreted as meaning “let your heart give you joy,” as the biblical idiom לב טוב means “joy.” Qoh 7:3 also contains the pair יטב and לב where the former means “to be good” and the subject is לב; elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible (Judges 18:20, 19:6,9; 1Kgs 21:7; Ruth 3:7) this phrase means “glad” and “cheerful.” Here in 11:9 the verb יטב (hi) with לב as its subject expresses the idea “let your heart give you joy.” The use of the word לב in relation to joy was also seen in Qoh 5:19 where God fills/reveals Godself with “joy in the heart” [בשמחת לבו]. The word לב becomes one of the key words in this pericope, repeated twice in 11:9 and once in 11:10. Qoheleth 11:7–10 is, however, notably different to the preceding joy texts since the vocabulary used to present the joy theme in chapters 2–9 (i.e. to eat, drink, etc.) is not used here. In addition, Qoheleth links joy to youth and introduces the themes of memory of the dark days and God’s judgement, for the first time in this context.

- | | | |
|----|--|---|
| 7 | ומתוק האור וטוב לעינים לראות את השמש: | Truly, light is pleasant, and it is good for the eyes to see the sun. |
| 8 | כי אם־שנים הרבה יחיה האדם בכלם ישמח ויזכר את־ימי החשך כ־הרבה יהיו כל־שבא הבל: | For if the human being should live many years, let him rejoice in them all, and let him remember the days of darkness, for they will be many. Everything that is to come is fleeting. |
| 9 | שמח בחור בילדותיך ויטיבך לבך בימי בחורותך והלך בדרכי לבך ובמראי עיניך ודע כי על־כל־אלה יביאך האלהים במשפט: | Rejoice, oh youth, during your childhood, and let your heart give you joy during the days of your youth. Follow the ways of your heart and the visions of your eyes but know that concerning all these things God will bring you to judgment. |
| 10 | והסר כעס מלבך והעבר רעה משרדך כ־הילדות והשחרות הבל: | So, remove irritation from your heart and get rid of evil from your flesh, because childhood and the dawn of life are fleeting. |

³⁸⁷ It is interesting to note that a study of the relationship between death and possessions has been done by Rindge who examines this final poem in his article and who argues that by inviting readers to imagine their own deaths, Qoheleth provides a powerful rhetorical argument for his admonitions to enjoy life. Rindge, "Mortality and Enjoyment," 276-278.

³⁸⁸ The hiphil imperfect 3ms of the verb יטב with the 2ms suffix.

This pericope divides naturally into two parts, vv. 7–8 and vv. 9–10, which both end with the key word הבל. The two verbs in the jussive which close the first section in v. 8, שמח “let him rejoice” and ויזכר “let him remember,” are repeated in the imperative form at the start of the following two sections: in 11:9 שמח “rejoice” and in 12:1 זכר “remember,” therefore linking the themes of enjoyment and remembrance, and hence it will be important to study these two themes and how they play off each other.³⁸⁹ In this manner, vv. 7–8 introduce this final poem and closing section of Qoheleth.

III.1. QOHELETH 11:7–8

Qoh 11:7 begins with a much discussed *waw*. Some scholars argue that 11:7 does not initiate a new section since it begins with a *waw* and connects with the preceding verses.³⁹⁰ Others, however, say that v. 7 opens a new section and therefore the *waw* is emphatic rather than copulative.³⁹¹ I have chosen to side with the latter, since I believe that although there are connections with the previous verses, this verse also distinctly begins a new section and the final joy text of Qoheleth.

The idea that light may be “sweet” is not seen elsewhere in Scripture but finds many parallels in Mesopotamia and Greece.³⁹² To see the sun (6:5 and 7:11) is synonymous with living, and therefore to not see the sun means death. This is also a common theme in the ANE, particularly in the famous text from Gilgamesh, “Let mine eyes behold the sun that I may have my fill of the light! Darkness withdraws when there is enough light. May one who indeed is dead behold yet the radiance of the sun!”³⁹³ In addition, both light and the sun point to the reality of joy which sets the scene for this joy text.

Qoh 11:8 dives into the theme of time, opening with the words: “For if the human being should live many years...” We are immediately introduced into the quantitative aspect of the human person’s lifetime. Though not noted explicitly, we know that those “many years” are a

³⁸⁹ “For Qoheleth, God is the giver and sustainer of life; he it is who also determines its end (cf. 3:19-21). This then is what Qoheleth invites us to ponder in our youthfulness” in 11:8 and 12:1. “The concurrent pursuits of rejoicing and remembering are to pervade all the days of one’s youth, described in 11:10 as the “dawn of life.” This period of time precedes what is now described as “evil days.” Graham S. Ogden, “Qoheleth XI 7-XII 8: Qoheleth’s Summons to Enjoyment and Reflection,” *VT* 34, no. 1 (1984): 27-38. See also: Mazzinghi, *Ho cercato*, 274-75.

³⁹⁰ According to Lohfink, the section begins at 11:4 and the opening *waw* in v. 7 introduces a consequence that should be translated “then” or “therefore.” Lohfink, Delitzsch, and Fredericks argue that it is conjunctive.

³⁹¹ Schoors, Mazzinghi, Vélchez, Lauha, Gordis.

³⁹² Note for example, Euripides’s text: “It is sweet to see the light,” Euripides, *Iphigenia in Aulis* 1.1219.

³⁹³ Sandars, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, 89.

gift from God, just as we have previously seen time and the years of life to be God's gift (Qoh 3:11; 5:17; 9:9). The word הרבה "many" forms an inclusion. The memory of the days of darkness is directly related to the call to joy. "...la pienezza della gioia presuppone la piena consapevolezza della morte (vedi i due imperativi, 'gioisci' e 'ricorda', insieme fin da 11,8)."³⁹⁴ It is these "many years of life" that provides the condition for the next two jussives: "let him enjoy them all, and let him remember that the dark days will be many." We have here the themes to be explored in the subsequent sections, 11:9–10 and 12:1–8, joy and remembrance. Interestingly, the reference to joy uses the word "years" while the reference to remembrance uses the word "days." In fact, the contrast is striking because the many dark days are clearly less than the many years of life that one is called to enjoy, hence reducing the significance of the dark days in the greater scheme of life and giving a more positive flavor to this text. Joy and remembrance are two verbs that often appear together in biblical texts having to do with cult, such as in Deut 16:11–12 and Ps 97:12. Joy is linked to the remembrance of God's salvific actions which Israel celebrates with its feasts.³⁹⁵ In these cultic texts, God is essentially the source of joy and memory. We saw this link between joy and salvation in the last chapter when speaking of the start of the previous joy text in 9:7. We also saw how the reference to remembering the brevity of life [יזכר את ימי חייו] in 5:19 is related to God's action of filling the human being with the joy of his heart [כי האלהים מענה בשמחת לבו]. Here in 11:7–8 the invitation to joy is once again linked to the remembrance of the brevity of life. It seems as if Qoheleth is picking up on and intensifying the idea that he presented in the previous joy texts, 5:17–19, 8:15, and 9:7–10. The object of memory in 11:8 is "the days of darkness" which will be many. The days of darkness are understood to mean the existence in Sheol, in other words, death, since light and sun signify life. Therefore, in 11:8 one is invited to remember death.

I cannot help but recall what I noted in chapter IV about the piel form of the verb שבח "praise" which is normally used in the Hebrew Scriptures with God as its object. In the case of Qoheleth, however, the objects of the verb are "the dead" in Qoh 4:2 and "joy" in Qoh 8:15. This may be a mere coincidence, but it is worth noting that when other places in the Scriptures mention God, both in the case of the verb "praise" and as the object of remembrance, Qoheleth puts emphasis on the idea of death and its relationship with joy, thereby linking the two themes.

In addition, the invitation to remember "the days of darkness" or death, forms an interesting contrast with Qoh 5:17–19 where joy is given to the human being precisely so that s/he "may *not* remember" how short are his/her days. Qoheleth 5:17–19 is the only other place in the book where the verb זכר is found in association with שמחה. In the enigmatic 5:19 we find Qoheleth saying that the human being "seldom remembers the days of his life because God reveals himself by means of joy." In this case, joy takes the upper hand and in practical terms supersedes the memory of one's own life. In contrast, here in 11:8, in order for the human being

³⁹⁴ Mazzinghi, *Ho cercato*, 310.

³⁹⁵ Mazzinghi, *Ho cercato*, 275.

to truly rejoice, s/he needs to remember how short his days are!³⁹⁶ We might say that in this final joy text, Qoheleth offers the last word on the relationship between joy and memory and essentially, the more aware that one is of the ephemerality of life, the more one learns to live joy. The verb “remember” bridges 11:8b with the final section 12:1–7 where v. 1 exhorts the reader: “remember your Creator” and where God is therefore directly linked to the action of remembering.

Qoh 11:8c concludes with a variation of the *הבל* phrase: *כל־שבא הבל*. We are reminded of the previous joy text in 8:15 which had closed a long section of the book where Qoheleth had been presenting joy as a response to *הבל*. As we noted in the previous chapter, the *הבל* formulas, which were introduced in 2:1 *הבל גם־הוא הבל* disappear in 8:14. However, Qoheleth reminds us of this theme by means of this new expression: *כל־שבא הבל* “all that is to come is fleeting,” which incorporates the aspect of future.³⁹⁷ This future may point to death and Sheol, because of the days of darkness mentioned in the same verse which is a metaphor of death, but it may also point to the last phase of life. Interestingly the word to indicate future, *שבא*, occurs two other times in Qoheleth with reference to a life that comes into being only to go [*הלך*] back where it came from (5:14f; 6:4). However, as *הבל* generally refers to situations of earthly existence, this future may simply refer to that which is to come, which is still unknown in the timeline of life. It serves as a conclusion which looks forward to that which is to come, hence leaving even the future open to *הבל*.

III.2. QOHELETH 11:9–10

Qoh 11:9 begins the second section of this pericope with the imperative “rejoice!” The exhortation to joy is addressed to a “youth” for the first time and s/he is invited to rejoice in this stage of life. The next clause which forms part of this opening call is the imperfect with simple *waw* *ויטיבך לבך*. This structure suggests a parallel relationship of these two opening clauses and therefore they are complementary. “Let your heart rejoice (lit. do good to you) during the days of your youth.” The emphasis is clearly set on the youthfulness of the one to whom the command is directed and “the figure of a youth fulfills several rhetorical functions.”³⁹⁸ First, Qoheleth may appeal to his status as elder and speaks with authority. This speaks of a community of learning where the wisdom is passed down with each generation. In

³⁹⁶ “La fonte della gioia, pertanto, è per il Qohelet ben diversa: non il culto, non la Torah, non la memoria delle azioni salvifiche di Dio, ma la consapevolezza della brevità della vita e la volontà imperscrutabile di Dio.” Mazzinghi, *Ho cercato*, 275.

³⁹⁷ Most scholars accept that the subject of the *הבל* phrase here is the future: Gordis, *Koheleth*, 324; Plumptre, 210; Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 40; Fischer, *Skepsis oder Furcht Gottes?*, 157, esp. 546; Hertzberg and Bardtke, *Der Prediger*, 200; R. B. Y. Scott, *Proverbs; Ecclesiastes* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965), 253.

³⁹⁸ Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment*, 74.

addition, the figure of the youth allows Qoheleth to speak to someone eminently open and willing to be taught. What one does not learn in one's youth is not impossible, but certainly more difficult to learn later in life.

Qoh 11:9b does not continue the sequence but opens a new series of imperatives: **והלך בדרכי לבך ובמראי עיניך**. The listener is urged to follow in the ways of one's heart and in the visions of one's eyes, a command that would normally have a pejorative sense as it reminds us of the Torah prohibition in Num 15:39 which said: "It shall be a tassel for you to look at and remember all the commandments of the LORD, so as to do them and not follow after your own heart and your own eyes, after which you played the harlot..."³⁹⁹ However, there is no reason that it does not have a totally positive sense here.⁴⁰⁰ In fact, "follow the ways of your heart," is an idiom for enjoyment and by using this expression, Qoheleth deliberately counters the position of setting the human heart and its desires in opposition to the divine will.⁴⁰¹ This is quite radical, indeed, as Qoheleth dares to say, in other words, that God's will is for the human to enjoy and it is licit to follow his heart's desires. In fact, if the human being does not enjoy his youth, God will judge him for this!⁴⁰² God's justice is linked essentially with the human being's capacity to enjoy. We are not far from the rabbinic teaching that God will judge the human beings for all the licit pleasures that he has not enjoyed during his life. "R. Hezekiah R. Kohen in the name of Rab: in the future the human being will be called into account for everything that his eye saw which he did not eat."⁴⁰³ This final joy text is a series of commands, imperatives and pleas for the human being to enjoy.

The core of this final call to joy in v. 9c might surprise us with its imperative: "and know that concerning all these things God will bring you into judgment." After this culminating call to joy, it might seem as though one must be careful to not enjoy too much, as if too much enjoyment would lead one to be found guilty of some transgression. This would thereby associate joy to its more negative meaning and hence this phrase is often seen as an orthodox gloss for these reasons of content, but also because of structural and metrical reasons.⁴⁰⁴ Most scholars, as noted in footnote 381, seem to think that Qoheleth could not say such a statement, as it seems to contradict the ideas he transmits elsewhere. However, we must recall that this is not the first time that Qoheleth speaks of God's judgment. In addition to 11:9c, the term **משפט**

³⁹⁹ Num 15:39; cf. Seow who concludes that this saying in Qoheleth "has nothing to do with how one makes ethical decisions (i.e., whether one follows one's heart or obeys divine orders)." Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 350.

⁴⁰⁰ As it does for example in Is 57:17; Job 31:7; Sir 5:2 and Nm 15:39. Mazzinghi, *Ho cercato*, 276.

⁴⁰¹ Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment*, 76.

⁴⁰² Mazzinghi, *Ho cercato*, 280.

⁴⁰³ Menachem writer of commentary Katz, *Talmud Tractate Qiddushin* (Jerusalem: 2016), 4.12.

⁴⁰⁴ The following consider 11:9c as a gloss of a pious editor: Vélchez Líndez, *Ecclesiastes*, 400; Carl Siegfried, *Prediger und Hoheslied*, HKAT II, 3, 2 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1898), 73; Podechard, *L'Ecclésiaste*, 452; Lauha, *Kohelet*, 205. 209; Diethelm and Lehmann, *Untersuchungen zur Eigenart des Buches Qohelet*, 166-167; Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 136.

comes up in 3:16–17; 5:7; 8:5–6; and 12:14. In both 3:16–17 and 5:7 the term **משפט** is found paired with the root **צדק** and it seems to have a judicial sense. In 3:17 and 8:6, the main meaning of both uses of the root seems to be condemnation to death.⁴⁰⁵ However, 8:5–6 puts “judgement” parallel to “time” in the phrase **עת ומשפט** and it takes on a completely different sense. If the human being could expect a judgment according to his actions, the future would remain less hidden and therefore, in these verses **משפט** would be a synonym of time, transmitting the standard of one’s behavior.⁴⁰⁶ Nevertheless, as we have seen elsewhere, Qoheleth is incapable of understanding a divine justice that corresponds to the rules of retribution. It is therefore not unlikely for the statement in v. 9c to be authentically Qoheleth’s, and we cannot take for granted that the judgement will be negative. An important factor to keep in mind is that it is placed at the heart of the final joy text of the book, a generally positive context, and therefore we must explore the relationship of joy with judgement and take it seriously. If we look to other biblical texts, we find more often that joy is the consequence or outcome of a judgment, especially of someone acting with justice. For example, Proverbs shows the expected relationship according to the traditional retributive mentality, namely that those who are just will be rewarded with joy. “When justice is done, it brings joy to the righteous but terror to evildoers.” (Prov 21:15) Therefore, here as well, we might expect that if one enjoys in the right measure, with the adequate balance, due justice, and reverence, God will take this into account. Hence, we cannot know if the judgement will be positive or negative and this is Qoheleth’s objective, that we resign to our sense of control at predicting how God will judge.

There is also a link between this joy text and the one in Qoh 5:17–19 because of the repetition of the word **לב**. Interestingly, the word **לב** is found three times in 9a-b, 10a. Looking back to our study of **לב** in Qoh 5 and the conclusions that we reached after studying the contentious phrase “God answers/occupies the human being with *joy in his heart*” **בשמחה לבו**, we can say that joy is once more associated with this focal point, the “heart” of the human being. In Qoh 11:10, the word **לב** is the potential seat of irritation or anger and therefore **כעס** belongs more to the emotional sphere rather than to the intellectual sphere, whereas **רעה** resides in the flesh referring to illness. Both **הילדות** and **השחרות** refer to youth, therefore the expressions is a hendiadys. This verse concludes with the word **הבל** and in this case it refers to youth. Youth is “fleeting” and “ephemeral,” and consequently, this qualification adds to the urgency of living joy.

⁴⁰⁵ Carmen Dell'Aversano, "mišpāt in Qoh. 11:9c," in *Biblische und Judaistische Studien. Festschrift für Paolo Sacchi* (ed. A. Vivian; vol. 29; New York; Bern: Lang, 1990), 121-34, 127.

⁴⁰⁶ Gorssen, "La coherence de la conception de Dieu dans l'Ecclesiaste," 301-305.

III.3. THE FINAL JOY TEXT IN COMPARISON TO THE PREVIOUS ONES

As noted already, the vocabulary used to present the enjoyment theme in chs. 2–9 is not used in this joy text, in fact the exhortation is no longer directed to the human being's physical needs and appetites but is instead focused on the person's emotional and mental needs. The very use of the word *לב* highlights this emphasis.⁴⁰⁷ This final joy text is the only one that does not include the following elements common to the other joy texts: eating, drinking, some phrase in relation to one's work, or a direct mention of God's action of giving. It may illumine our study to highlight the elements which are specifically absent from the final joy text.

Throughout the joy texts there is a build-up in terms of the human being's positive experience of work. While in 2:24–26 the human being was to “tell himself that his labor is good,” Qoh 3:13 took a step forward in the affirmation of the goodness of work by saying that there is nothing better than “to see the good in all his work.” Qoh 5:18 God has empowered the human being “to rejoice in his work,” while in Qoh 8:15 the experience of joy “stands by him in his work.” Already, the joy text in Qoh 9:7–10 begins to change and develop this common thread of “work,” by saying that “it is now that God favors your works.” This statement in 9:7 brings God's approval and favor in direct relationship to the human being's work and therefore, to “enjoy life...all the days of your fleeting life...is your reward for your work for which you have labored under the sun.” (9:9) However, in reaching Qoh 11:7–10, we no longer find any mention of work. We will look at the possible reason for this when we wrap up this chapter in the conclusions.

In addition, while all of the previous joy texts noted how God gave life or gave joy, the only mention of God in Qoh 11:7–10 does not directly use the name “God” though it is clear in v. 9 that he refers to God with the use of the 3ms verb *נתן* wherefore the implied giver is clearly God: “...all the days of your fleeting life which *he* has given you.” Although Qoheleth does not tell us directly, he takes for granted that the message has been communicated and that we know that God alone is the source of joy. The imperative is positive: it is to enjoy life in the here and now.⁴⁰⁸

⁴⁰⁷ Ogden, “Qoheleth XI 7–XII 8,” 31.

⁴⁰⁸ Cf. Whybray, “Qoheleth, Preacher of Joy,” 91.

IV. QOHELETH 12:1–7

- | | | |
|---|---|--|
| 1 | זכר את־בוראיך בימי בחורתך עד אשר לא־יבאו ימי הרעה והגיעו שנים אשר תאמר אין־לי בהם חפץ: | And remember your Creator ⁴⁰⁹ in the days of your youth, before ⁴¹⁰ not only the days of evil come, but the years approach when you will say, "I have no joy in them." |
| 2 | עד אשר לא־תחשך השמש והאור והירח והכוכבים ושבּו העבים אחר הגשם: | before not only the sun and the light and the moon and the stars become dark; but the clouds return after the rain; |
| 3 | ביום שיזעו שמרי הבית והתעותו אנשי החיל ובטלו הטחנות כי מעטו וחשבו הראות בארבות: | On the day when the guardians of the house tremble, and the strong men are bent, and the grinding women cease because they are few, and those looking through the windows ⁴¹¹ grow dim; |
| 4 | וסגרו דלתים בשוק בשפל קול הטחנה ויקום לקול הצפור וישחו כל־בנות השיר: | and the doors to the street are shut, and the sound of the mill is low; and the voice of the birds will rise, and all the daughters of the song are weakened; |
| 5 | גם מגבה יראו וחתחתים בדרך וינאץ השקד ויסתבל החגב ותפר האביונה כי הלך האדם אל־בית עולמו וסבבו בשוק הספדים: | also, one will fear the High One and the terrors in the street; and the almond tree blossoms and the locust tree is laden with fruit, and the caper berry blossoms because ⁴¹² the human being has gone to his eternal house and the mourners are going around in the street. |
| 6 | עד אשר לא־ירתק חבל הכסף ותרץ גלת הזהב ותשבר כד על־המבוע ונרץ הגלגל אל־הבור: | Before not only the silver cord is severed, and the golden bowl is crushed; but a jar is shattered upon a spring of water, and the wheel at the well is broken, |

⁴⁰⁹ The Hebrew word בוראיך is apparently a plural and the form is sometimes explained as the "plural of majesty," but it is best to interpret the form as the result of the frequent confusion in late Hebrew of III-~~א~~ and III-Weak roots. With regards to the meaning of the word, though there has been much discrepancy, it is hard to think that something other than "creator" is intended as the primary meaning. By the end of the passage (12:7), with its allusion to the creation of humanity (Gen 2:7; 3:19), it is difficult not to think of the creator.

⁴¹⁰ Hebrew עד אשר לא, lit. "until when not," means "before." This phrase is repeated at strategic moments in the poem (vv. 1b, 2a, 6a).

⁴¹¹ Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, the feminine participle ראות refers to the eyes (Gen 45:12; Deut 3:21; 4:3; 11:7; 28:32; 2Sam 24:3; 1Kgs 1:48; Is 30:20; Jer 20:4; 42:2). This is the only passage where there is ambiguity, but the additional בארבות "through the windows" allows us to understand that "those who look" are women. The motif of women who look through the window belongs to a literary convention, often used to express the dashed hopes of the women (see S. Abramsky, "The Woman Who Looked Out the Window," *Beth Mikra* 25 (1980): 114-24.)

⁴¹² Here we have an explicative-causal clause introduced by כי.

- 7 וישב העפר על-הארץ כשהיה והרוח תשוב אל-האלהים אשר נתנה: and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the life breath returns to God who gave it.

This final poem of Qoheleth has been the source of much confusion and has been studied and interpreted in numerous ways.⁴¹³ An allegorical interpretation was the most common, according to which Qoheleth was believed to speak metaphorically of the reality of old age in the nearly twenty phenomena listed in 12:3–6, nevertheless, there are many arguments against this theory and there are those who believe that Qoheleth is speaking of death and beyond more than old age. Other scholars have opted for a more literalistic solution and hence 12:1–7 would be the description of a house in ruins and the uselessness of human efforts,⁴¹⁴ or the description of a funeral which would read it literally, symbolically and allegorically.⁴¹⁵ Others still interpret it as a *masnal* on the winter time of life or old-age.⁴¹⁶ As we have already noted in the previous section, there is a strong argument that the metaphor of the storm describes the reality of death. Finally, a symbolic reading would see a cosmic or eschatological dimension to this poem as the Church Fathers already did, beginning with Gregory Thaumaturgus.⁴¹⁷ I don't pretend to offer a completely new interpretation, but conscious that we are before a poetic text which communicates on various levels, I will study this poem mainly through the lens of the metaphor of the storm which describes the reality of creation, chaos, and death. Through this reading of the poem and its symbols we will shed new light upon its meaning by means of the themes of creation, time, death, joy, and God.⁴¹⁸

⁴¹³ For more on the history of exegesis on this passage see: Mazinghi, *Ho cercato*, 281-309; Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 794-825.

⁴¹⁴ Sawyer notes that old age is not a matter in which Qoheleth has thus far expressed interest and perhaps we should look beyond this common view concluded due to the contrast in 12:1 with the days of one's youth. J. F. A. Sawyer, "The Ruined House in Ecclesiastes 12: A Reconstruction of the Original Parable," *JBL* 94 (1975): 519-31.

⁴¹⁵ Fox, "Aging and Death in Qohelet 12," 55-77.

⁴¹⁶ Loretz, "Poetry and Prose in the Book of Qohelet (1:1-3:22; 7:23-8:1; 9:6-10; 12:8-14)," 155-189; Gilbert, "La description de la vieillesse " 96-109.

⁴¹⁷ For more on the eschatological interpretation of this poem in Patristic Exegesis see: Sandro Leanza, "Eccl. 12,1-7: l'interpretazione escatologica dei Padri e degli esegeti medievali," *Aug* 18 (1978): 191-208. The starting point of Gregory Thaumaturgus was the reference to the stars in Qoh 12:1 which he linked to eschatological texts such as Joel 2:11 and Is 13:9. In addition, see following study which understands Qoh 11:7-12:8 in terms of an allegory based on mythological and cosmological imagery set in an apocalyptic key, perhaps complementary to the allegory of human old age: H.A.J. Kruger, "Old Age Frailty Versus Cosmic Deterioration? A Few Remarks on the Interpretation of Qohelet 11,7 - 12,8," in *Qohelet in the Context of Wisdom* (ed. A. Schoors; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1998), 399-411. Finally, for a more recent take on Qoheleth as "cultural memory" and reading this poem as containing resonances of national and not only cosmic disaster, see: Barbour, *The Story of Israel in the Book of Qohelet: Ecclesiastes as Cultural Memory*, 164-167.

⁴¹⁸ "El autor parece moverse de la descripción directa al símbolo profundo pasando por la alegoría menuda e ingeniosa. El efecto de la pieza es algo extraño por la mezcla de procedimientos de estilo; puede ser que para los contemporáneos resultase menos extraño el tejido de las alusiones." Luis Alonso Schökel, *Ecclesiastés y Sabiduría* (Madrid: Ediciones Cristiandad, 1974), 66. "Il poeta si serve però di simboli, che fanno del testo un

IV.1. QOHELETH 12:1

In 12:1, Qoheleth is inviting the human being to remember the Creator, to look to God and place one's focus and attention on a reality qualitatively different than the passing and temporal human reality of life "under the sun." In addition, Qoheleth invites the young person to come close to his Creator from the start, before death approaches and it is too late. This remembrance of the divinity guarantees true joy in this present life.⁴¹⁹ The imperative verb זָכַר "remember" which begins v. 1 points to the jussive form of this verb previously used in 11:8 which read: "let him remember the days of darkness for they will be many." This was initially a negative memory in contrast with rejoicing in the light and in the many years in the first half of v. 8. Qoheleth 12:1 will resolve the tension created earlier by now putting God "your Creator" as the principal element of one's memory.⁴²⁰ To remember is an activity in the present which brings the past to the *now*. The verb זָכַר for the Israelite people and their faith is of great significance because it was a continuous call to be aware of the ways that God had rescued them out of slavery in Egypt, and hence it has a salvific meaning. In this specific case, Qoheleth is calling on us to remember the God who created us, the one who brought our life into this world. Qoheleth does not point to the Savior and redeemer,⁴²¹ a concept of God more common within Israelite tradition, but he points further back to God our Creator and the moment of our creation. Just the same, God is placed at the focus and core of the human being's memory.

The term used for "your Creator," בּוֹרְאֵיךְ is a plural form of the qal participle בָּרָא, meaning "to create," with the second masculine singular possessive suffix. It is a hapax in the Hebrew Bible although the singular form, "your Creator," is found in Isaiah 43:1.⁴²² There have been many proposals to correct the text, since according to some scholars it initially seemed so out of place. Some scholars prefer to read "your well" as suggested by the critical apparatus of the BHS, or even "your grave." The arguments to defend the translation "your Creator" include, first that the context supports this reading, since God has already been introduced in 11:9c and the poem concludes recalling God in 12:7. Next, Qoheleth alludes to the Genesis creation texts since particularly 12:7 points to Gen 2:7 and 3:19, and hence the translation "Creator" seems adequate. Finally, the ancient versions of the Bible fully support the

"testo in movimento", non chiuso in se stesso, ma aperto a ulteriori significati; se talora vi è allegoria, questa non può essere chiusa in un significato univoco." Mazzinghi, *Ho cercato*, 308. For a comprehensive summary of the different ways of reading this poem, see also: Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 333-349.

⁴¹⁹ "Life which God gives is to be taken and enjoyed in all its fullness, however at the same time one must bear ever in mind that death and Sheol lie in everyman's future, and such an awareness cannot but impinge upon life in the present." Ogden, "Qoheleth XI 7-XII 8," 30.

⁴²⁰ Mazzinghi, *Ho cercato*, 272.

⁴²¹ The concepts "savior" and "redeemer" do not refer to the conception present in the New Testament but to גֹּאֲל in the Israelite understanding.

⁴²² This is the only time the participle of the verb בָּרָא is used to describe God in the Wisdom Literature. Of the 12 other times in which this occurs in the MT, 11 cases are from texts in Deutero-Isaiah.

MT.⁴²³ We cannot however exclude that Qoheleth is intentionally playing on the homophony of different terms. Rabbi Aqabia ben Mahalalel in the medieval reading of this verse notes the provocative play on words: “Reflect upon three things and you will not fall into the clutches of transgression: Know from whence you came, whither you are going, and before whom you are going to have to give a full account of yourself... before the King of king of kings, the Holy One, the blessed.”⁴²⁴ Qoheleth undoubtedly intends to allude to these different meanings, as the poem looks towards the Hebrew word בור meaning “well,” “source,” “cistern,” or “fountain” which conveniently ends this poem at 12:7. The meaning “cistern” would additionally point to the reality of death, since empty cisterns were at times used as prisons. (Jer 38:6; Lam 3:53; Ps 40:2; 69:15). The “pit” where Joseph was thrown into was a beer or dry well (Gen 37:24).

It is significant to highlight the 2nd person suffix possessive pronoun, which gives a very personal touch to Qoheleth’s concept of God. Despite the widely diffused thought that Qoheleth’s God is distant and impersonal, Qoheleth is now addressing the reader directly. Qoheleth 12 is addressed to “you.” The scene represents the fate of the reader, since it is syntactically circumstantial to a main clause in the second person (12:1a). Qoheleth is stating bluntly that this is what lies ahead for you.⁴²⁵ Therefore what follows in the different images and metaphors takes on a very personal flavor. To remember the Creator as one confronts the certainty of old age and death means to appreciate and learn to enjoy the life given to us by our Creator.⁴²⁶ It is not a desperate invitation for the young person to enjoy life before it is too late, but rather it is born of a certainty which reveals how deeply anchored Qoheleth is in the faith of his people. In remembering both the source and the end of life, our creation and our death, the human being discovers God’s initial intention for human life and is able to encounter joy.⁴²⁷ Within the reality of a transitory and fleeting life, it is precisely in remembering God the Creator that one finds a deeper motivation to live and enjoy life. If God has wanted our lives to exist, and God has created so many other beautiful realities, then God in his goodness sees a purpose and end to our life.

In 12:1b we have the first עַד אֲשֶׁר לֹא phrase which rhythmically marks this poem at vv. 1b, 2, and 6. In 12:1b, “Before not only the days of evil come...” we first note that Qoheleth is using the temporal expression “days” to refer to a specific moment in time. The question is what Qoheleth means by “days of evil.” For a fuller understanding, it must be read with the subsequent phrase linked by a *waw conjunctivum*, “but the years approach when you say I have no delight in them.” Once again, the word “years” signals a moment in time that is to come

⁴²³ Mazzinghi, *Ho cercato*, 282.

⁴²⁴ Jacob Neusner, *Torah from our Sages: Pirke Avot* (Chappaqua, NY: Rossel Books, 1984), 93.

⁴²⁵ Fox, “Aging and Death in Qohelet 12,” 71.

⁴²⁶ Mazzinghi, *Ho cercato*, 285.

⁴²⁷ Cf. Mazzinghi, *Ho cercato*, 285.

which we know to not be particularly pleasurable. There is a clear emphasis on the aspect of time, whether it is described by means of the word “days” or “years.” It places the human being in the realm of time and specifically in the moment of “the days of your youth,” limited by the word “before,” which begins the final clause of 12:1b and which contains “evil days” and “years” as further references to time. We are before the description of a difficult time; a time when one loses the enthusiasm and drive with which s/he originally began a project. Most often, scholars have taken this to refer to old age, however, this subject is one that Qoheleth does not seem to have great interest in, and it would also not fit into the framework of the unexpected or unpredictable. Unlike death and accidents, old age comes to the human being at a foreseeable point in life. Therefore, it seems preferable “to take this as referring again to the unpredictability of human endeavor, a recurring theme in Qoheleth and incidentally, one which nicely mirrors the uncontrollable processes of nature, to be described next.”⁴²⁸ Therefore, I would not say that these metaphors and figures point exclusively to old age, but rather to the reality of death. The “days of evil” and the “years” in which one says “I have no delight in them” can also be the reality of a young or middle-aged person who has never learned to enjoy. We might even say that by not living joy s/he lives as though s/he were already dead. It is best to learn early on what may be more difficult to learn as time passes. “Evil days” or “days of distress” are not dependent on one’s age but on the state of one’s interior life and one’s relationship with God, which is why Qoheleth is adamant in reminding us to “remember your Creator” before we lose our life and it is too late.

The subsequent stich 12:1c “...but the years approach when you say I have no delight in them,” includes another temporal clause where Qoheleth warns of a time without joy. The distinctive feature of this time frame is that Qoheleth uses the Hebrew word *חפץ*, in some places meaning “affair” or “matter” and in others, as we have studied, meaning “joy” or “pleasure.” It comes up 8 times in the book in very interesting contexts: Qoh 3:1, 17; 5:3, 7; 8:3, 6; 12:1, 10. The first time that it comes up in 3:1, it is used in the phrase that kicks off the poem on time: “There is an appointed time for everything, and a time for every affair [joy] under the heavens.” Both uses of *חפץ* in Qoh 3:1 and 17 frame the reflections on time and are best understood meaning “affair” or “matter” but could also be read with the secondary meaning “joy,” and similarly 8:6 is a variation of 3:1. The eight-fold use of *חפץ* is striking and Qoheleth reminds us of the principal poem on time with each subsequent use of the word *חפץ*. In Qoh 5:3, 8:3, 12:1, 10 the meaning is “joy” or “pleasure,” whereas 5:7 is the only place where the meaning can only be “matter.” Here in 12:1 Qoheleth’s intention with the word *חפץ* is “joy.”

⁴²⁸ Sawyer, "The Ruined House," 523.

IV.2. QOHELETH 12:2

Qoh 12:2: “...before not only the sun and the light and the moon and the stars become dark; but the clouds return after the rain,” introduces the second **עַד אֲשֶׁר לֹא** which begins another clause that depends on the opening imperative invitation to “remember.” Qoheleth invokes the sun, light, moon and stars and brings us back to the poem which started the book in 1:4–11. While these bodies of nature have a cyclical existence, and as we have noted, are a reliable source of telling time, alternating between light and darkness, they will become definitively dark “on the last day.” In a similar way, the human being will reach the end of his cycle and his life will be extinguished for good. The first half of the phrase describes what we earlier said to be a predictable phenomenon. At the end of the day or during a strong storm, the sun, moon and stars become dark, only to renew their cycle on the following day, however, the fact that clouds return after the rain is something less predictable. Actually, after the rain, one expects the clouds to clear, as is so often the case in the Land after a strong shower.⁴²⁹ The celestial signs that accompany the last day, darkness as judgement for the evil ones and light as salvation for the just are very common features amongst the apocalyptic tradition and Qumran writings. “Qoheleth uses such eschatological language to speak of the end of human life; it is as if the whole cosmos is coming to an end.”⁴³⁰ We must keep these symbols of the natural world in mind, since the storm and the chaos will prove to be important when we look at this poem as a whole.

IV.3. QOHELETH 12:3

Qoh 12:3a breaks the sequence of phrases beginning with **עַד אֲשֶׁר לֹא** and begins with: **בְּיוֹם שֶׁ-** “On the day when...” This is a common eschatological expression used throughout the Hebrew Bible and used only here in Qoheleth. While the word “day” in the plural is very common throughout the book, this is one of six times that **יוֹם** is found in the singular. The remaining five occurrences are in Qoh 7:1 “day of death and day of birth,” 7:14 “day of prosperity and day of adversity;” and 8:8 “day of death.” This expression also connects us to the previous verses, and we know that the description which follows is that which occurs on the day in which one’s human life comes to an end.

Qoheleth offers the following images in v. 3: “the guardians of the house tremble, and the strong men are bent, and the grinding women cease because they are few, and those looking through the windows grow dim.” All these images point to the reality of fear, weakness, and vulnerability. The guardians of the house are meant to offer security and protection to the rest

⁴²⁹ Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 139.

⁴³⁰ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 353.

of the inhabitants, and yet if they tremble then we can assume that they feel vulnerable and experience fear.⁴³¹ If they themselves feel insecure, how can they guard and offer security? The strong men are those who similarly are meant to offer their power and strength to defend and combat whatever comes, and yet they are bent by forces that are greater and stronger than themselves.⁴³² This image epitomizes the weakness of humanity even when it is supposedly at its strongest. The grinding women are those who work the mill which grinds the harvested wheat and make the flour which provides the bread, a staple for the nourishment of the household.⁴³³ They are the image of one who is tirelessly and perseveringly at work, but the fact that they cease because they are few only points to a decadence within the house itself, a slowing down of life and energy.⁴³⁴ Perhaps they are few because some of them have died, or perhaps they cease because they have lost motivation and strength. Finally, we have those who look through the windows. Their eyes are the symbol of light, who see, who observe, and who prove that there is life within the house. Yet these eyes and this light grows dim, and therefore the life that once was in that house, in that body is slowly extinguished. Interestingly, the images that Qoheleth offers in 12:3 describe the incapacity of each of the members of the household to live up to their role.⁴³⁵ These different characters are presented in a parallel manner between the rich nobility and the servants. The guardians and the grinding women being the servants and the strong men and the women who look through the windows being the nobility. Once more, Qoheleth continues to demonstrate that there are no differences between the rich and poor, as all experience weakness and vulnerability in just the same way. All are limited and all alike will one day die!

IV.4. QOHELETH 12:4

The next verse, 12:4 continues to describe the consequences of the situation from v. 3. The doors of the street are normally closed at night, so we have a figurative description of the “night,” the close of daytime or the close of “life” which has arrived. “The sound of the mill is

⁴³¹ The root זוע used here for tremble is only used twice in the Hebrew bible, here and in Esther 5:9 where Haman is angry at Mordecai because he did not tremble with fear before him. The phrase שמרי הבית is found only once in the Hebrew Bible and it refers to those “watching over” or “guarding the house.” The verb שמר can mean watch, guard (Jdg 1:24), protect (1Sam 26:16; Ps 121:7), with care and attention (Deut 4:6; 5:1; Nm 23:12).

⁴³² Interestingly the same root used here to describe the strong men who are “bent” אנשי החיל has been used in Qoh 1:15 and 7:13 to speak of that which God has made crooked and the fact that no one is able to straighten it. Hence, the strong men here are incapable of straightening themselves pointing to their impotence.

⁴³³ הקְחִינּוֹת This particular word used for “grinding women” is only found in Qoheleth.

⁴³⁴ Kruger points out that the fact that they are few points “to an extraordinary catastrophe that can be interpreted as the judgment of God – be it the fall of the house of an individual ‘evildoer’ or the destruction of all houses, whose comprehensive size is then named here through the naming of socially higher and lower positions, as well as of men and women.” Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 202.

⁴³⁵ Mazzinghi, *Ho cercato*, 290.

low” and reflects the fact that the grinding women are no longer at work. However, 12:4b is difficult on a textual level. The lamed of לְקוֹל is emphatic and introduces the subject הַצִּפּוֹר. Therefore, the phrase would be translated “the voice of the birds will rise.”⁴³⁶ This rising voice of the birds contrasts with the dying sound of the mill in the preceding verse. Next come the “daughters of the song are weakened” where the final verb is שָׁחָ which means “to prostrate,” “to be lowered,” or “to weaken.” Is 29:4 may give us some clues for how to interpret this difficult verse since it also uses the verb שָׁחָ with reference to קוֹל and in its context it means “to weaken.” Therefore, the melodic song of the birds here in 12:4, which could symbolize the vitality and joy of life, rises, weakens and ceases. We are therefore immersed in an atmosphere of mourning and death.

IV.5. QOHELETH 12:5

Qoh 12:5 continues the description with four more images in the first part. It begins with the phrase: גַּם מִגְבַּה יִרְאוּ וַחֲתָחֲתִים בְּדֶרֶךְ, “Also one will fear the High One and the terrors in the street...” To begin, we have the fears that one experiences. It is actually unusual for the root גָּבַהּ to indicate the heights, as it is often understood; instead in some cases this root points to God as the “High One” and hence, the greatness of God.⁴³⁷ If we read this root with the latter meaning, then the fear of God and hence reverence of God envelops the mourners as they accompany the dead. The terror is death itself that lies waiting at the door of the house. Perhaps it is for this reason that the doors are shut, trying to shut out death.

The description continues with images from nature: the almond tree, locust tree and caperberry plant. The most common interpretation of these images has been as deliberately obscured sexual allusions, but I think this is reading too much into it. I agree with Fox who states that “they are best understood literally, as descriptions of nature”⁴³⁸ that stand in contrast to the human being. After all, nature, as opposed to the human being, experiences birth and renewal in the springtime, whereas when the human being reaches the wintertime of his life with death, s/he encounters the end. The verb used with the almond tree וַיִּנְאֵץ has been misinterpreted because of its superfluous aleph, however it is best understood as “blooms.”⁴³⁹ “The

⁴³⁶ Fox, who takes up an old intuition of Taylor, thinks of the song of the birds as a sign of bad luck and death. Charles Taylor, *The Dirge of Coheleth in Ecclesiastes xii Discussed and Literally Interpreted* (London: 1874), 19-20; Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 325-326. Lohfink also supports this interpretation. Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 136.

⁴³⁷ Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 807-808. Mazzinghi, *Ho cercato*, 294. Fox notes that one problem is that the word גָּבַהּ without an article is not a recognizable epithet for God, however, if we vocalize מִגְבַּהּ, the min “from” indicates that the source of the fear is heaven and hence acts as an allusion to God. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 327.

⁴³⁸ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 328.

⁴³⁹ Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 808. Some scholars, such as Podechard have derived the word from נִיץ meaning “is despised” which makes little sense in the context. Podechard, *L'Ecclésiaste*.

almond is a popular tree that thrives in Israel and is noted for its early blossoming in January/February (before it produces its leaves!) while the other trees are still bare.”⁴⁴⁰ Interestingly, it is the almond tree, an early bloomer which offers a bit of hope in the heart of winter, the season which most represents death.⁴⁴¹ The almond tree points to a new season which is about to be inaugurated, highlighting the beauty of death and the hope of new life. Next, we have *ויסתבל החגב* most often translated as “the locust gets heavy.” Most scholars interpret this as the insect, however, since this occurs between and parallel to two sentences describing the blossoming of trees, the word *חגב* is probably the name of a tree.⁴⁴² To “be laden” would describe the growth of buds or fruit. An interesting fact is that Carob trees can survive long drought periods, but in order to grow fruit, they need 500 to 550 mm rainfall per year. The fact that the locust is here described to be laden would therefore coincide with the context of the heavy rains and storm that we see in Qoh 12:2. Finally, *ותפר האביונה* is mostly understood as “the caperberry which is frustrated.” However, the verb *פרר* meaning “frustrated” does not make any sense. Therefore, the verb *ותפר* is best read as *ותפרה* (ה-ח haplography) meaning “blossoms.” The verb-pair *פרח* and *נצץ* are also found parallel in Songs 7:13.⁴⁴³

It may help us to note the explicative-causal clause introduced by *כי* in the second half of the verse: “because the human being has gone to his eternal home and the mourners are going around in the street.” It offers a significant clue to our interpretation of the first part of v. 5. That which is renewed and reborn in the plant world after winter contrasts with the finality of the experience of death described by Qoheleth who speaks of the eternal home as the final destination of the human being. This is the only time that the expression *אל-בית עולמו* is used in the Hebrew Bible. This phrase most likely has an Egyptian origin and comes from a post-classical phase of biblical Hebrew.⁴⁴⁴ The term is also found in Hellenistic times on Punic and Palmyran grave inscriptions.⁴⁴⁵ Ps 49:12 uses a similar expression to describe the tomb as “their houses forever” using the plural of “house.” The contrast between those who die and those who live is poignant, since the dead person has one destination, “his eternal home,” while the mourners “go around” in the street. The verb *סבב*, “to go around” is used six times by Qoheleth. In

⁴⁴⁰ L. L. Walker, “shaqed,” *NIDOTTE* 4:231.

⁴⁴¹ “The early blossoming of the almond tree became a symbol of the rebirth of life in the spring.” Edward Lipinski, “שקד,” *TDOT* 15:450.

⁴⁴² This interpretation would be stretching it as there is no occurrence in Classical Hebrew as of yet that attests to this meaning. Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 809. However, as Fox argues, it would be the most logical meaning. In English “locust” is used to refer to the *Ceratonia siliqua*, commonly known as the carob tree or locust tree which is native to the Mediterranean region. C. R. Conder and H. H. Kitchener, *The Survey of Western Palestine: Memoirs of the Topography Orography Hydrography and Archaeology* (vol. 3; London: Committee of the Palestine Exploration Fund, 1883), 354.

⁴⁴³ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 328.

⁴⁴⁴ Avi Hurvitz, “*byt-qbrwt* and *byt-wlm*: Two Funerary Terms in Biblical Literature and Their Linguistic Background,” *Maarav* 8 (1992): 64-66 64-66. “In contracts from Murraba‘at, dying is paraphrased as going into the house of eternity.” (DJD II, 20:7; 21:12) Galling, *Der Prediger*.

⁴⁴⁵ Jenni, “Das Wort ‘olām im Alten Testament,” 245.

1:6 he uses it three times to describe the wind which goes around and around, seemingly pointlessly, while in 2:20 and 7:25 he uses it to describe his own vain attempts to find meaning in life.⁴⁴⁶ It is likely that here in 12:5 he wants to allude to this theme by emphasizing that no matter how much a mourner goes round and round, by not letting go of the one s/he mourns, s/he will not accomplish anything, much less bring the dead back to life.

IV.6. QOHELETH 12:6

We return to the third and final **עַד אֲשֶׁר לֹא** phrase which introduces Qoh 12:6 and four more images. "...the silver cord is severed, and the golden bowl is crushed, but a jar is shattered upon a spring of water, and the wheel at the well is broken." There is a clear structural connection between vv. 6–7 which can assist our comprehension of this difficult text.

6a: verb – noun – adjective; verb – noun – adjective
 6b: verb – noun – **על**-noun; verb – noun – **אל**-noun
 7a: verb – noun – **על**-noun – verb; 7b: noun – verb – **אל**-noun – verb

While all the verbs are in a *waw-yiqtol* form, only **וּנְרָץ** in v.6b is a qal perfect. In addition, the second to last verb in v.7 does not start the phrase but comes after the noun "spirit," changing the order and putting a special emphasis on "the return of the spirit" to God.

The four phrases in v.6 express the theme of "brokenness" as they each depict an implement or utensil whose functional life has reached its end, and the four verbs used **רָצַץ**, **רָתַק**, **רָצַץ**, **שָׁבַר**, and **רָצַץ** are synonyms for the word "destruction."⁴⁴⁷ Therefore, this verse offers a metaphorical description of death.⁴⁴⁸ We have two images, each developed in two different scenes. The first is a golden bowl sustained by a silver cord, which is a lamp. The silver cord is severed and hence the lamp is broken. This first image displays the destruction of light – life is darkened and extinguished and this results in death. In addition, the silver string that tears may also make one think of the life thread that is cut off.⁴⁴⁹ The word used for string or cord **חבל** is a homonym of the frequent and repeated word **הבל**. Instead of the **ה** it begins with a **ח**, but the reader would undoubtedly think of **הבל** and all the implications that accompany this word, all that is passing and ephemeral. The root **חבל** occurs only once in Qoheleth, but a total of 96 times in the entire Hebrew Bible. Its meaning especially in the Psalms and elsewhere is "cords of death," "cords

⁴⁴⁶ Sawyer, "The Ruined House," 529.

⁴⁴⁷ Ogden, "Qoheleth XI 7-XII 8," 35.

⁴⁴⁸ Gordis, *Koheleth*, 337.

⁴⁴⁹ Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet*, 267.

of Sheol” or “cords of affliction”⁴⁵⁰ and it symbolizes the cords, boundaries and limits of time and life. The second image is of a jar which is held by a cord and pulley at the water well, where the wheel at the well is crushed and hence the jar is broken. This image displays the destruction of that which draws water at its source, the well, the same word used for Creator, source and tomb which had come up in 12:1. Both images express finality and death. “With this climactic conclusion, Qoheleth portrays a dramatic reversal of cosmic creation that is occasioned by the death of the human creature. The end of civilization, or light and life, and the onset of eternal oblivion is occasioned by the death of human beings.”⁴⁵¹

Qoh 12:6 closes in a chiasmic manner the two images opened at the very beginning of this chapter in vv. 1–2. The image of the broken lamp in v. 6a which as we noted shows the destruction of light reflects 12:2 where the sun, light, moon and stars, nature’s lamps and sources of light become dark, while the image of the shattered jar at the spring and crushed wheel at the well הבור, in 12:6 points back to the opening of this poem in 12:1 where one is invited to “remember your Creator” בוראִיךְ.

IV.7. QOHELETH 12:7

Just as the destruction of the jar and well reminds us of the source and Creator, death brings us back to our place of origin, and essentially our source and Creator. Dust returns to dust and the breath of life returns to God who has given it.⁴⁵² For Qoheleth death is final. There is in no way a suggestion that Qoheleth believes in the immortality of the soul, as this is a concept foreign to the Hebrew Bible and even strange to the Late Greek texts including the book of Wisdom. Nevertheless, Qoheleth does not deny it explicitly.⁴⁵³ What he does tell us is that “the spirit will return to God who gave it.” What happens to the individual spirit when it returns to God is part of the mystery of God and whether it constitutes a continuation in God in a humanly incomprehensible way, is not completely out of the question. However, what is clear and certain is that death constitutes an absolute end to human-physical life. In fact, to stress this Qoheleth uses the anthropology from the Genesis creation narratives to show that there is no difference between the רוּחַ of the human being and that of animals.

⁴⁵⁰ i.e. Ps 18:5–6, 116:3, 119:61; 2 Sam 22:6; Job 3: 6–8.

⁴⁵¹ Perdue, *Wisdom & Creation*, 236.

⁴⁵² Cf. Ps 104:29f; Job 34:14f; Eccl 40:11.

⁴⁵³ The question of distinguishing the spirit of humans that went up and that of beasts, which went down in Qoh 3:19 does point to an intended differentiation. However, Qoheleth’s conclusion is “who knows?” “There is no contradiction between 2:21 and 12:7 which says that the breath returns to God.” Murphy, “Death and Afterlife in the Wisdom Literature,” 102–116. See also, Joseph Blenkinsopp, “Post-Mortem Existence in the Old Testament,” in *Lebendige Hoffnung - ewiger Tod?! Jenseitsvorstellungen im Hellenismus, Judentum und Christentum*, ABiG 24 (ed. Michael Labahn and Manfred Lang; Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2007), 33–51 33–51.

In 12:7 Qoheleth culminates his description of death and gives us a clue into his anthropology clearly modeled on the Genesis creation narratives. This verse is in fact inspired in Gen 2:7; 3:19 and other passages from the Hebrew Bible that reflect a circular/cyclical idea of life.⁴⁵⁴ Gen 2:7 says that the Lord God formed the human being “with the dust of the earth” עפר מן־האדמה “and he breathed into his nostrils the breath of life” נשמת חיים and the human being became a living being. In 12:7 Qoheleth uses the same word for dust used in Gen 2:7 and this dust is returned to the earth על־הארץ. Both in Qoh 3:19.21 and here in 12:7, Qoheleth substitutes the term from Gen 2:7 נשמת חיים with רוּחַ, a term that is also present in Genesis to indicate other living beings in Gen 2:19 and Gen 7:22, in addition to indicating wind or God’s spirit in Gen 1:2. While it could be said that both רוּחַ and נשמת חיים are generally synonymous and refer to an impersonal principal of life,⁴⁵⁵ the use of רוּחַ in Gen 1:2 which hovered over the waters at the dawn of creation, is indicative of God as a principal of life – “it is the vital power originating with God that activates and sustains both human life and creation.”⁴⁵⁶ This רוּחַ is not merely an impersonal breath that gives life, it is God that gives life by means of his breath and his creative word and this has far-reaching implications for our understanding of the human being and the vital principle that gives him life. Qoheleth 12:7 highlights this aspect of God’s giving, since it speaks of “the God who gave it” referring to the רוּחַ. We touch the very source of the divine vital principal.

Back in chapter II, we highlighted the diverse actions of “giving” which Qoheleth attributes to God. God gives a task to the human being (1:13; 2:26; 3:10), God gives joy (2:24; 2:26; 3:13; 5:17.18), God gives wisdom and knowledge (2:26), God gives “the everlasting” (עלם) (3:11), God gives days or years of life (5:17; 8:15; 9:9); God gives riches and wealth (5:18; 6:2); God gives the spirit (12:7). Looking at this final affirmation, the spirit which God gives to the human being, in relation to the previous gifts God has given, we may conclude that God’s gift of joy and time go hand in hand with the very gift of life. It may also be enlightening to examine other examples where God gives to the human being throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. In Gen 28:4, for example, God gives to Abraham the land of his sojourning, and in Gen 30:18 God gives Leah her wages. In Judg 8:3 God gives the enemies’ leaders into the hands of his people while in 1 Kgs 10:24 God gives Solomon the gift of wisdom, and in Neh 10:29 God gives the Torah to Moses. In Deut we have several examples of “God giving” to the human being: in 8:10 God gives the good land; in 12:15 the Lord God gives blessing; in 26:11 one is said to rejoice in all the good which the Lord God has given him and his household; and in 28:53 God gives his people the flesh of their offspring to eat. In all these cases, God gives only good things: God gives land, wisdom, Torah, and blessing. Essentially, God gives his people

⁴⁵⁴ For other references from the Hebrew Scriptures, see Ps 104:29; Gn 3:19; Ps 103.14; Job 10:9; 34:14-15.

⁴⁵⁵ For a complete discussion of this verse and the anthropology from Genesis see: Mazzinghi, *Ho cercato*, 300-302.

⁴⁵⁶ Job 27:3; Isa 42:5; Zech 12:1; Ps 104:29–30. Perdue, *Wisdom & Creation*, 207.

life and sustenance. Hence, there is a consistency and coherence between Qoheleth's God and the God of the Hebrew Scriptures: God's gifts are a great good for the human being, and therefore, the gift of joy coming from the hand of God is understood as having great value. Interestingly, though joy is a side-effect of being just and righteous in God's presence in many other passages (ie. Deut 12:7, 18; 16:11; 26:11; 1Chr 16:10; 2Chr 6:41; Ps 32:11;34:2;35:9; 40:16; 64:10; 70:4; 96:13; 97:12; 104:34, to name a few) Qoheleth is the only book of the Bible where God explicitly gives the human being the gift of joy.

IV.8. QOHELETH 12:1–7 AS IT RELATES TO THE OPENING POEM 1:3–11

We shall look at the relationship between the opening poem and the final poem of the book and the common themes reflected in each. Structurally, the poem in 12:1–7 completes the *inclusion* with the introductory poem in 1:3–11 and thematically, it returns to and closes many of the key issues addressed throughout Qoheleth's discourse, most importantly the images of nature and creation. This final poem which is Qoheleth's outstanding culmination represents the key points of his final message. He casts an eschatological nuance to his speech about death to make the bold assertion that his appeal to joy has significance of eschatological proportions. The theological basis to his discourse is therefore prolonged, as joy is no longer only a gift from God but God's command.

Both poems touch on the connection between the human being and the created world by means of three natural phenomena, the light of the sun, wind (רוּחַ), and water, which in being the necessary conditions of life, have real and symbolic meaning for the life of the human being. The first natural phenomenon is the sun which is said to rise and set repeatedly in 1:5 while 11:7 notes that light is sweet, and it is good for the eyes to see the sun. The sun has been one of the most traditional ways of measuring time. In addition, as we saw earlier, light is also symbolic of a joyful and successful life. Therefore, an interruption to the cycle of the sun would symbolize the cessation of time and hence the extinction of light is an expression of the process of dying or death (12:2, 6). The second phenomenon from nature is רוּחַ. In 1:6, the wind is turning upon itself, and coming and going, whereas 12:7 speaks of the spirit of God which God had given to the human being. "...der Mensch aber ohne die göttliche *rûah* nicht leben kann, klingt hier im Bild die Angewiesenheit des Menschen auf Gott und die Unsicherheit menschlichen Lebens an."⁴⁵⁷ Life is said to come from God's own breath or רוּחַ. The third phenomenon from nature highlighted in both poems is water. Together with the light of the sun and wind as breath, water is the third symbol which is essential for life to exist. These three natural elements which are vital to life unify the two poems at the start and end of the book in a way that highlights how much a part the human being is of God's greater creation. The water of the rivers

⁴⁵⁷ Zimmer, *Zwischen Tod und Lebensglück*, 138.

flow without ceasing in 1:7 until the pitcher shatters at the spring and the pulley breaks at the well 12:6.

The final poem begins with the imperative “remember” which forms a blatant contrast with the end of the opening poem in 1:11 where Qoheleth had said: “There is no remembrance of earlier things...there will be for them no remembrance among those who will come later still.” By beginning with the imperative “remember,” Qoheleth picks up where he left off and drives home the point that it is still possible to remember. Of course, he is referring to something very different since, one may not be able to remember the things that have been done (referring to 1:9–10) but it is always possible to remember one’s Creator in the days of one’s youth. The continual cycle of life which is presented at the beginning of Qoheleth’s discourse in 1:4–11 now finds its conclusion in 12:1–7 with the stark reality of death. As the word *הבל* has reminded us throughout the book, all things are fleeting and ephemeral and will end. No doubt, generations come and go (1:4) and are transitory and impermanent, even while the earth is permanent, yet the permanence that is guaranteed for the human being is *בית עולם* “eternal home” in 12:5, in other words, death. After all, the human being returns to the dust and earth from which he was formed.

We recall the question that opened Qoheleth’s discourse just after his *הבל* refrain: “what profit have we from all the toil which we toil at under the sun,” (1:3) what will remain of all our efforts? Qoh 12:7 gives a very accurate answer: “the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it.” Our dust remains and returns to the earth. Our spirit is not obliterated but returns to God. Since God remains, then the work we have done, our part in God’s work of creation, lives on in God who holds and collects the totality of our times: present, future, and past in Godself. Therefore, God’s creation and God’s ability to embrace the totality of time are related and very important for Qoheleth. Creation from the beginning in Qoh 1 until the end in Qoh 12 is expressed by means of the natural elements of light, wind or spirit, and water, and these are the places where time exists and manifests itself. While the first poem affirms the fact that there is nothing new under the sun, stemming from the belief that most things are predictable, expected, and part of repeated cycles, this final poem points to numerous images which indeed drive home the point Qoheleth has been making throughout the second half of the book: we cannot know or understand our future or our end. The “novelty” is that all things will end with death; there will be a close to the cycle. In the eschatological perspective, the endless repetition of nature and the endless cycle of times seen both in 1:4–11 and in the poem on time in 3:1–8 will one day come to their conclusion.

V. QOHELETH 12:8

8 הבל הבלים אמר הקוהלת הכל הבל: Utter breath, says Qoheleth, all is breath.

This concluding refrain which closes the book in 12:8 forms an inclusion with Qoh 1:2 the very first words with which Qoheleth opened the book: הבל הבלים אמר קהלת הבל הבלים הכל הבל. The refrain in Qoh 12:8 is slightly shortened, pointing to the initial theme in an abbreviated form and serving as a literary frame for the material in between. It also comes straight after a traditional affirmation of Israel's faith: the vital breath returns to God who gave it. The closing refrain culminates the explicit reflection on death in 12:6–7 and in its poetic fashion asserts that human life is transitory and ephemeral.

Looking back for a moment to the opening refrain in 1:2 in which הבל is repeated five times, Qoheleth gives us the thesis of what he wants to prove throughout his discourse. What sense does הבל have in this refrain; הבל as something ephemeral, vaporous, temporary, passing, or absurd and futile, or perhaps all these meanings together? If הבל is a poly-valent metaphor, then it would mean that all these meanings can comfortably fit into the one word. In addition, it could very well be that our Sage is using the known rhetoric function of *antanaclasis* whereby a phrase or word is repeatedly used, though the meaning of the word changes in each case.⁴⁵⁸ In this typical Hebrew superlative, Qoheleth emphasizes the greatest הבל, repeated twice for added emphasis and topped off with the affirmation that “all is הבל.” What does “all” refer to? All human existence? All that is present in heaven and on earth? Or is it merely all that is accessible and contained in the human experience which takes place “under the sun”? The verse following the refrain may give us a clue. We notice that 1:3 contains the question that comes up consistently throughout the first half of the book: “what profit/advantage (יתרון) is there to a person in all his/her labor...” The word יתרון appears only in Qoheleth (1:3; 2:11.13; 3:9; 5:8.15; 7:12; 10:10–11) and is usually translated as “profit/advantage,” but the basic meaning of the root “to remain” or “to be left over” is illuminating, therefore making Qoheleth's question: “what remains or what endures from the labor at which one toils.” Therefore, this “all” principally refers to this “profit,” that which “remains” of all our human efforts, and apparently, it all fades away, turning from breath to wind.

Now in the concluding verse Qoh 12:8, we have only one superlative. Qoheleth no longer finds the need to repeat הבל הבלים twice, perhaps because the emphasis is no longer necessary. He feels that it has been sufficiently proven throughout his discourse and we merely need one simple reminder. From 6:11–12 as we saw earlier, the question of purpose disappears,

⁴⁵⁸ Anthony Raymond Ceresko, "The Function of Antanaclasis in Hebrew Poetry, Especially in the Book of Qoheleth," *CBQ* 44 (1982): 551-69.

and we begin to see the repeated statement of “not knowing.” It is this, ironically, which “remains” – the certainty that we cannot know. In this way, then, the הבל refrain functions “in tandem with Qoheleth’s other refrain concerning what humans cannot know and cannot find/grasp.”⁴⁵⁹

Does this conclusion to the book of Qoheleth simply come full circle to where we began? Can it be that of a sceptic, a pessimist, one who is in total despair, or is it instead the affirmation of the wise person who accepts without discussion that which God has ordained for the life of the human being?⁴⁶⁰

VI. THE CREATOR GOD IN QOHELETH 11:7 – 12:8

The theme of creation shines through this final section of Qoheleth. As we saw in our study of Qoh 12:7 above, the expressions and vocabulary point us to the Genesis creation narratives. In addition, the context of this section and the various structures presented highlight the creation theme. In addition, “the demise of a person can be compared to the very undoing of creation itself... a reversion to the universal state of things preceding its creation.”⁴⁶¹ When opening the first creation narrative, Gen 1:2 offers the image of the earth being תהו ובהו, without “form or shape,” often translated as “chaos,” and with darkness covering the depths. Such an image is not necessarily pessimistic, as it opens a possibility for God to apply order and display creativity. In addition, as darkness dominated in the beginning, the disappearance of light in Qoh 12:2 may signify universal catastrophe, but it can also symbolize glorious restoration and apocalyptic promise as in Isa 60:19–20; Ps 139: 11–12. We shall therefore look at 11:7 – 12:8 with the creation model in the backdrop so that it might shed more light upon this text.

Just two verses before the joy text in 11:7–10, Qoh 11:5 offers a clear and direct reference to God as Creator who forms the bones in the womb of the pregnant woman. This verse emphasizes how we do not know the activity of God who makes all things. We are presented with a God whose creative work surpasses our comprehension and understanding. The way Qoh 11:5 uses the word רוּחַ is not clear from the start. It may be understood as wind or as God’s spirit, as demonstrated by the following translations: “As you do not know the path of the wind, or how the body is formed in a mother’s womb...” (NIV); “Just as you do not know how the breath comes to the bones in the mother’s womb...” (NRSV) We will first take a closer look at

⁴⁵⁹ Ceresko, “The Function of Antanaclasis,” 565.

⁴⁶⁰ Mazzinghi, *Ho cercato*, 303.

⁴⁶¹ T. A. Perry, *God’s Twilight Zone: Wisdom in the Hebrew Bible* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 129.

the meaning of the word רוח, and then we will see if the use of רוח in Qoh 11:5 and 12:7 has any relation to the use of רוח in the Genesis creation narratives.

VI.1. THE WORD רוח

Since רוח has such a broad range of meanings, it is difficult to capture its semantic breadth with a single term or phrase, hence רוח is variously defined as “blowing,” “air in motion,” “breath,” “wind,” and “spirit.”⁴⁶² The invisible essence of רוח is known principally by the effect that it has on the visible world. It communicates something that cannot be measured or grasped. Wind cannot be contained, and its direction cannot be controlled. Oftentimes, a sense of “worthlessness” has been attributed to the words רוח and הבל in the sense of “wind” or “breath,” probably because the wind itself is fickle and vanishes without a trace. At the same time anything insubstantial, unstable, or deceptive is carried off by the wind and hence resembles the wind.⁴⁶³ Just the same, one may simply interpret these aspects of wind and breath as indicative of the transitoriness of life. However, on a more positive note, breath is the essence of life and a direct result of the divine, creative power of God given to his creation and hence רוח may be understood as physical vitality.⁴⁶⁴ God directs and attracts the “spirit,” whether it be God’s Spirit or the human spirit. Wind, breath and spirit have in common the fact that human beings do not control them. As soon as one exhales, that breath is lost in the air. These elements in turn, have a special relationship to time. As the wind blows and traverses the living space of the human being, so too does time traverse human life, and just as wind cannot be grasped or controlled, so too we cannot take hold of time. In this sense, wind may be understood as a metaphor for the mystery of existence and parallel in character to time.

Interestingly, Lys in his overview of the word רוח throughout Scripture, comes to conclude that in the wisdom literature it cannot be disconnected from the question of who the human being is in his/her search for meaning, authenticity and hence, wisdom.⁴⁶⁵ Indeed, the word רוח designates at the same time the respiration and inspiration of the human being.⁴⁶⁶ Though it is true that both human beings and beasts are breathing beings, the breath of humankind is connected with that which it accomplishes in life by means of the inspiration that God gives. God can give רוח, a power emanating from God that vivifies or enables the recipient to perform a particular task. Therefore, both respiration and inspiration are God-given gifts that

⁴⁶² VanGemerén, Willem A., “רוח,” *NIDOTTE* 3:1073.

⁴⁶³ Heinz-Josef Fabry, “רוח,” *TDOT* 13:374-375.

⁴⁶⁴ VanGemerén, “רוח,” *NIDOTTE* 3:1074.

⁴⁶⁵ See, for example, Prov 1:23 where רוח appears in the mouth of Lady Wisdom.

⁴⁶⁶ “Nous avons vu en effet que *rûah*, partant de l’antique potentialité, désignait à la fois la respiration et l’inspiration de l’homme.” Daniel Lys, *Rûach: le souffle dans l’Ancien Testament: enquête anthropologique à travers l’histoire théologique d’Israël* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1962), 297.

cannot be possessed but which may be renewed in each moment.⁴⁶⁷ To be alive is to breathe, and to breathe is to be alive. Life is enigmatic and mysterious, and before a mystery that one cannot fathom, there exist no words to express or explain the mystery, hence there is silence. It is in silence that we are simply our breath.

If we look back for a moment to the use of רוח in Gen 1:2 אלהים after mentioning the formless chaos, void and darkness, the creation narrative describes the wind or the spirit of God as a powerful, life-giving and creative force. In addition, it is related to the breath of God's mouth and hence God's creative word, as the subsequent verses of the first creation account will expand. God's pronouncement of his Word is the means by which all things come into being. Genesis uses רוח to speak of God's spirit and uses other words to speak of the human spirit נשמת חיים as we noted above when studying Qoh 12:7.

VI.2. רוח IN QOHELETH

The uses of רוח in Qoheleth, however, vary. In Qoh 1:6, it is used to describe the circularity of the wind and the cyclical or repetitive nature of life, life's senselessness and even futility, according to some interpretations. In Qoh 3:19, רוח speaks of the "life breath" of both humans and animals and in 3:21 questions whether that of humans goes upwards while that of animals goes earthwards, yet puts human beings on the same level as animals, affirming that there is no implication of a personal survival in the after-life. Qoheleth uses the term רוח in 7:8–9 and 10:4 to indicate the "self-awareness" of the human being. In Qoh 8:8 and 11:5, it is used to emphasize a power beyond human control, since no one can control wind or restrain it and in the same way, no one knows the works of God no more can they evade death or change their destinies.

Throughout Qoheleth, the phrase רעות רוח "chasing after the wind" is repeated seven times and the similar expression רעיון רוח another two times and it is used mostly to complement the expression "everything is הבל." As we saw in chapter II, the image of "chasing after the wind" emphasizes the impossibility of catching or controlling the wind, God's work, or anything for that matter, but it also expresses the "yearning" and "desire" for God's animating life-force. Finally, in Qoh 12:7, "dust unto dust and spirit back to God" once again refers to the "life breath" of human beings, in a parallel manner as it was used in 3:21. In this use, like the "heart," רוח denotes a person's "interior," the spiritual center from which the entire person is

⁴⁶⁷ Mais ce soufflé de l'homme n'est pas quelque chose de gratuite, mais est lié aux conduits qu'il permettra à cet homme d'accomplir. De plus, il exprime l'inspiration que Dieu donne comme il l'entend à tel ou tel pour le comportement qu'il attend d'eux. Et le même terme exprime – pour l'homme – les deux choses, la respiration comme l'inspiration n'étant pas un bien dont on serait en possession mais une grâce à chaque instant renouvelée. Lys, *Rûach*, 297.

engaged, and also the place where the human is in touch with the divine. It denotes the vital principle, dependent on God for renewal and preservation.⁴⁶⁸

VI.3. THE CREATOR GOD – A GOD OF JUSTICE

In the joy text in Qoh 11:7–10, Qoheleth introduced the question of God’s judgment and hence the central theme, joy, is not only complemented by the emphasis on the limited and fleeting time of life, but also by the additional mention of God’s justice. As we noted in the previous chapter, Qoheleth consistently gives evidence against the act-consequence theory while at the same time questioning whether a God of justice even exists, uncertain of when and how God will judge human beings on how they have lived their lives. In our study of 11:9c, we have come to conclude that God will judge us on how we live joy.⁴⁶⁹ At first, this affirmation might seem to go against what we have said about the creator God, who invites us to live joy and to receive the gift of joy, which would in turn imply that joy is merely an added bonus to life, an optional extra, but not an integral part of it. However, the very fact that God will hold us accountable to the way we live joy raises it to another level. We may assume therefore that God’s intention in giving us the gift of joy is for it to fulfill and give plenitude to our human existence, in other words, an experience that is essential to our identity as God’s creatures. This would be another way of saying that our Creator God creates and recreates us in the measure we are open to receiving the gift of joy and exercising it. God’s justice which we cannot pretend to understand or predict will hold us to account depending on how we respond to joy. A human being who does not receive or practice joy is therefore missing out on an essential part of the human experience and is not fulfilling the purpose for which s/he has been created. Hence, once more, joy is elevated to a superior level.

This relationship between the creator God and the just God is not foreign to the Hebrew Scriptures and finds emphasis in deuterio-Isaiah and the Psalms. For example, both Is 40:26–31 and 45:18–20 speak of God as the Creator who does justice. In Is 40: “The Everlasting God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth does not become weary or tired. His understanding is inscrutable. He gives strength to the weary, and to *him who* lacks might He increases power.” (vv.28–29), in other words he imparts justice, while in Is 45:18 we hear of the God who created the heavens and formed the earth, a God who speaks righteousness (v.19), “a righteous God and a Savior” (v.21). We do not have an explicit mention of joy, but there is a sense of a humanity that glories in the Lord. “In the LORD all the offspring of Israel will be justified and will glory.” (v.25) However, Is 42:5–11 in addition to bringing together the Creator God and the aspect of justice, “I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness,” (v.6)

⁴⁶⁸ Fabry, *TDOT* 13:374-375.

⁴⁶⁹ Cf. Mazzinghi, *Ho cercato*, 280. In a similar vein, we saw that God judged according to the reverence of God present in his people in Qoh 8:12-13.

also incorporates the aspect of joy a few verses later: “Let the inhabitants of Sela sing aloud, let them sing for joy from the tops of the mountains.” (v.11). In this case, joy is a consequence of the human being’s interaction with the Lord God who is the just creator.

With regards to the Psalms, there is a more explicit mention of joy when describing the creator God who is just. Ps 89:11–16 speaks of the creator God who has founded the world and all it contains. “The north and the south, You have created them; Tabor and Hermon shout for joy at Your name.” (v.11) and “Righteousness and justice are the foundation of Your throne...” in v. 14a. Also, Ps 149, for example, speaks of praising the Lord with song, and rejoicing in their Maker. (v.2) “For the Lord takes delight in his people; he will beautify the afflicted ones with salvation.” Hence, we have a combination of the Creator God who does justice for his people by offering them salvation, and their songs and dances of praise and joy. Therefore, while Isaiah and the Psalms combine the idea of a just creator God with a consequence of joy in the human being, Qoheleth’s emphasis on joy as being an essential part of the human experience is not only unique, it places a special emphasis on joy as understood by Qoheleth.

VI.4. REMEMBER YOUR CREATOR

In 12:1 Qoheleth exhorts: “Remember also your Creator...” before the time in which you no longer enjoy, before the moment of death when it is too late, and before you reach a state of vulnerability and weakness. Qoheleth uses this nomenclature for God only this once and hence we must highlight the significance. The second person singular suffix adds a personal touch to Qoheleth’s concept of God, and he invites us to remember that God is bigger and greater than you; God formed your bones in your mother’s womb – a miracle you will never comprehend or understand. It is an urgent appeal to remember God in the present moment and to touch the divine dimension, here and now, in our earthly existence while we enjoy the gifts of time and life. We cannot forget, however, the allusions to the source and to the grave that are present here in this word. Hence, to remember one’s Creator means also to remember where one comes from, one’s source, and one’s end in death.

The most notable reference to the creation narratives is 12:7 which says: “then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it.” That breath of God that originally brought all things into being by means of God’s powerful word in Gen 1, is now the “life breath” which returns to God at the conclusion of life. This verse is clearly pointing back to Gen 3:19, “By the sweat of your brow you shall eat bread, until you return to the ground, from which you were taken; For you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” Interestingly, the context of this verse from Genesis is the narrative of the Fall and the punishment that Adam and Eve incurred for disobedience to God’s instructions. As we noted in the con-

clusions of the previous chapter, death is seen as the consequence of disobedience in the Genesis creation narratives. Eating and hence survival was dependent on the labor and work of human beings until the very end of life, when they return to the ground and clay from which they were formed. It is the God who formed the human being out of the clay of the earth who allows him to become dust once again, and who takes back the spirit that had once given the human being life.

God is one who has given life and time to humanity, who has provided all that is needed for life, and there is certainly a God-ordained order in the world. In fact most scholars will recognize that Qoheleth notices a certain order in the world, although for the most part their argument is that “this order is wearisome to Qoheleth.”⁴⁷⁰ On the contrary, I have shown that this order is not necessarily wearisome, but it is instead an evolving cycle. Life returns to its beginning and ends where it started, God and God’s breath. While this does not take away the fact that God’s ways are inscrutable for Qoheleth, this nevertheless, does not need to be a torturous or wearisome reality.

The Near Eastern motif of the *Chaoskampf*, the battle between the Creator God and the forces of chaos or death which is more obvious in Proverbs, Job, and the Psalms, is present in Qoheleth, albeit in a hidden way. The Creator God has put everything into movement, and by the end of the book in Qoh 12 we encounter the metaphor of the storm and the reality of death, a symbolic chaos, which brings everything back to where it started, and opens the possibility of renewal and recreation. There is a temporal totality that allows us to read Qoheleth in a comprehensive way, as an evolution from the beginning to the end. Everything returns to God who gave it; it returns to its source and origin because the end looks back to its origins, its source and gift. This understanding of life and time would imply that the end is not really a concluding point but a beginning to a new cycle. In terms of human life, which has a clear-cut and definitive end with death, this return to the origins implies that in some manner there is a continuation of one’s life. Whether one can simply say that the body decomposes and returns to the organic material of the earth that continues bearing life in some way, or that the breath which returns to God lives on in God, we know that this breath does not simply vanish and disappear into the wind.

VII. CONCLUSIONS: THE TWILIGHT OF LIFE

We began this chapter looking at different possible structures that give form to Qoh 11:7 – 12:8 and the surrounding context in chapters 11 and 12. Despite the fact that the theme of death is the dominant flavor of this final section, we cannot deny that the presence of the

⁴⁷⁰ *Dictionary of the Old Testament* 66.

ever-central theme of joy and its interaction with the theme of creation alongside the presence of God as Creator are vital and essential to the integrity of Qoheleth's message.

The structure presented in section II.1., where we saw the center to be the imperative, “know that God will bring you to judgement for all these things,” is encased in sections A and A' which repeat the natural elements: clouds and rain, light and sun, realities of nature which are necessary for life upon earth. These images point us towards God's creation and the ways God provides for human survival. In a manner which contrasts these metaphors of life, sections B and B' remind us to consider death, all is *הבל*, all will come to an end. That is, while life is a gift, it is also temporal and passing. This opposition set up by sections A, A', B, and B' between life and death find their resolution by pointing to Qoheleth's command in C and C': Enjoy your youth and enjoy life while it lasts. The command to enjoy is a way of inviting the person who is both fully aware of the gift of life as well as of its passing nature, to focus on the present moment. Finally, at the heart of this section in D we find the certainty that Qoheleth's God is a God of justice and the imperative: “know that God will bring you to judgement for all these things.” The fact that God will judge humanity provokes an attitude of reverence of God while also promising the sort of justice that is apparently absent in the world. In the measure one grows in this knowledge of God, one grows in wisdom that goes hand in hand with the attitude of revering God. This wisdom gives one insight into how God's justice will come about, even if it is not fully comprehensible.

Creation itself reflects all the important themes studied throughout this thesis. Creation is God's doing and hence exceeds the limitations of human comprehension and control. Amongst the natural elements we find a tension, including both symbols of joy (sun and light), which are predictable, and symbols of desolation and death (clouds, wind, and rain), which are not predictable and represent chaos. Therefore, joy is only possible for the human being within the more positive context of the created world, the sun and light. However, the reality of chaos and death is present precisely to invite and incite the human being to enjoy the short life God has given him. The clouds and rain come and go, symbolizing a passing reality, however the sun and light, with its regularity, rhythm, and reliable timekeeping are constant and stable, giving the impression of permanence, with or without clouds and rain. God keeps the clock ticking and holds us accountable to our part of the deal, which is our own human work. Our task and work also entails enjoying this work and making the most of the gift of life. Therefore, the message of this structure is that God is at the center of time and joy and holds them together, and God will keep us accountable to the fulfillment of our part. In this sense, joy and time lay the foundations for a new creation. According to Qoheleth, this new creation is built upon the reliability of time and the consistent invitation to joy, and it consists in the human being who lives the present moment fully alive. Because of the emphasis on the elements of nature, and the rhythm and regularity of time set by the celestial bodies, the new creation which Qoheleth points to can find its bases in the creation story of Gen 1, which rhythmically portrays the

creation of the different celestial bodies and culminates in the creation of the human being who God declares to be “very good.” Humankind is said to be created in God’s own image and likeness (Gen 1:26), therefore containing within himself God’s own seal, a reflection of the eternal, a taste of God’s essence. This, for Qoheleth, is the union of time and joy in the human being, when s/he is wise enough to integrate the passing and permanent realities within himself, living God’s gift of joy in the present.

In section II.2., we saw an even simpler structure that placed the joy text as the focal point of this final section of the book. In a similar fashion with the previous structure, A and A’ describe elements of nature which human beings cannot control or predict. Interestingly in 11:5 it included the word רוח, “wind” or “God’s creative breath” which was present in Gen 1:2 hovering over the waters. A’ does not mention רוח but does note the image of the “storm” which reminds us of the chaos present at the time of creation in Gen 1. From these basic elements, God shapes and forms his creation, smoothly leading to B and B’ which both highlight the image of a Creator God. The reality that seems to dominate is that of the *chaotic* characteristic of creation: the clouds, rain, and wind, which are unpredictable and uncontrollable. However, the next layer, section B, is God as Creator, within the *chaos*. This means that even behind the chaos which we may not understand, there is a mind and an intentionality; there is a Creator. If we focus on the chaotic elements of created nature we will *not* work and hence, we begin to lose purpose and meaning to life, making joy impossible. “One who pays heed to the wind will never sow, and one who watches the clouds will never reap.” (11:4) It becomes a vicious circle destined to failure. Therefore, on a level deeper than the chaotic elements of nature, we are invited to remember and focus on God as our Creator so that we too may participate in the work of creation.

This leads into the joy text in 11:7–10 that lies at the heart of this structure. We may recall that it was unique in that there was no mention of the typical elements of food and drink and hence more focused on the interior human needs. In addition, we also noted how there is no mention of work, a customary topic within the joy texts. If the focus of the surrounding section points to the importance of work beyond any possible motive for discouragement, it now makes sense why it is not mentioned. Therefore, look to God, revere God and get to work. Do not be paralyzed by fear and remain idle. Work is already something taken for granted and accentuated in the surrounding verses, and hence it is not mentioned in the joy text itself. With the joy text comes the one stable and reliable element of nature, the sun. God’s creation is not completely unpredictable and unreliable. The sun which is a rich symbol of life and joy is the one lasting and steadfast element on which we can depend. Even if there are clouds, rain and wind, even if storms come with the force of destruction, the sun continues its rounds, continues to provide life and light regardless. It follows, therefore, that joy, symbolized by the sun, has a lasting and reliable characteristic. Joy goes deeper than superficial and fleeting feelings, as we have already seen previously.

The message which Qoheleth transmits by means of this structure is that even though we are only a small part of God’s great work of creation, which exceeds both our understanding and control, and which is mysterious and beautiful, we are called to enjoy. Lack of control, lack of knowledge and all the other things we so often think we need in life cannot and do not keep us from the experience of joy. In addition, the natural terminology used in this section points us towards the prevalent theme of creation. It is precisely the greatness of the Creator which urges this joy that is incarnated in our lack of control and knowledge. God’s greatness, God’s divine nature finds a home amid our smallness.

The final poem of the book in Qoh 12:1–7 about the end of life and death sets off as a response to the final exhortation to joy in 11:7–10 and its objective is to focus the mind even more fully on the present moment. While all the figures and metaphors described in vv. 1–7 point to the reality of death and highlight the fact that time is running out, the topic of joy seems absent. There is, however, one mention of the theme of joy which comes first in the list of moments that are to come: “before the evil days come and the years draw near when you say, ‘I have no delight in them.’” As we noted in our study of 12:1 above, the word used to express joy or delight is *נִפְחָה*, the same word used in our poem on time in 3:1. This infrequent but key word proves to be a connection point for these two important poems linking the theme of time with the theme of death. These “evil days” are the days in which one is nearing death, and in fact, those days of distress are days without joy, in which one lives as though one were dead. The assumption would be that the days of one’s youth are days in which it is still possible to experience delight and joy, and this experience is dependent on how well and how much one remembers the Creator.

The various references to youth (*שחרות, ילדות, בחור*) which occur 6 times in 11:9 – 12:1 suggest that there is something about this stage of life which makes Qoheleth’s advice especially relevant. Although the years of youth are the time designated for enjoyment, this stage also “incarnates the ideal of unrestrained exuberance, a radical openness to life.”⁴⁷¹ In addition, youth are least likely to think of death and dying and they still lack the experience of life that forges wisdom and the attitude of detachment. Life, people, things and moments are passing, yet just as it is difficult for anyone to accept loss, it is even harder for a young person who may still live under the illusion that things have no end. A youth is generally less detached and struggles with letting go, making the experience of joy more difficult amid life that is full of moments coming and moments going. In this sense, the advice: “remember your Creator” is so vital, because it puts life into perspective for the youth. In a human experience when all things are constantly passing and changing, the only fixed and permanent reality that remains is the Creator.

⁴⁷¹ Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment*, 75.

Therefore, in conclusion, Qoh 12:1–7 is an urgent and moving plea for enjoyment. Though the entire poem does not mention joy after 12:1, it points back to this opening line and to the joy text in 11:7–10 which propel it and motivate it to begin with.

VII.1. THE IMAGE OF GOD, REVERING GOD, AND JOY

The three references to God within these verses are the reminder that God will bring one into judgment in 11:9, the call to remember the Creator in 12:1, and the mention of how the spirit returns to God who gave it in 12:7. As we noted in chapter IV, the themes of creation and death are linked in the creation narratives of Genesis and once again they seem to work hand in hand here in Qoheleth, but do they contain the same underlying beliefs of a retributive God who punishes the human being for his disobedience? At first glance, it might seem like it, since we hear the talk of “judgment” in 11:9 and might assume that it is negative. However, the listener is urged to follow in the ways of one’s heart and in the visions of one’s eyes, here presented as a completely positive and acceptable command, not necessarily as a temptation. In fact, the culmination of this joy text points to the rabbinic teaching that if the human being does not enjoy, God will judge him for that! We therefore have a complete reversal of the expected judgment and instead find a God who not only commands joy but who will hold us accountable if we do not live joy. God has created the human being, giving him his very own life-breath as a vital principle in order to live. This is not a despotic, indifferent, and distant God; this God is a good God. The call to “remember your Creator” in 12:1 not only points us to the goodness of the God who created us and formed us in our mother’s womb (11:5), but who in giving us his own life-breath, gives us life, and hence time upon this earth to enjoy it. In addition, it reminds us that God is also personal with the use of the second person possessive pronoun “your.”

Though Qoh 12:5 does not directly mention God, it does allude to God as we noted in our study above. The root *גבה* may be taken to refer to God as the “High One” and hence to the greatness of God. Although we do not have a direct mention of “revering God” as it exists elsewhere in Qoheleth, we cannot help but recall the theme with this possible reading. Hence, it is the reverence of God that envelops the mourners as they accompany the dead, and the terror on the road is death itself. This experience of fear and terror is real and grips the human being in the face of death. Read in line with the conclusion that our Creator God is good, it can only be a reminder to trust in the powerful renewing dynamism of God through nature and its life cycles. In this same verse, we saw three examples from the natural world that emphasize this cycle of renewal and new life during spring. While human beings have no guarantees of an after-life, according to the mentality of Qoheleth and the belief of his time, he nevertheless reminds us of the miracle of rebirth and renewal in the creation that surrounds us. The human

being knows that “his permanent abode” בית עולמו awaits him at the moment of death and he walks towards it בִּיְהִלֵּךְ הָאָדָם אֶל-בֵּית עוֹלָמוֹ. We are reminded once more of the allusion to “salvation” with the use of the verb הלך that we saw in the sixth joy text in 9:7–10. This rebirth, renewal and new creation has the flavor of salvation. If one trusts and radically leaps with faith into the arms of the Creator God, the one who has given us the gift of life and the possibility to experience joy, one can approach death not with the trembling and fear of the unknown, but with a sense of reverence and the assurance of salvation.

We have seen a complete reversal of God’s expected judgement, perceiving that God invites us and commands us to enjoy and hence will judge us for not enjoying life. Consequently, Qoheleth introduces us to a new sense of God’s justice, one which we are not accustomed to and do not expect. Wisdom for Qoheleth is this recognition of God’s justice along with the acceptance and surrender to life’s circumstances that are beyond human control. This is Qoheleth’s critique to the commonplace thinking of his time and his new contribution: God’s justice will focus on how we live the gifts of time and joy. Qoheleth is certain that God is just and challenges us to a deep and radical life of enjoyment of the good things God gives. Qoheleth invites his audience to a deeper and truer faith, to a real and existential trust, to a radical and detached freedom. A recognition of this justice goes hand in hand with human wisdom and a growing attitude of revering God and hence, how much they can enjoy the present moment.

VII.2. THE THEMES OF TIME AND JOY

After having studied the final joy text in Qoh 11:7–10, we notice an escalation and build-up in the urgency and tone of the joy text. There is praise for joy in 8:15, imperative commands to eat and drink with the complements “bread and wine” in 9:7–10, and finally in 11:9 an imperative to the young person to “rejoice,” because youth is fleeting. As we saw earlier on in this chapter, Qoh 11:7–10 is different from the preceding joy texts in that it omits the usual vocabulary of eating and drinking, and instead this final joy text unites the themes of joy and memory at v. 8, something which typically revolves around God in the Hebrew Scriptures. Here, however, the hinge which unites joy and memory is death. The key word הבל splits up the joy text at vv. 8 and 10 and the accent is on the remembrance of the brevity of life. The phrase which closes v. 8 reminds us of the repeated הבל refrain which disappeared at 8:14 but which here incorporates the aspect of future and therefore points towards the final section of the book which will deal with the end of life and death. Albeit indirectly, we notice the theme of time as expressed by means of the brevity of life and its ultimate end in death. Therefore, this final joy text brings us to the conclusion that the more one is aware of the fleeting nature of life, the inevitable passage of time and its limited nature, and hence death, the more one is urged to enjoy. We may therefore conclude that death and joy can be understood mutually. That is, in order to understand profoundly the quality of joy to which God invites us, we must

be aware of and open to the reality of death. In the same way, in order to understand death, we must dare to live God's gift of joy.

We reach the closing verses of Qoheleth and have seen that the themes of time and joy and their interconnectedness have evolved and progressed throughout the book. The awareness of one's mortality is the ultimate imperative that makes the call to joy more serious. Time has essentially run out and the inevitable consequence is death. Likewise, the experience of joy becomes more intense, complete, and even urgent. Even the question of God's judgement comes into play, emphasizing the importance of joy on a moral level. The call to joy is an indication that joy has taken the lead and comes in first place above all. In addition, from the perspective of creation, we might say that joy is the culmination of creation and the fulfillment of God's purpose in having created the human being. Another way of expressing this would be to say that time corresponds to creation and the experience of joy to "salvation." Although 'fleeting time' naturally comes to an end, the dimension of time that is 'eternal' unfolds in the very experience of joy which journeys towards plenitude, and it is in this sense that we may reach the conclusion: joy supersedes time.

CHAPTER VI: QOHELETH SEEN THROUGH TIME AND JOY

*“El tiempo se me escapa.
Me sabe a algo superior a todos los tesoros y aun a todo lo creado.
El tiempo me sabe a Ti. ...
Gracia abundantísima se fue reservando para este día;
día que continúa y se prolonga, sine die, sin espacio y trasciende en el «sin tiempo».⁴⁷²*

~ Jaime Bonet, *A Solas. Oraciones de un Evangelizador*

0. THE BEGINNING OF THE END

In this thesis, I have argued and demonstrated that several important sections of Qoheleth intertwine and connect the themes of time and joy. The in-depth analysis of Qoheleth's discussion of these themes, studied alongside the themes of creation and death, and in addition to the topics of justice and wisdom, which increasingly prove to be vital to joy and time, provide a unique and enriching perspective through which one may engage with the book. This is evidently not the only way to read the book, but this specific lens certainly provides this difficult book with a degree of coherence and offers a fresh angle on some of the passages by shedding new light on them. In addition, it suggests a very different perspective to the usual negative and pessimistic reading of Qoheleth. Instead of being a dark and cynical book that laments at the vanity and futility of all things under the sun, with a melancholic attitude about life, Qoheleth takes on the vital and almost pleading task of calling humankind to live the present moment with joy. The experience of joy is a gift from God that we must strive both to receive and exercise. Time provides a framework for the experience of joy, and enhances its importance since time is limited, life is not everlasting, and yet joy runs towards fullness. We are mortal, a reality we too often and too easily forget; yet this reminder constantly invites us to reconsider how we live our lives and calls us to joy. The fact that our life will end one day is not intended to be a gloomy or fatalistic affirmation, but a realistic wake-up call. Wisdom, after all, invites us to live awake, aware, and conscious. It is from wisdom that we learn to appreciate the purpose and profit of life and work in its vital link to enjoyment. How different it is to read and understand “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity,” as a morally flavored judgement, as opposed to “Fleeting breath, fleeting breath, all is breath,” a call reminding us that we do not know the day or the time of our passing away from this earth. The latter need not be negative or pessimistic, it is indeed our human mortal reality; however, it may be an opportunity for authentic joy when one lives life in the detachment and freedom of not knowing, not having, and not controlling.

⁴⁷² Jaime Bonet, *A solas. Oraciones de un evangelizador* (Palma de Mallorca: Verbum Dei, 2015), 41. 133.

Throughout the chapters of this thesis, we have seen a growing progression in the relationship between time and joy, and how these themes relate to creation, death, wisdom, and God's justice. In addition, a different theological perspective that does not fit the traditional retributive image of God has become clearer and wisdom makes us able to perceive God's justice in a new way: judging us for how much we enjoy life. As we saw in chapters II and III of this thesis, Qoh 3:1–15 and Qoh 5:17–19 strongly point to the theme of creation, making the pair time and joy, more of a trio: time, joy, and creation. In chapter II, Qoh 3 places more of an emphasis on time, while in chapter III, the theme of joy surpasses time as the focal point in Qoh 5. In the conclusion of chapter III, we noted that the idea of creation and allusions to the creation narratives color and enrich the meaning of time and joy in human life. Furthermore, we noted a qualitative step in chapters IV and V of this thesis where we studied Qoh 8:15 – 9:12 and Qoh 11:7 – 12:8. Joy is not only praised but in Qoh 11 it is commanded. Joy consistently maintains the upper-hand and the theme of time is understood more and more as something passing and ephemeral with its point of expiration in death. While time which corresponded to creation, reaches its end in death, joy which is symbolic of salvation, insinuated by means of the vocabulary used, becomes the focal point. With this perspective on the limitation of time comes wisdom, the imperative to live joy, and the certainty that God's justice will be done. The trio time, joy, and creation become a sextet by the end of the book: time, joy, creation, death, wisdom, and God's justice. In other words, Qoheleth progressively offers a more complete picture of human existence in the world since time and joy in the context of creation is only the beginning. The theme of joy integrates and incorporates the various other themes, and time and joy cannot be understood without a deeper reflection on death and the question of God's justice. Towards the end of the book, Qoheleth tackles these questions and develops these themes.

In this thesis, we have studied four relevant texts and their contexts, which has covered a vast majority of the book. However, this final chapter will explore a possible interpretation and reading of Qoh 4; 7 – 8:14; and 9:13 – 10:20 for the sake of gaining a perspective of the coherent whole of Qoheleth from the angle of time and joy. In addition, we shall take a global look at the three poems of the book, Qoh 1:4–11, 3:1–8, and 12:1–8 as they are placed at such important junctures of Qoheleth's discourse, as well as the seven joy texts and their role within the whole. Finally, we will bring together the insights on Qoheleth's theology and the importance he attributes to revering God with his treatment of the themes joy and time.

I. AN OVERVIEW OF THE REST OF QOHELETH

In a similar way to the other books of Hebrew wisdom literature, Qoheleth offers us his insights and the richness of his experience concerning wisdom and its importance in the life of the human being. Up until this point, we have concluded that for Qoheleth wisdom is not about

knowing and grasping everything or having control or power over life and what takes place. Qoheleth makes a clear break with tradition by affirming that wisdom does not mean knowing the proper times or even controlling the experience of joy and happiness. Instead, for Qoheleth, wisdom is to have the ability to surrender and accept that God is the one ultimately in control of our life and time, in other words to revere God: God gives life, time, joy, and empowers us to experience joy.

As we know very well, the figure of the king is a symbol of wisdom in the Hebrew Scriptures. Qoheleth himself uses the Solomonic identity in 1:1 to give authority to the discourse he will make, but interestingly, as we have studied in chapter II, the search of the king in 1:12 – 2:23 is made into a “parody” and is essentially used to show the uselessness of this position. The remaining texts and sections of Qoheleth that we will examine in this chapter have in common the fact that they speak of wisdom and make consistent reference to the figure of the king. Without a doubt, Qoheleth as a wisdom teacher himself who stands in a long tradition of sages is seeking to demonstrate throughout his book his way to wisdom. One viable approach to wisdom is through the intersecting routes of time and joy, as they relate to God, creation and death. We shall explore how the remainder of the book alludes to these themes or might relate to them, though perhaps not always directly dealing with them.

I.1. QOHELETH 4

If we briefly note the buildup towards Qoh 4, we recall how Qoh 2 describes Qoheleth’s search for happiness and pleasure by means of the parody of the king. Qoheleth presents the king’s egotistical search at length which results in disappointment. To follow in Qoh 3 is the important presentation on time outlining the different moments and times that make up human life. However, this contemplation of time and God’s gift of the “totality of time” to the human being in Qoh 3:11, changes something in Qoheleth. Instead of the egotistical search focused on himself and the acquisitions that might bring him pleasure as we saw in Qoh 2, Qoheleth reconsiders and “turns to look.” In fact, Qoh 4 begins with these words: “Then I turned and saw...” וּשְׁבַתִּי אֲנִי וְאָרָאָה.⁴⁷³ This phrase pattern consisting of the 1st person common singular perfect verb followed by the 1st person common singular pronoun begins vv. 1, 2, 4 and 7 and this section may remind us of the verses in Qoh 2, especially vv. 11–20 which also begin with this pattern. However, the subject of Qoheleth’s personal reflection has dramatically changed.

⁴⁷³ Some scholars such as Schoors, Isaksson, Lys and Krüger, among others, contend that this construction closely links the two verbs and expresses repetition of the act expressed by the second verb, “Again I saw.” However, I side with Fox who says that the function of the modal verb שׁוּב in this context does not mean “again” but as in 2 Chr 19:4; Isa 6:10, 13; and Jer 18:4, שׁוּב points to another series of events and means “afterwards” or “next”. Fox, *Qoheleth and his Contradictions*, 201. Therefore, we cannot conclude that Qoheleth had seen the oppressions before 4:1 and I have chosen to stick to a relatively literal translation, “Then I turned and saw...”

Instead of the self-centered concern for work, its profit, and his own fate, these verses in Qoh 4 now observe oppression and work in society, and deal with the importance of life in community. It is a significantly outward-looking perspective as opposed to the inward-looking focus of Qoh 2. Qoheleth is apparently now able to notice something that before had escaped his gaze, namely, the oppression and injustice present in society.

In Qoh 2, Qoheleth presents himself as a king. In addition, we may infer this reference by the mention of his success and growth “larger than all who preceded me in Jerusalem.” Who but the king would “be preceded by others in his line” and have so many possessions and so many people at his disposal? The mention of both “male and female slaves” עבדים ושפחות as well as “home born slaves” בני-בית speaks of social status and power and of the possibility of oppressing those who are “less” on the social scale. When he sees “all the acts of oppression which were being done under the sun,” something he had clearly not seen before, we cannot help but wonder if Qoheleth might be referring to his own acts?

I.1.1. QOHELETH 4:1–8

Qoheleth 4:1 begins with his observation of the oppression and the tears of the victims. There is a recognition of the violence from the oppressors and the absence of consolation. This is the context in which Qoheleth “praises the dead” in 4:2. As we have already studied, the same verb שבח is used in 8:15 to praise joy. Here in Qoh 4, however, we perceive Qoheleth’s negativity as he confesses that the dead are more fortunate in death than the living to be still alive. In fact, better than both the living and the dead is the one who “is yet unborn” and has never witnessed the evil done under the sun in v. 3. This is the only place where Qoheleth presents a possibility better than life. Therefore, he is struck deeply and brought down by his observation of injustice and the suffering of the oppressed. Qoheleth confronts us with the theme of death, idealized and praised, as a state that supersedes the pain and injustice that one must face with life. Death is therefore not a negative end to life, but a place of solace and peace, especially for one who has not existed at all.

Qoheleth 4:4–8 speaks of rivalry and solitude in work and we find the repeated affirmation that “also this is הבל.” All labor and skill done as the result of rivalry is הבל, meaning that it will not bring about anything lasting. Qoheleth observes this as a reality in his society and the same holds true in our world today. When people allow their value system to be determined by money, power and success, these foundations eventually corrode under their own weight. The next two verses continue to develop this idea of the futility of a life revolving around productivity and success. Qoheleth presents two contrasting attitudes: that of the lazy fool (v. 5) and that of one who overworks (v. 6). Traditional wisdom has always praised the

hard-worker and reprimanded the one who is idle. The lazy fool folds his hands and since he does not work, he only has his own flesh to eat. In v. 6 however, Qoheleth challenges us to go beyond just avoiding laziness. He also invites us to avoid useless fatigue. “One hand full of tranquility is better than two fists full of labor and striving after wind.” It is important to work, to be industrious, to not be idle, but to do so with tranquility. What is the use of gaining more if it is a constant stress and if one is not able to enjoy life? The question of joy enters the discussion in an implicit manner and the assumption is that joy is not about having, doing, or possessing but about how we live and work in the present moment.

In a similar fashion, our sage in v. 8 speaks of the lonely person, without child or sibling, who labors without end. In this case, labor becomes a drudgery and even a slavery because the person is never satisfied. In addition, he apparently has no purpose or reason for his work beyond himself. This is evident because the text tells us that he was never capable of asking: “For whom do I do all of this?” When there is no one for whom to struggle, with whom to enjoy the fruits of one’s work, and when there is no deeper meaning and purpose to what I do, then it is הבל, it is temporal and passing, it will bear no lasting fruit. The inference from this conclusion, therefore, is that when one enjoys one’s work, when one has a deeper meaning and purpose in one’s work, participating by means of one’s work in God’s creative action, it is not necessarily הבל, but it may bear a lasting mark in some shape or form.

Hence, we may conclude that Qoheleth takes a step beyond the traditional understanding of wisdom. For him, wisdom is not only to avoid laziness and promote hard work, but to strike a balance: one is to work in such a way that one may joyfully and purposefully participate in God’s creative work. In this sense the wise person gains profit, and this profit is the experience of joy. Hence, it is possible to compare and even equate wisdom to creation, as creation is the very foundation of wisdom, grounded in the orderly regulation of the world by the creator God. “Wisdom thinks resolutely within the framework of a theology of creation” and the wise person or sage is commonly associated with someone who possesses “skill” or a “practical knowledge” in any sphere, and hence one who participates in God’s creation.⁴⁷⁴ The implications of this would therefore be that in the measure that one grows in wisdom, though one may not necessarily comprehend God’s work, one does participate actively as co-creators with God, all the while recognizing one’s limitations.

⁴⁷⁴ Roger Norman Whybray, *The Composition of the Book of Proverbs* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1994), 4.

I.1.2. QOHELETH 4:9–12

In contrast, however, vv. 9–12 show us another perspective and one that, interestingly, is *not* said to be הבל, in fact it is a stirring and uplifting commendation of community.⁴⁷⁵ While הבל was used three times in the preceding five verses, הבל is nowhere to be found in these four verses. In fact, Qoheleth presents the social dimension of work and life in a positive light. The advantage to working *with* another, in cooperation and not in rivalry, is that “they have a good return for their work” (v. 9). It is interesting to note this observation about “a good return.” The Hebrew word is שכר meaning “wages” and though it is not the same word for profit that Qoheleth repeatedly invokes in his question of purpose, it is a synonym and expresses a similar objective. The judgement is that the “return” is good and hence, we may conclude that profit in some way is possible. Indeed, “two are better than one” and vv. 10–12 spell out the reasons for the advantages of comradeship as opposed to solitude. If one falls, the other will lift him up. If two lie down together, they keep warm as opposed to one who is alone. One who is accompanied has more strength to resist someone who wants to overpower him. It is significant that Qoheleth excludes the word הבל from these verses, since we may consequently infer that there is a lasting character, a possible return or profit when one chooses to work in cooperation and not in rivalry. There is indeed a greater sense of satisfaction and even, one might say, joy.

Human life on a surface level consists in the action and work that one does, therefore work is, in a sense, the characteristic mode of human existence.⁴⁷⁶ However, though it is true that in order to live and subsist the human being must work, the purpose of work is not merely for survival. Work is part of human life in that it gives people a purpose and an objective towards which to strive. What is the result or outcome of work? Is it merely the wages, the food to eat today, or the shelter in which to repose? Or is it an activity that keeps us from boredom and gives human beings something to do? Is it an activity merely to accumulate money and security or does it fulfill a still higher purpose – that of completing a sort of mission or task given to us from above? Is it truly a co-participation in God’s creative work? Qoh 4:9–12 which repeats ideas such as “a good return,” “resistance,” and “not being quickly torn apart” when referring to a cord of three strands, points to positive and lasting consequences of one’s work in cooperation with others. Consequently, to practice wisdom means living this sense of comradeship and collaboration with others when it comes to one’s work.

⁴⁷⁵ Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 105-6.

⁴⁷⁶ “Although they must earn their bread by the sweat of their brow, they accomplish nothing that is enduring, Qoheleth observes, except at most their own subsistence.” Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, 43.

I.1.3. QOHELETH 4:13–16

In the final three verses of Qoh 4, vv. 13–16, we return to the figure of the king and once again, all the categories of traditional wisdom are turned upside down. “A poor yet wise lad is better than an old and foolish king who no longer knows how to receive instruction.” While the elder would traditionally be regarded as wiser, here the youth is said to be wise. On the contrary, the king who is the epitome of wisdom is said to be foolish, tearing down all our expectations. The reason is that he does not know how to receive instruction. Interestingly, this coincides with the conclusions we have reached thus far about what wisdom means for Qoheleth. Wisdom is not about knowing, controlling or even having power. Wisdom is about recognizing one’s limitations and hence, being open to learn. From this attitude of humility and reverence of God one is made sensitive to the fleeting aspect of time and open to receive the gift of joy. Without this, one cannot be guaranteed a life of joy. If the subjects do not follow the example of their wise leader, they will be unable to experience joy for themselves. Hence, Qoheleth briefly mentions at the end of v.16, “the later generations will not have joy in him.”

Qoheleth continues to nourish his novel vision of wisdom in contrast to the traditional understanding. As we have seen in chapter II, once the question of purpose disappears, the remaining joy texts no longer respond to the question of purpose, but instead are set in the context of texts that speak of wisdom. We can therefore conclude that the one who is wise is better equipped to enjoy life and has a purpose and meaning to what s/he does. There is a sense that it is possible to experience the fruit and profit of one’s work, and this section tells us that this is enhanced when one learns to work in cooperation with others.

I.2. QOHELETH 7 – 8:14

The beginning of Qoh 7 enumerates a series of proverbial “better than” sayings whose content is far from traditional, often focusing on the difference between the wise and the foolish. The “better-than” sayings respond to the series of questions of purpose in 6:8–12. The questions in 6:8 ask: “What profit have the wise compared to fools, or what profit have the lowly in knowing how to conduct themselves in life?” In addition, 6:12 asks: “For who knows what is good for mortals in life, the limited days of their vain life, spent like a shadow? Because who can tell them what will come afterward under the sun?” The focus is on the passing nature of life, the limits imposed by time, and ignorance of the future. In addition, this section presents a culmination of the questions of purpose that disappear from this point onwards.

I.2.1. QOHELETH 7:1–14

Qoh 7:1 starts off by asserting that the day of one's death is better than the day of one's birth. This reminds us of Qoh 4:2 where Qoheleth had praised the dead more than the living. Again, Qoheleth gives a certain priority to death, one of the pervading ideas of the whole book.⁴⁷⁷ Verse 2 presents the contrast between the house of mourning and the house of feasting. This reminds us of the king and his luxuries and feasts in Qoh 2, however Qoheleth here asserts the superiority of the house of mourning since it is "the end of every person," and verse 3 gives us the reason: "Sorrow is better than laughter, for when a face is sad a heart may be happy." This verse confirms what we already stated earlier when looking at the poem on time in Qoheleth 3:4, namely, that weeping and laughing, mourning and dancing are not necessarily indicative of true joy or lack of it. While one may outwardly be sad, and show all the symptoms of sorrow, the heart – the deeper dimension of the person – may be experiencing authentic joy. Even death, in which one bids farewell to this life and must detach from the people and things of this world, though undeniably sad, is often at the same time a profoundly joyous occasion for those left behind who celebrate the life of the deceased in gratitude. In other words, the experience of joy goes much deeper than momentary, superficial feelings and emotions.

The remaining verses up until 7:12 continue to define and explain wisdom. While the house of feasting and the house of pleasure, along with their song and laughter is linked to fools, wisdom is connected to the house of mourning, to rebukes, and sorrow. In a similar vein, wisdom is associated with mourning and sorrow in Qoh 1:18. This may seem completely contrary to the message of joy, but again we note that mourning does not necessarily exclude the joy that Qoheleth mentions elsewhere. Joy is to live the present moment fully and mourning cannot impede this; joy is instead a characteristic of those who are wise. Qoheleth 7:10 supports this interpretation as it is clearly an invitation to live in the present and not look to or remember the past. It is not from wisdom that one asks: "why were former days better than these?" Wisdom knows that if one lives looking at the past and yearning for it, this prevents one from experiencing the present moment. Qoheleth 7:13 asks a rhetorical question expecting a negative answer: "Consider the work of God, for who is able to straighten what He has bent?" After this extended discussion on wisdom, v. 13 concludes that when considering God's work, human beings are far from understanding, controlling or being able to change anything. One is to recognize one's smallness before the greatness of God's work. Not even the wisest person is able to "make straight what God has made crooked" and hence no matter how much advantage, profit, and good may come from wisdom, one is still far from understanding God. One must recognize that the future is out of one's hands, knowledge, and control. Even those endowed with wisdom experience limitation, yet this does not necessarily prevent one from being happy, as we shall see in the verse to follow.

⁴⁷⁷ Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 501.

Finally, this section concludes with 7:14 a verse considered by Pinçon to be the eighth joy text – a reminder of Qoheleth’s call to be happy in the present without looking towards the future.⁴⁷⁸ Qoheleth invites us to enjoy “in the day of prosperity” and not complain in “the day of adversity” since God has made both “so that the human being may not discover anything that will be after him.” This verse closes the discourse that praises wisdom, highlights the human incapacity to know the future, and concludes that the wise person is one who can experience joy in the present moment.

I.2.2. QOHELETH 7:15–29

Qoh 7:15–20 exhorts the listener to not fall into the extremes. While some readers have been scandalized by Qoheleth, some scholars have read these verses as an endorsement of the *via media*. Others, however, find a warning against self-righteousness and pretensions to wisdom. An anti-pharisaic leaning is also a possibility, as the conservative view of the after-life points to a Sadducean tendency in Qoheleth. In any case, what is certain is that Qoheleth aims at the importance of moral balance: one is called to enjoy life, while not being a rigorist, and without giving in completely to pleasure, like a fool who disregards law and discipline.⁴⁷⁹ “Perfectionism is the opposite of wisdom.”⁴⁸⁰

In 7:15 Qoheleth uses the word הבל to describe his lifetime that is ephemeral and passing just before he describes his observation of what contradicts accepted tradition. In a similar manner, in 8:14 Qoheleth defines as הבל the following contradiction: that “there are righteous people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked... and evil people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous.” I find it interesting that Qoheleth often uses this enigmatic word, when referring to the questions around the act-consequence principle. As noted already in chapter II, הבל describes the contradictory reality that escapes our understanding just as vapor that quickly rises and disappears. Only God knows where it goes. In the same way, only God can understand what happens in consequence to the actions of the good and the evil. The human being cannot know, judge or comprehend, not even the wise can understand God’s justice.

In 7:16–17, we find an almost perfect parallel where Qoheleth ironically counsels moderation.⁴⁸¹ Why should Qoheleth warn against a high degree of righteousness and wisdom and why should only a high degree of wickedness and folly be avoided? We should instead ask

⁴⁷⁸ Pinçon, *L'énigme du bonheur*.

⁴⁷⁹ Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 537.

⁴⁸⁰ S. R. Andrews, "Ecclesiastes 7:1-19," *Int* 55 (2001): 299-301, 300.

⁴⁸¹ The only exception to the parallelism is in v. 17b where the adverb “excessively” is missing.

what exactly the distinction is between a righteous and wicked person. According to the traditional wisdom understanding, the righteous person is one who fulfills the Law, while the wicked person is one who does not guide his/her life according to the Law. Qoheleth could hardly warn against being overly just in the sense of true virtue or justice. It would be contrary to the general biblical tradition to understand excessive justice as something sinful, especially since he affirms that justice is an unattainable ideal in 7:20. If the righteous person is s/he who observes the Torah, then Qoheleth's warning is against those who through a rigorous observance of the precepts, thought to avoid their "ruin."⁴⁸² Qoheleth here warns against hypocrisy and refers to those who attempt to justify themselves, cautioning them that in being too strictly faithful to the Torah they will find their ruin.⁴⁸³ In other words, "straining to be too righteous may be a form of hubris... Living on too high a level of virtue gives the appearance of striving to go beyond human bounds."⁴⁸⁴

In contrast to the affirmations in v. 16 about not being excessively righteous or wicked, v. 17 changes its style and radically condemns foolishness by means of a categorical imperative, hence not being allowed for at all. "Il v. 17b suggerisce così come il Qohelet non stia affatto insegnando un'etica della moderazione, una sorta di via media tra stoltezza e sapienza; se infatti un po' di malvagità appare inevitabile e se è inutile cercare di essere troppo giusti o troppo saggi, la stoltezza non può essere accettata."⁴⁸⁵ To conclude his thought, Qoh 7:18 affirms that "It is good to hold to this rule, and not to let that one go..." inviting us to take on an attitude of "both/and" and stating that "the one who reveres God will succeed with both," in other words, one who reveres God is able to live this balance. At first, we might have the impression that it is here where Qoheleth refers to the *aurea mediocritas*, the Greek notion of avoiding excess.⁴⁸⁶ However, this view is a common misreading of these verses, and this is not what Qoheleth is advocating.⁴⁸⁷ Instead, the counseled attitude one must adopt to find the middle ground and not fall into extremes is repeatedly shown in Qoheleth to be "revering God." Since according to Qoheleth, a firm reference point does not exist, the human being must succumb to the only one who is not relative or relativized by Qoheleth, God, to whom maximum

⁴⁸² Luca Mazinghi, "Il fondamento dell'etica del Qohelet," in *Qohelet: Letture e Prospettive* (Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2006), 170-171.

⁴⁸³ Roger Norman Whybray, "Qoheleth the Immoralist? (Qoh 7:16-17)," in *Israelite Wisdom: Theological and Literary Essays in Honor of Samuel L. Terrien* (ed. Samuel L. Terrien and John G. Gammie; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1978), 191-204.

⁴⁸⁴ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 260.

⁴⁸⁵ Mazinghi, "Il fondamento dell'etica," 171.

⁴⁸⁶ According to the principle of the μέσος ἕξις, "wisdom is not one of the extremes to be avoided. Wisdom is the mid-point between two extremes, which are too much and too little of any quality, while folly is defined as either extreme. For Qohelet, the continuum goes from extreme wisdom/righteousness to extreme folly/wickedness. He does not advise us to locate ourselves in the mid-point." Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 260.

⁴⁸⁷ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 72. This virtue is not to be determined in a rigid and absolute way, since it is proportionate to each individual and to each situation which is why only wisdom can adequately grasp it. Mazinghi, "Qohelet tra giudaismo ed ellenismo," 114.

reverence and respect is due. This is the main idea implied by the doctrine on “the Fear of God” in Qoheleth, as Vélchez refers to it.⁴⁸⁸ This is why Qoheleth does not advocate a “middle way” in 7:16–18, mainly because these verses present two points of view, not two extremes in moral activity that would require equilibrium in order for virtue to be attained.

Qoh 7:20 declares that no one is without sin and therefore we cannot see life as black and white, but rather we are invited to see the grey shades in life. This is not a new teaching; it is a well-known theme in Israelite thought to recognize that no human being is free of sin. (1 Kgs 8:46; Sal 51:7; 130; etc.) Qoheleth picks up this teaching but enriches it in the new context of this passage.⁴⁸⁹ Human beings cannot be separated simplistically into categories of “good” and “bad,” of “righteous” and “sinner.” “Qoheleth teaches us to accept in ourselves a mixture of good and bad, just as we should accept that same mixture in the events and circumstances we experience (7:14).”⁴⁹⁰ For Qoheleth, this is the only way we can truly “revere God,” since pushing too hard in either direction displays a presumptuous confidence in one’s own powers. “In this context, צַדִּיק also is not a religious term; it refers to one who is always correct – the opposite of the fool. The one who ‘does only good’ is one who is always correct and does not make mistakes.”⁴⁹¹ If we are able to let go of the distinctions in terms of the moral categories of who is “good” and “bad,” excluding from the outset the possibility of a perfectly righteous person, we relegate to God the ability to judge as God sees fit and admit inability to do so ourselves. Wisdom consists in being free of these traditional moral categories and in having the capacity to recognize our inability to judge.

The final section of Qoh 7 beginning at v. 23 switches to the first person and continues to describe Qoheleth’s search for wisdom. Though Qoheleth may observe the reality described in the previous verses, namely that the act-consequence principle fails, and test it with wisdom, with the hope of *being* wise, this wisdom is out of reach: “It was far from me!” Wisdom cannot be grasped or controlled, and one is unable to understand God’s way of doing justice no matter how wise one may be. Qoheleth 7:24 begins with the repeated proverbial saying מֵה־שֶׁהִיא, which begins the riddles we have previously studied in 1:9, 3:15, and 6:10. As we saw in chapter II, Qoh 1:9 looks first to the past as a way of defining the future, assuring that what has been and what has been done, will be and will be done. In Qoh 3:15, however, what God is seeking in the present is something that has already existed in the past. Qoheleth 6:10, drops the repetitive quality of the riddle and simply conserves the phrase מֵה־שֶׁהִיא to reaffirm that what exists in the present “...was long ago given its name, and human nature is known; mortals cannot contend in judgment with One who is stronger.” Finally, here in 7:24, we have an escalation of

⁴⁸⁸ Vélchez Líndez, *Ecclesiastes*, 318.

⁴⁸⁹ Vélchez Líndez, *Ecclesiastes*, 320.

⁴⁹⁰ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 260.

⁴⁹¹ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 142.

this riddle that closes with the impossibility of its solution: “What has been is remote and exceedingly mysterious. Who can discover it?” Can anyone discover it? Regardless of the challenge, Qoheleth declares: “I have directed my mind to know, investigate and seek wisdom and an explanation...” Nothing stops Qoheleth, not even the sheer impossibility of the task. Of course, in seeking and investigating wisdom, one equally comes face to face with “the evil of folly and the foolishness of madness.” Wisdom and folly are essentially two sides to the same coin. When one encounters one, one inevitably finds the other. Following this train of thought, the most logical discovery that Qoheleth makes in 7:26 is not “the woman” but “Folly.”

Qoh 7:26 is an often-misinterpreted passage, apparently showing Qoheleth to be a misogynist who demonizes the woman. “More bitter than death I find the woman who is a hunter’s trap, whose heart is a snare, whose hands are prison bonds. The one who pleases God will be delivered from her, but the one who displeases will be entrapped by her.” Though it would not be surprising for Qoheleth to agree with the generally pejorative conception of the woman in Mesopotamia and Egypt, I agree with the scholars⁴⁹² who assert that we are put before a metaphor of Folly who is personified as a woman. Given the context’s focus on wisdom and folly, it is unlikely that Qoheleth is suddenly introducing the topic of women in general, or even of a particular type of woman, especially since the topic is not brought up anywhere else in Qoheleth. “The use of the definite article does suggest that the audience is expected to know who this feminine figure is. If one looks for an antecedent referent, the most obvious would be הסכלות ‘Folly’ in the preceding verse.”⁴⁹³ If we, therefore, take the woman to be a personification of Folly, it gives a very different twist to the interpretation of this verse. The focus is placed on the avoidance of Folly’s trap, which is more bitter than death and notes that one who is pleasing to God can do so, while the offender gets caught in the trap.

Finally, in 7:29 Qoheleth offers a concluding thought to this section in Qoh 7. “Behold, I have found only this: that God made human beings upright, but they have sought out many devices.” Qoheleth claims that God has made human beings ישר “upright,” or “straight,” but human beings have gone in search of many devices and inventions. Clearly Qoheleth is making a direct reference to the moment in which God created the human being and he may have Gen 1:26 or Gen 2:4 – 3:24 in mind as he makes this affirmation. We return to the prominent theme of creation which has been highlighted throughout our study, whose content belongs to the surest and appreciated legacy of Israel. If there is anything that Qoheleth is sure of, it is the basic principle of the Israelite faith that the human being has been created by God. However, Qoheleth adds to this affirmation the fact that God has made the human being upright. The verse continues however, with a disjunctive particle: “but” followed by the affirmation that the human being has sought out many “devices.” The focus is now placed on the human being and his/her freedom. In the end, Qoheleth is affirming that if evil enters the world it is not because

⁴⁹² Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 271-2; Schellenberg, *Erkenntnis als Problem*, 157-8; Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 566-573.

⁴⁹³ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 262.

God did something wrong, but he is putting responsibility on the human person.⁴⁹⁴ Responsibility can only be understood when it is based on freedom.

At the end of this section, we may conclude that the wise person possesses the gift of reverence of God and hence is humble enough to recognize that the moral categories of “good” and “evil” are too simplistic. Instead, the truly wise person can admit that s/he cannot understand God’s justice, since it is beyond human comprehension.

I.2.3. QOHELETH 8:1–14

As we already saw in chapter IV when discussing the context of 8:15 – 9:12, we noted how Qoh 8 begins by discussing the topic of human wisdom and incorporates the figure of the king, the principal symbol of wisdom. The focus is on obeying and respecting the word and command of the king, because it is powerful. This is virtually the way to wisdom and a happy life, as “one who obeys a command will meet no harm.” Qoh 8:3 is the only place in Qoheleth where the root חפץ is used as a verb and it is one of five places in the Hebrew Bible where it takes on a legal meaning. It is used in the phrase כּל־אֲשֶׁר יִחַפֵּץ יַעֲשֶׂה which adopts “a legal formula whose *Sitz im Leben* is to be sought in the domain of jurisprudence.”⁴⁹⁵ We already noted how Qoh 8:5–6 pairs the word עת with the word “judgment” in the expression ועת ומשפט in both verses to mean “just time.” In addition, Qoh 8:6 uses the word חפץ again, which we have repeatedly seen to be associated with “joy” or “delight” and hence the translation could be: “For there is a just time for every joy...” We are again reminded of the vital link between time and joy. Qoheleth 8:7–9 insist on the fact that the human being cannot know what will happen and no one has control or authority over the wind or over the day of death. The human being is not in command, not even the king, and therefore not even wisdom can allow one to possess time or have power, as one must recognize the higher power. These verses clearly point us back to Qoh 3, the theme of time, and the humbling realization that one is ultimately not in control or in power of anything, most especially not in control of the time of one’s death.

There is a direct reference to the themes of time and joy in 8:5–6 which points us back to the discussions in Qoh 3 with the use of עת and חפץ. It is the wise heart that is said to know the “just time” in 8:5 and in v. 6 we find the “just time” for חפץ “joy” or “matter” which is affirmed in spite of it being “a great evil for mortals.” This once more confirms what we concluded about joy being something that goes deeper than the troubles and sorrows present in this

⁴⁹⁴ “In this way, Qoheleth defends God from any shade of doubt about God’s goodness and adequately prepares the terrain to make the human being the only one responsible for evil in the world.” Vélchez Líndez, *Ecclesiastes*, 332.

⁴⁹⁵ Its first appearance was made after 500 BCE and was probably influenced by an Aramaic model. Avi Hurvitz, “The History of a Legal Formula: kōl ’ašer-ḥāpeš ’āšāh (Psalm 115:3; 135:6),” *VT* 32 (1982): 257-67, 258.

life. The wise person learns to find joy in the present moment, even though the human being in general cannot know the future and cannot control it, much less know or control the time of death.

Though the section Qoh 8:10–14 does not directly speak about time or joy, it does speak of the general search for wisdom. Qoheleth continues to unveil what he understands by wisdom and how he interprets the reality he observes considering his image of God. As we saw earlier, the wise person teaches us what it means to enjoy life. Mourning and sorrow are often associated with the wise, but wisdom is indicative of a deeper joy that goes below the surface of feelings or emotions such as sorrow or grief. This section also repeatedly points to a focus on the present moment, discouraging both looking to the past or the future. The wise person knows how to enjoy life in the present during his fleeting time under the sun and the one who reveres God lives in equilibrium and balance.

To begin, both 8:10 and 8:14 form a sort of inclusion, by defining the reality that Qoheleth displays as הבל, and giving it a negative tone. If we first look at 8:10–12a, 14 Qoheleth observes once again how the contrary of the act-consequence principle takes place. The protagonists of 8:10 are the wicked. They are the ones who are buried, who go in and out of the holy place, and who are soon forgotten. The translation of 8:10 is highly discussed since many scholars modify the fourth word of the MT from קברים, meaning “buried” to קרבים, meaning “come close.”⁴⁹⁶ Though the G and Vg are in favor of the MT, many argue that the idea of the burial of the evil ones makes no sense in the context, especially since it would make no sense to speak of burial in proximity to a “sacred place” which would be rendered impure by a burial place or corpses. However, this phrase does not necessarily imply proximity in location, and I would keep the MT reading. Instead, Qoheleth is affirming the fact that the wicked die and are consequently buried. It is a way of associating the wicked to the pious Jews who offered sacrifices to the Lord, and affirming that they too die, even after having gone in and out of the “sacred place.”⁴⁹⁷ In other words, keeping with the traditions and fulfilling the Law will not prevent the experience of death that all must eventually go through. Qoheleth’s observation stirs him up as it surely stirred up many others who saw the same though perhaps stayed silent.⁴⁹⁸

⁴⁹⁶ In support of this interpretation: G.R. Driver, H.W. Hertzberg, O. Loretz, K. Gallig, A. Lauha, J.L. Crenshaw, D. Michel, who all affirm that the solution to v. 10 has been found by Serrano and Driver.

⁴⁹⁷ “Qoh 8:10a konstatiert das Zerbrechen des sogenannten Tun-Ergehen-Zusammenhangs.” Franz Josef Backhaus, “Qohelet und der Sogenannte Tun-Ergehen-Zusammenhang,” *BN* 89 (1997): 30-61.

⁴⁹⁸ “Qohélet no solo lo dice, sino que lo escribe: personas que en su modo de vivir y convivir son impíos reconocidos, pero que al ir al *lugar sagrado*, suponemos que para ofrecer sacrificios al Señor, desafían al mismo Señor, cuya ley quebrantan, y a los que de corazón sirven al Señor, los justos, probablemente víctimas de sus fechorías.” Vélchez Líndez, *Eclesiastes*, 344.

In 8:11 the Masoretic punctuation must be modified if we are to make sense of this verse. פתגם is a Persian loanword both in Hebrew and Aramaic and it means “word” or “matter,” corresponding to the Hebrew דבר, but here it is used in the specific sense of “a word of judgment” or “sentence.”⁴⁹⁹ Therefore, the protasis: “since sentence for an evil work is not carried out quickly” corresponds to the apodosis: “people are intent on doing evil,” lit. “the heart of human beings is full within them to do evil.” Qoheleth is not indirectly accusing God of being responsible for the violence and injustice in the world, instead he is challenging the existence of the retributive principle as it was understood in Israelite tradition. “For him, ‘fearing God’ is something that must be totally separated from any notion of reward or punishment, something thus, totally free.”⁵⁰⁰ The affirmation in 8:12a, “the offender does the evil of hundreds and yet lives long,” implicitly questions God’s justice since a “long life is a well-known symbol of happiness in the Bible, and especially in the wisdom tradition.”⁵⁰¹ Once again, it shows how Qoheleth throws down the commonly held retributive principle.

Qoheleth 8:12b–13 are the verses that apparently confirm the act-consequence principle, claiming a distinction between the fate of the good and that of the evil. Scholars have had varying reactions to the apparent contradictions present within these few verses. Some claim that Qoheleth here shows the hands of different redactors and sources.⁵⁰² Crenshaw drastically claims “no satisfactory solution exists;” while Murphy admits that “this is a desperate solution” since “one has no control over the alleged presence of such glosses. The text should be dealt with as it stands.”⁵⁰³ I, too, agree that the text should be dealt with as it stands. In fact, I do not see the two sections as contradictory. Fox claims that it is because Qoheleth “knows” the principle of retribution, but also knows of cases that violate the rule, and it is because he “holds to the axioms of Wisdom, that he is shocked by their violation and finds the aberrations absurd.”⁵⁰⁴ I disagree, however, that Qoheleth holds to the axioms of wisdom; I also disagree with Murphy’s claim that Qoheleth’s use of “fear of God” in 8:12b–13 has a different nuance than elsewhere in the book, here reflecting “the traditional attitude that is secure and certain, for it is tied in to clear divine retribution.”⁵⁰⁵ The proposal that Mazzinghi offers is illuminating and surpasses all previous proposals.⁵⁰⁶ He states that although it may seem as if Qoheleth is affirming once more the idea of act-consequence in this verse, he is in fact “challenging the

⁴⁹⁹ “We should ignore the disjunctive accent on פתגם, take the word to be in construct with הִרְעָה מְעֵשָׂה, and interpret מְהֵרָה as an adverb (its normal usage).” Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 286.

⁵⁰⁰ Luca Mazzinghi, “The Divine Violence in the Book of Qoheleth,” *Bib* 90, no. 4 (2009): 545-58.

⁵⁰¹ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 85.

⁵⁰² Siegfried, *Prediger und Hoheslied*; Podechard, *L’Ecclésiaste*; Martin Rose, *Rien de nouveau. Nouvelles approches du livre de Qohélet* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000).

⁵⁰³ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 85.

⁵⁰⁴ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 286.

⁵⁰⁵ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 85.

⁵⁰⁶ Mazzinghi, “Esegesi ed ermeneutica,” 197.

existence of the retributive principle as it was conceived in Israelite tradition.”⁵⁰⁷ “Tra giusto e malvagio è aperta una nuova e sorprendente possibilità etica: il temere Dio, appunto il che costituisce senza dubbio un aspetto centrale nella teologia del Qohelet.”⁵⁰⁸ Qoheleth understands fearing or rather, “revering” God in a completely original way in this specific verse and everywhere in the book.⁵⁰⁹

By the end of this section, we affirm not only that the wise person knows how to enjoy the present moment, but that the wise person’s reverence of God pleases God. The wise person shows reverence not with the interest of finding God’s favor, but for the sake of the reverence of God, in itself. Hence, there is no guarantee that his ethical choices will secure positive consequences; nevertheless, this attitude of revering God is what makes joy possible. In addition, the wise person can hold together different apparently contradictory realities, because there is a trust in the justice of God. This too makes possible the experience of joy – and hence joy encompasses the one who reveres God and the wise person who trusts in God’s justice.

I.3. QOHELETH 9:13 – 10:20

The final section of the book that we will study is Qoh 9:13 – 10:20. The general topic of this section is, again, wisdom. As we have seen in the previous two sections, and generally throughout Qoheleth, the wise person accepts the different times and moments of life while recognizing that s/he cannot always know or control the things that happen or their consequences. One who possesses wisdom is open to learn and can enjoy the present moment. As we saw in chapter II, the wise person is also more likely to gain profit. Therefore, the questions of purpose which often use the word יתרון “profit” and which drive the book forward up to 6:7–12 when they disappear, are questions that may best be answered by the wise person. It is important to emphasize that the wise person is “more likely” but not guaranteed to gain profit, because otherwise it would correspond to the act-consequence principle. However, since the outcome continues to be arbitrary, God’s justice continues to be an incomprehensible mystery.

⁵⁰⁷ Mazinghi, "The Divine Violence in the Book of Qoheleth," 552.

⁵⁰⁸ Mazinghi, "Esegesi ed ermeneutica," 197.

⁵⁰⁹ Qoheleth expresses his novel understanding of “revering God” by means of the originality of his language which we noted in section V.3.1. of chapter II. This is an important clue when looking particularly at 8:12 because a classical thought should be expressed in traditional language, and since here we encounter an innovative manner of expression, it is also an indication that the actual thought is also new. We will take a look at this further on. Louis Derousseaux, *La crainte de Dieu dans l'Ancien Testament*, LD 63 (Paris: Cerf, 1970), 340.

I.3.1. QOHELETH 9:13 – 10:3

The last verses of Qoh 9, namely vv. 13–18, up until 10:3, which we may consider a unit, bring us back to the default theme of wisdom. In fact the word “wisdom” חכמה appears six times in these nine verses and the word “wise” חכם three times, as an adjective describing the poor man in v. 15, as a nominative plural in v. 17, and as an adjective describing the man in 10:2. Qoheleth 10:2–3, the last three verses of this section, incorporate the frequent use of “folly” סכלות or “fool” בסיל, סכל, which thereby contrast with wisdom. Wisdom is undoubtedly deemed as superior: “the poor wise man...delivered the city by his wisdom” in 9:15, “wisdom is better than strength” in 9:16, “the words of the wise heard in quietness are better than the shouting of a ruler among fools” in 9:17, and finally, “wisdom is better than weapons of war...” in 9:18.

Nevertheless, despite the unquestionable superiority of wisdom, it is easily outweighed by a little bit of folly as demonstrated throughout these same verses: “...the wisdom of the poor man is despised and his words are not heeded” in 9:16 and “...one sinner destroys much good” in 9:18. Qoheleth 10:1 offers the image of dead flies that make a perfumer’s oil stink, hence “a little foolishness is weightier than wisdom and honor.” What can we make of this? It appears that no matter how much wisdom one has, any little mistake can ruin all of one’s efforts. Why be wise if, apparently, no matter how wise one may be, one is doomed to failure? There seems to be no profit from wisdom at all. The words from Qoh 1:17 may still resonate strongly: “Yet when I applied my mind to know wisdom and knowledge, madness and folly, I learned that this also is a chase after wind.” Here we have the only reference to the fleeting aspect of wisdom. Its acquisition, in a similar manner to the experience of joy, is not within one’s control. While it is true that wisdom is something that can never be grasped or controlled and it might seem that Qoheleth believes the search for wisdom to be useless and futile, the rest of Qoh 10 will paint a generally positive picture of wisdom and affirm its necessity.

I.3.2. QOHELETH 10:4–20

The next four verses, vv. 4–7, show how the errors committed by rulers result in a radical conversion of the social order. While folly is exalted, the rich are brought low, and while slaves ride on horses, princes walk like slaves on the land. The rulers referred to in these verses מושל, שליט, and שר, do not refer to the king, but instead, to local authorities in Judah. This is another way of saying that foolishness has its consequences and no matter how much power or authority one may have, one can easily lose it if one is not careful.

The following four verses, vv. 8–11, offer a series of pithy sayings and proverbs that first outline the risks involved in taking different kinds of action in vv. 8–9, such as digging a pit, breaking through a wall, quarrying stones and splitting logs. All are images of one who is doing hard labor, but more specifically of one who is building, constructing or creating something. One's action and work cannot be done without the risky consequences that one cannot control or avoid. Qoheleth 10:10 continues with an image from the world of work and construction and confirms that one who works with wisdom, that is, one who sharpens his axe, can exert less strength. The second part of this verse is a well-known *crux interpretum* and there are various ways to interpret the phrase ויתרון הכשר חכמה.⁵¹⁰ Together with v. 10, the proverb in v. 11 praises the profit and advantage of wisdom. As we noted in chapter II, when one is wise, one can do less work and have the same successful result. Likewise, the profit that comes from the charmer is to prevent the snake from biting. If we were to associate the charmer with one who is wise and who has the capacity to subdue the negative forces of the snake, the profit that one gains is not having to deal with a snake bite. Furthermore, this profit coming from wisdom also leads indirectly to the possibility of joy by avoiding the bite. We therefore begin to recover a more positive view of wisdom, its advantages and profit.

The brief section in vv. 12–15 puts the “words from the mouth of the wise person,” which are described as חן “gracious,” meaning “agreeable,” “charming,” “attractive,” in contrast with the words of the fool. “The lips of the fool consume him” (v. 12), “...the beginning of this talking is folly and the end of it is wicked madness” (v. 13). “Yet the fool multiplies words.” (v. 14a) This is an interesting observation, as oftentimes we think that one who has much to say is more intelligent or more capable. However, this multiplication of words points us back to Qoh 5:2 which says: “the voice of the fool [comes] through many words.” Few words are necessary to communicate and convey a message. In addition, the truly wise person is also humble and knows that s/he cannot pretend to know even the future. Qoheleth 10:14b once more reaffirms the fact that no one knows what the future will bring. This phrase reminds us to Qoh 7:14 which offered a similar idea: “one may not discover anything *that will be* after him.” Hence, wisdom is associated firsthand with an appreciation of time in the present moment without needing to know and control the future. In this acceptance, one can experience joy.

Finally, vv. 16–20 begins by presenting a contrast between the land whose king is “a youth” [נער] and whose princes feast in the morning and the land “whose king is of noble birth and whose princes eat at the appropriate time.” The former is addressed with “woe to you” while the latter is addressed as “happy are you.” We cannot ignore this reference to the land that is said to be “happy” [אשרי] because the princes eat “on time” [בעת]; this is also the final use of the word עת in Qoheleth. This use of עת corresponds to an “appropriate” or “good” time,

⁵¹⁰ For an extended study of the different interpretations see: Timothy J. Sandoval and Dorothy B. E. A. Akoto, “A Note on Qohelet 10,10b,” ZAW 122, no. 1 (2010): 90-95.

since the purpose of the food is said to be “for strength and not for drunkenness.” This comparison between the two lands is somewhat expanded in the pithy saying that follows in v. 18 and which describes how the rafters of a house sag because of laziness [עצלתיים] and the house leaks because “the hands are slack” [ובשפלות ידיים], another way of expressing laziness. This laziness is the opposite to work, and here, instead of someone working to build a house, the house is falling apart due to idleness and sloth. The following verse, v. 19, returns to the theme of joy and the images of eating and drinking. Food or bread [לחם] is made for the purpose of enjoyment and laughter while wine is said to “give joy” to the living [ויין ישמח חיים]. The theme of joy, by means of the daily things such as food and drink, is continued and reaffirmed at the conclusion of Qoh 10.

At the beginning of Qoheleth, the advantages of wisdom seemed dubitable, however, after 10 chapters and much gained experience, Qoheleth affirms the contrary in 10:10b when he says, “Wisdom is the profit of the skilled person.”⁵¹¹ From this point onwards, Qoheleth makes no other negative affirmations about wisdom. Although there is no joy text, there is a direct mention of joy in both 10:17, “Happy are you, O land...” and 10:19, “A feast is made for merriment and wine gives joy to the living, but money answers for everything.” The latter verse clearly points back to 9:7, the previous joy text, which was the only one to specify “eat your bread...” and “drink your wine...” The image of eating a meal in enjoyment and drinking wine that makes life merry concludes this chapter in v.19.

Throughout this section, we have commented on the remaining passages of Qoheleth that have not been treated in depth in the previous chapters of this thesis and we have noted what, if any, relation they have to the themes of time and joy. Qoheleth 4 touches on themes such as oppression, rivalry, and solitude in work, which are deemed to be הבל. What is the use of a life that revolves around productivity and success if one is not able to enjoy life? This sort of life is הבל, passing, and will bear no lasting fruit. On the contrary, Qoheleth commends community and the observations of vv. 9–12 are not labeled as הבל, meaning that they have a lasting quality. These latter points coincide with what may be deemed to be a greater sense of satisfaction in life and even joy, even though joy is not explicitly mentioned. This would lead us to conclude that joy is found and experienced in moments of life that possess a lasting character, that go deeper and beyond material gain and profit, and hence are not described by הבל, which is passing and fleeting. Qoheleth 7 focuses primarily on the passing nature of life and the limits imposed by time in death. Confronted with the reality of death, Qoheleth nevertheless affirms that the experience of joy goes deeper than momentary feelings and emotions. This discussion concludes with Qoheleth’s reminder that we are called to be happy in the present moment, in 7:14 since we are incapable of knowing the future. The second half of Qoh 7 begins

⁵¹¹ For the sake of our study, I have sided with Fox who reads הכשיר as “the skilled person.” Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 306; Sandoval and Akoto, “A Note on Qohelet 10,10b,” 90-95.

by endorsing the *via media* and pointing to reverence of God as the attitude that brings about balance, seeking wisdom and avoiding folly.

Qoheleth 8:6 says, “for there is a just time for every joy...” revisiting important vocabulary previously studied such as **הפנ** and **עת**. There is a clear and direct reference to the vital link between time and joy. Even if the only explicit mention of time and joy is in 8:6, the focus of the rest of Qoh 8 is on wisdom and we may safely conclude that the wise are better equipped to enjoy life and find meaning and purpose to their work. We may conclude, therefore, that for Qoheleth, the experience of joy supersedes the limits imposed by time, and a life of wisdom leads to joy in the present. As we noted in chapter IV, after Qoh 8:15, joy rescinds and replaces the fleeting aspect of time previously described by **הבל**. The final section, which consists of the last 6 verses of Qoh 9 and all of Qoh 10 does not make mention of time or joy until the very end in 10:19, reminding us of the joy text in 9:7 and concluding these verses with the image of eating and drinking in the experience of joy.

II. THE THREE POEMS

In chapter II we explored the connections between the poem on time, 3:1–8 and the opening poem of the book 1:4–11, while in chapter V we noted the connections between the final poem 12:1–8 and the opening poem 1:4–11. The connections between 3:1–8 and 12:1–8 remain to be explored and therefore it may be illuminating to look at these two poems first. In a second moment, we will glance at all three poems side by side in order to see what insight they may offer concerning this study on joy and time in Qoheleth and the role that they play within the book.

II.1. THE POEM ON TIME 3:1–8 AND THE FINAL POEM 12:1–8

At first glance, the poem on time in 3:1–8 and the final poem on death in 12:1–8 seem to have little or nothing to do with each other, however, we cannot deny the emphasis on the theme of time. Qoheleth 3 basically offers a list of diverse moments in time, all part of the human experience, from birth and death until war and peace. As we have already mentioned, there is a sense of the cycle of life that repeats itself and is continually renewed. There are constantly times of giving birth and times for death, times for planting and uprooting – it is the constant cycle of life. This perspective on 3:1–8 coincided well with the circular view of time in the opening poem. The final poem, on the other hand, is focused on convincing the listener to remember his Creator “before” a specific and yet inevitable time comes upon him/her: the

time of death, the time when the dust will return to the earth and the spirit to God. This seemingly endless cycle ends in the final poem.

One significant detail that these two poems share is that they both use the word *חפץ* in their opening line. As we have already studied, *חפץ* may mean “matter” in 3:1, however, it is not impossible for us to read the meaning “joy,” “...there is a time for every *joy* under heaven.” Of its eight uses in Qoheleth, 12:1 is one which most certainly means “delight” or “joy.” This infrequent word, therefore, serves to connect these two poems from their start. Although the rest of the poem does not repeat the word or even the idea of joy, it has been mentioned from the beginning and hence puts the theme in the spotlight as being important to Qoheleth.

II.2. ALL THREE POEMS

Clearly, all three poems deal with time. The first focuses on the cosmos and the rhythms and cycles that determine both the earth and the elements and generations that pass through it. There is a tension between the fleeting and passing dimension of time, and the lasting and permanent nature of the earth. This permanence takes on a new character in the repetition of the specific moments and individual times that make up the lives of human beings in Qoh 3:1–8. We lose sight of the bigger perspective of nature, creation, and the cosmos and we focus solely on the times unique to human beings as they work under the heavens. The rhythm of the different moments and times that human beings live do not directly mention joy, but do involve joy in the overarching picture, not only because joy, as we have already mentioned, is present in a hidden way in the opening line of the poem in Qoh 3:1, but because we know that God gives the gift of joy to the human being. The experience of joy is therefore above and beyond individual moments and can encompass more than one moment in a person’s life.

Finally, in the closing poem, we return to the elements of nature and creation and unite them with the closure of the human being’s time-cycle in death. God’s creation and God’s ability to embrace the totality of time are related and very important for Qoheleth. Creation from the beginning in Qoh 1 until the end in Qoh 12 is expressed by means of the natural elements of light, wind or spirit, and water, and these are the places where time exists and expresses itself. While the sun in 1:5 exhibits its constancy and circularity, by rising and setting, with no sign of this rhythm abating, 12:2 describes a time when one day the sun will be darkened. What in the opening poem seemingly had no end, now in the final poem gives way to completion. In 1:11 the opening poem concluded by saying: “There is nothing new under the sun,” stemming from the belief that most things are predictable, expected, and part of repeated cycles. However, the final poem points to numerous images which indeed drive home the point

Qoheleth has been making throughout the second half of the book: we cannot know or understand our future or our end, and hence there *is* something new about the end as we cannot have known or predicted it. The “novelty” is that there will be closure to the cycle. The progression of time and creation will conclude and return to its starting point. In the eschatological perspective, the endless repetition of nature and the endless cycle of times seen both in 1:4–11 and in the poem on time in 3:1–8 will one day come to their conclusion. In our individual existence, that closure comes with death, and on the cosmic level, that closure comes with the end of the world. As we saw in Qoh 9:5, the living know that they will die, but the dead no longer know anything. Indeed, that is all that the human being can know for certain, the fact that s/he will die, whereas with death, knowledge ceases completely. Death is the end of the world for each individual person, and death invites and urges the call to joy “during the few days that we have to live under the sun.” Although we may theoretically know and understand that all things will end with death, we cannot know the experience until it takes place, and hence there is a newness to death that we cannot pretend to comprehend here and now.

Structurally, the poem in 12:1–7 completes the *inclusion* with the introductory poem in 1:3–11, and they serve as the bookends of Qoheleth, opening and closing the book. Thematically, 12:1–7 returns to and closes many of the key issues addressed throughout Qoheleth’s discourse, most importantly the images of nature and creation. Together with the light of the sun and wind as breath, water is the third symbol which is essential for life to exist. These three natural elements which are vital to life unify the two poems at the start and end of the book in a way that highlights how much the human being is a part of God’s greater creation. The poem on time in Qoh 3, which does not include these images of nature and creation, focuses instead on the different times in the lives of human beings who form a part of this bigger picture. The questions of purpose and the joy texts which build up within the book are specifically and directly aimed at the human being, a small part of the bigger cosmos, but which the human person cannot fully comprehend, even with the gift of עלם in his heart (3:11).

The placement of the three poems is also significant and noteworthy. While we have mentioned that 1:3–11 and 12:1–7 open and close the book, the poem on time in Qoh 3 is strategically placed after the parody of the king in 1:12 – 2:23. This false start, as it were, has concluded in an unconvinced assertion of joy (with the first joy text in 2:24 – 26) and needs a jump start, a point from which Qoheleth can re-commence his discourse. Not everyone has the life of a king, nor can everyone experiment with joy (2:1) by accumulating riches and wealth as the king did. However, everyone can and does experience numerous and diverse moments of time in which joy is potentially hidden. The mention of joy by means of the word הפץ in the opening line, hints at this potential joy present in all moments of a human being’s life. In addition, the poem on time emphasizes the importance of the individual within the bigger picture, opening the search to every human person not just the king.

Poetry communicates on various levels and the placement of these three significant poems at the beginning and end of Qoheleth highlight a specific message that Qoheleth wishes to communicate, namely the origin of all things, the times of their existence, and the end of life and end of time with death, which closes the cycle. That which seems permanent is seen in contraposition to the fleeting and ephemeral reality of human life. None of the poems deals directly with the theme of joy, yet in their own hidden way by means of the word **פֶּן** the second and final poems do not fail to insinuate the prominence of joy. Therefore in these three poems, even if only symbolically, joy takes precedence above and beyond the theme of time and the singular moments in life. Ultimately, the theme of joy encompasses all the other themes which become integrated into it.

III. TIME AS IT PASSES

Time is a consistent theme throughout the texts of Qoheleth that we have studied in this thesis. At the very start of the poem on time in Qoh 3:1 we saw how the totality of time is at the center of “all” that which forms part of human existence and the events and times of the poem are enlisted as a representation of the completeness and fullness of human life. The repetition of the word **עַתָּה** expresses an indefinite idea of time that is far from the idea of time as “duration” but instead conveys the idea of time as an event or moment of human life. In addition, the human being is not passive or completely dependent on time but has the freedom to seize and choose how to live his/her times as we have come to conclude that Qoheleth does not believe in a deterministic God.

Diametrically opposed to the fleeting and temporal nature of human life, expressed by means of the word **הַבָּל**, is a sense of permanence and endlessness, a sense of totality and perfection. This contrast and opposition hold both aspects of time in tension. While human life is brief and ephemeral, as transient as a breath of air, there is something about human nature that gives our life and existence the weight of eternity. Whether it is the human longing for perfection and wholeness or the explicit belief in the divine reality that admits to a realm “above” the heavens, and beyond the confines of limited time, human life seeks the eternal. Time runs out: we cannot stop it, hold it or control it. It slips through our fingers, as the sand slips through an hourglass and that sand is limited, yet our dreams and longings seem to have no end and are never satisfied. The one and only certainty that comes to all is death.⁵¹²

We may see a similar logic in the theology of the Word described in Deuteronomy. Deut 8, for example, reminds the people of Israel of how God has directed their journey through the desert. The imperative is to not forget the Lord their God by being sure to keep God’s

⁵¹² The word **עַתָּה** refers to the time of death in 7:17 and in both occurrences of 9:12.

commandments. While experiencing hunger and thirst and the gift of God's manna, the emphasis is put on the nourishment obtained from "all that comes forth from the mouth of God." (Deut 8:3) Likewise, in Deut 30, the emphasis is on God's commandments, which the Israelites are called upon to observe. "But the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may observe it." (Deut. 30:14) The voice of God, God's word and commandments, may be immaterial, but they are consistent and lasting.

III.1. THE PRESENT IS THE WINDOW TO GOD

Time is a gift that God gives to the human being, along with joy. God is the one who "gives the counted days of one's lifetime" to the human person.⁵¹³ Hence, time is synonymous to the gift of life and human existence. God has no problem possessing and holding together the completeness of time: past, present and future, a mystery given to the human being and yet too great for the mind to comprehend (3:11). Though the human being cannot hold these times together, people have access to God and to this "timelessness" only through the present moment. Therefore, it is in the present that the human being can have access to the fullness and wholeness of time. What exactly this present means is a question that philosophers and psychologists are still asking, but for Qoheleth it simply means the experience of joy, here and now. As Qoheleth has stated in 5:19, one loses awareness of the passage of time by means of the gift of joy. In addition, God's work of creation and the fact that God makes everything "beautiful" in its time (3:11) links God's creation to the experience of joy that is also said to be "beautiful" (5:17). Hence, we begin to note that although time is one of God's gifts and a basic building block of life, joy is the real purpose to life and takes the upper hand in the relationship between the two.

III.2. TIME RUNS TOWARDS DEATH

To ponder the mystery of life animated by our breath leads us to contemplate the mystery of death. Life and death are two parts of the same paradox: the mystery of human existence. One who lives is not dead and one who is dead cannot be alive. The natural end of life is death.⁵¹⁴ The element of time is essential to the lived experience because one who is alive,

⁵¹³ In 9:9 the word יום is used to express the temporality of life, as is also the case in Qoh 2:3; 5:17; 8:15; 6:12; and 7:15.

⁵¹⁴ The word for death מות comes up 15 times in the entire book (Qoh 2:16; 3:2.19(2x); 4:2(2x); 7:1.17.26; 8:8; 9:3.4.5(2x); 10:1 and references to death appear in every chapter between one and twelve with the exception of Qoh 10. See 2:14-16; 3:2; 19-21; 4:2-3; 5:15-16; 6:3-6; 7:1-2, 4, 17, 26; 8:8; 9:2-12; 11:8. Burkes, *Death in Qoheleth and Egyptian Biographies of the Late Period*, 48-70.

experiences the realm of the living from within the dimension of time given the nature of human life “under the sun.” On the other hand, one who is dead is no longer within this realm and is therefore unable to experience time and hence unable to experience anything at all (cf. Qoh 9:5 the dead cannot know). It would seem to follow, therefore, that life is synonymous with time.

As life and time relate, there inevitably must then be a connection between death and time. The fact that Qoheleth describes life as “breath” or “vapor” evokes the fact that human existence is something ephemeral, inevitably concluding in death. Death is the ultimate limitation set for human beings and is, therefore, an expression of the fact that “time runs out” on our human life. Death is normally viewed as “the natural end of life, when it comes in the fullness of time.”⁵¹⁵ Death invites us to value the limited time that life gives us. The philosopher Kent Thune eloquently states, “death not only gives meaning to life but is also the *enabler of life*. The proximity to death equals the proximity to life; embrace death and you will live more fully.”⁵¹⁶ Mortality is the expression of our limited life-span upon this earth. This is the natural and final destiny of the human being, the expected occurrence and the proper and fitting culmination of the normal earthly life. “This ‘satisfaction’ or ‘fullness’ of days is the proper, expected time for death.”⁵¹⁷ Death plays this role in Qoheleth’s rhetoric. Therefore, though death may seem to bring time to its end, it is more accurate to say that death brings time to its completion or fulfillment. In this way, life and time do not end or cease, but are fulfilled in death. We may conclude in saying that death in Qoheleth is not greater than time, since death does not eliminate time, but instead fulfills it. Beyond whether the human being has faith in life-after-death (which we know to be beyond Hebrew thought at his time), the very fact that human existence ends, puts a limit on time and pushes the human being to give a deeper meaning and purpose to life, *here and now*. As we have been noting up until now, this “here and now” is given meaning most fully by means of God’s gift of joy.

In letting go of and detaching from what is not within one’s control, one can instead take hold of *that which is* within one’s power in the present. Looking forward several hundred years from Qoheleth’s time to the one who not only incarnates Qoheleth’s message but fulfills it, we find Jesus who even to the last minute in his helplessness and powerlessness on the cross, still has one precious power and gift to offer: his own life freely offered for the redemption of many and for the completion of God’s work in the world. This offering of life gives us a purpose and motivation to continue struggling until our last breath, no matter how much or how little we may feel that we have to offer and give. It is no wonder that the objective of Jesus’ words rings true through time: “These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in

⁵¹⁵ Wilch, *Time and Event*, 115.

⁵¹⁶ <http://www.thefinancialphilosopher.com/2011/05/the-paradox-of-death.html>

⁵¹⁷ Wilch, *Time and Event*, 115.

you, and *that* your joy may be made full.” (Jn 15:11) As our time runs out and walks towards death, our joy is called to grow until it is full and complete.

III.3. THE PARALLEL BETWEEN “THE DEAD” AND “JOY”

Of the 8 occurrences of the piel form of שָׁבַח in the Hebrew Scriptures, we have noted in chapter IV that the two uses in Qoheleth praise “the dead” in 4:2 and praise “joy” in 8:15. The remaining six occurrences have God or God’s works as the object, and hence apart from Qoheleth, the verb שָׁבַח is used exclusively in theological pronouncements.⁵¹⁸ This must therefore make us question these two objects, their relationship, and their significance for Qoheleth.

Looking first at the context of these verses, in both 4:2 and 8:15, Qoheleth contemplates the abuse of power and the perpetration of injustices in human society. In 4:2, the sage’s observation of human misery precipitates the bitter declaration: “I praise [שָׁבַח] the dead who have already died...” In such dire circumstances where rivalry and oppression take the joy and satisfaction out of work, it is better to be dead than alive. We touch one of Qoheleth’s low points as he observes humanity and the futility of the search for wealth which is as fleeting as breath (4:8). Death is in a sense a liberation from the absurdity of injustice and oppression and is hence praised and elevated to divine status. As the chapters progress, however, Qoheleth’s persistent focus on the redeeming value of enjoyment changes his tone and transforms his vision. The enthusiasm with which he acclaims enjoyment intensifies, and in 8:15 we reach a culmination of praise for joy.⁵¹⁹ The language of praise is now reclaimed to affirm what is “good” and “divine,” raising joy to its divine quality.

IV. THE THEME OF JOY

The objective of this thesis has been to understand the relationship between the themes of joy and time, both central to the book of Qoheleth. Throughout the course of the thesis we have observed that both joy and time are related to God and other themes such as creation and death. In chapter II, we began by noting how joy seemed to respond to the need for meaning posed by the questions of purpose early in the book. The discussion of time in Qoh 3 was presented alongside these initial joy responses, without yet showing the tight relationship between them. By chapter III, we notice how the fleeting or finite aspect of time is accentuated and enhanced. Joy serves to help the human being forget the passage of time while at the same

⁵¹⁸ Ps 63:4; 106:47; 117:1; 145:4; 147:12; 1 Chr 16:35; Qoh 4:3; 8:15. Clines, *DCH* 8:230; Backhaus, *Denn Zeit und Zufall trifft sie alle*, 164-5.

⁵¹⁹ Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment*, 59.

time allowing God to directly enter and touch human experience. Qoheleth 8:15 elevates and praises joy, while also noting the limitation of time in life by entering the topic of death more fully in Qoh 9. In the joy text that concludes the discussion on death, joy is then commanded for the first time in 9:7–10. Joy is placed as the most important achievement in the brief life of the human being. Finally, Qoheleth once more commands joy in 11:9. It is no longer only highlighted as being the most important way of living life or as merely a recommendation, but rather it is Qoheleth's imperative all the while immersing us in the discussion of the reality of death.⁵²⁰ Therefore, as time shortens and runs out, heading towards death, joy grows, strengthens, and reaches fullness and plenitude.

IV.1. THE JOY TEXTS

In the previous chapters, we have studied five of the seven joy texts in depth, but now we shall take a step back in order to gain a comprehensive perspective of the seven joy texts in Qoheleth and the function they play within the entire book. In the following chart, I will outline the seven joy texts and highlight common and unique traits amongst them, then I shall draw some conclusions.

	Translated text – unique aspects are in italics	Similarities with one or more other joy texts
1	<p>Qoh 2:24–26 “There is nothing better for a human being than to eat and drink and to see for himself that his work is good. Also, this I have seen that it is from the hand of God. <i>For who can eat and who can have enjoyment apart from Him? For to a person who is good in His sight He has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, while to the sinner He has given the task of gathering and collecting so that he may give to one who is good in God's sight. Also this is breath and chasing after wind.</i>”</p>	<p>- Begins with אִין־טוב</p> <p>- eat, drink, and see that his work is good</p> <p>- it is from the hand of God</p> <p>- also this is הבל and chasing after the wind</p>
2	<p>Qoh 3:12–13 “I know that there is nothing better for them than to rejoice and do well during life; moreover, for every person who eats and drinks and sees the good in all his work – this is a gift of God.”</p>	<p>- Begins with “I know that...”</p> <p>- Uses אִין־טוב</p> <p>- eat, drink, and see that his work is good</p>

⁵²⁰ “Ritorna così, alla fine del libro, uno dei temi che lo hanno dominato: la morte, intesa come la più radicale dimostrazione che “tutto è soffio.” Eppure il pensiero della fine non elimina la gioia, pur se la relativizza. Né il ricordo della fine elimina la realtà dell'agire di Dio; tutto è soffio, è vero, ma la gioia, pur se limitata, non è meno reale; tutto è soffio, tranne l'agire di Dio, che resta incomprensibile all'uomo, ma non per questo meno autentico.” Mazzinghi, *Ho cercato*, 311.

- this is a gift of God [מתת אלהים היא]
- 3 **Qoh 3:22** “And I saw that there is nothing better for mortals than to rejoice in their work; for this is their lot. *Who will let them see what is to come after them?*” - Begins with “And I saw...”
- Uses אי־טוב
- Rejoice in their work
- 4 **Qoh 5:17–18** “Here is what I have seen *to be good, that which is beautiful*: to eat, to drink and to see the good in all one’s work in which one labors under the sun during the counted days of one’s lifetime which God gives him, because that is one’s portion. *Moreover, as for every person to whom God has given riches and wealth, God has also empowered him to eat from them and to receive his portion and rejoice in his work – this is a gift of God. Indeed, he will not be mindful of the many days of his lifetime, because God answers with joy in his heart.*” - Begins with “Here is what I have seen...”
- eat, drink, and see the good in all his work
- during the counted days of one’s lifetime which God gives him
- this is a gift of God [מתת אלהים היא]
- 5 **Qoh 8:15** “Therefore *I praised joy*, because there is nothing better for a human being under the sun than to eat, to drink, and to be joyful. This will accompany him in his work through the days of life that God gives him under the sun.” - Uses אי־טוב
- eat, drink, and be joyful
- this will accompany him in his work through the days of life that God gives him under the sun
- 6 **Qoh 9:7–10** “*Go then*, eat your bread in happiness and drink your wine with a joyous heart; *for God has already approved your works. Let your clothes be white all the time and let not oil be lacking on your head. Enjoy life with the woman whom you love all the days of your fleeting life which He has given to you under the sun; all your fleeting days, for this is your reward in life and in your work in which you have labored under the sun. Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might; for there is no activity or planning or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol where you are going.*” - *Imperative*: Eat your bread in happiness and drink your wine with a joyous heart
- all the days of your fleeting life which He has given to you under the sun
- 7 **Qoh 11:7–10** “*Truly, light is pleasant, and it is good for the eyes to see the sun. For if the human being should live many years, let him rejoice in them all, and let him remember the days of darkness, for they will be many. Everything that is to come is fleeting. Rejoice, oh youth, during your childhood, and let your heart give you joy during the days*” - *Imperative*: “let him rejoice in them all”; “rejoice!”
- everything that is to come is fleeting

of your youth. Follow the ways of your heart and the visions of your eyes but know that concerning all these things God will bring you to judgment. So, remove irritation from your heart and get rid of evil from your flesh, because childhood and the dawn of life are fleeting.”

The joy texts are theologically charged statements associating joy directly with God and illumining our study of God in relation to human joy.⁵²¹ There is a notable progression throughout the joy texts in emphasis and force. The sevenfold enumeration of the joy texts in the book of Qoheleth is not accidental but reflects the conscious effort of Qoheleth to reiterate the importance of joy and hence Qoheleth’s understanding of joy cannot be easily dismissed as a distraction to escape the drudgery of life. Seven, signifying perfection in the Hebrew understanding, communicates that this repeated and escalating call to joy is the fullness that God can give to the human experience.

We witness an evolution of the meaning for the root שמח which in 2:1–10, the royal parody, signifies “pleasure.” The transition from the idea of “pleasure” to “joy” comes with the first joy text in 2:24–26. This joy text tells us quite explicitly that God is the source of joy and without God, joy would not be possible. In addition, the first, second, third and fifth joy texts consistently use the phrase אין טוב, a formula that responds to Qoheleth’s habitual question: “what good or profit is there for the human being...” This formula “nothing is better than” always comes after a negative development and therefore points to the existence of an authentic good for the human being, in this case, the experience of joy. The fourth joy text, which is the centerpiece of the seven, is an exception to the regular rhythm set by the phrase “nothing is better than” and is also exceptional because of the uniqueness of its vocabulary. We saw in chapter III how Qoheleth speaks of the experience of joy as something “good and beautiful.” In addition, God is said to “empower” the human being to experience joy. We therefore reach a climax with the rich and profound statement that “God answers with joy” in the person’s heart. As the center point of the seven joy texts, the relationship between joy and time is not the same after this fourth joy text. While the entire section surrounding the fourth joy text, 5:8–16 and 6:3–9 leaves us with the sensation that everything is הבל and brings us to question the reason for entering this world and the meaning of the work and fatigue we undergo, 5:17–19 and 6:1–2 home in on the reason for our existence: the enjoyment of life which is a gift from God. The fourth joy text is also climatic because we have the difficult to interpret phrase: מענה לבו. God “gives,” “deposits,” “occupies,” or “answers” with joy so that the human being “may not remember” how short life is. The concepts of joy and time are inherently linked

⁵²¹ The root שמח is consistently found in the seven joy texts: as the noun שמחה meaning “joy” in four of the seven joy texts (2:1.2.10.26; 5:19; 7:4; 8:15; 9:7) and as the verb שמח meaning “to rejoice” in five of the seven joy texts (2:10; 3:12.22; 4:16; 5:18; 8:15; 10:19; 11:8.9).

in the human experience because as we see, the perception of time is dependent on the experience of joy. We come to a turning point in Qoheleth's theology where we may affirm that Qoheleth believes joy to be God's access point. Joy is where God can enter the human experience. The human being can experience joy and forget the limitations of life, touching for a moment a dimension that is limitless – the divine dimension.

The fifth joy text Qoh 8:15 brings us back to the expression “there is nothing better than” אֵין־טוֹב that we saw in the first three joy texts. This joy text restates in similar words the elements that we had in the first three texts: “eating and drinking,” the mention of “the work throughout the days of one's life” and the fact that these are “given by God.” In addition, it points us back to the very first mention of joy in 2:1 where Qoheleth says, “Come now, I will test you with שמחה...” In reminding us of 2:1 and repeating similar themes found in the first three joy texts, the fifth joy text restarts the emphasis on joy, especially since from this point forward the questions of purpose no longer appear. We evidently begin a new stage in the development of the themes presented in the book. Finally, the sixth and seventh joy texts bring us to a second climax by means of their use of the imperative to command joy; first, commanding one to “Go, eat your bread with joy and drink your wine with a merry heart” in 9:7 and then simply commanding one to “Rejoice” in 11:9.

The seventh joy text, Qoh 11:7–10, the most nuanced exhortation to joy that Qoheleth makes, is an invitation to enjoy life during one's youth and reminds us that youth is ephemeral. This seventh and final joy text blends the themes of time and joy together. Qoheleth offers the last word on the relationship between joy and memory and essentially: the more aware that one is of the ephemerality of life, the more one learns to truly live joy in the present moment. Once again, Qoheleth reminds us that God alone is the source of joy and commands us to enjoy life in the here and now. In this specific joy text, the exhortation to joy is no longer directed to the human being's physical needs and appetites but is instead focused on the person's emotional and mental needs. Therefore, we find that there is a process of interiorization. Joy takes a step deeper than the merely physical dimension, and Qoheleth is progressively touching the deeper needs of the human being. We may recall that after the opening poem, Qoheleth began by describing the king's search for pleasure and happiness. It was a search completely centered on material human desires. The frustration of this superficial search led again to the question of purpose and the first joy text, which finally offered a different response. As Qoheleth gains insight on the existential human search, and as the perspective of death becomes clearer, he also delves deeper into the real needs that humanity experiences in the face of death. Joy is an interior reality, and regardless of the different moments, positive or negative, that make up the many years of life, humanity is to rejoice in them all.

It is significant that all the joy texts incorporate in one way or another the aspect of the temporality of life. Joy is a human experience that can only be perceived in our conscious realm

of time. Joy in life can only be fully appreciated considering its own relationship to transience, a recognition of the fleeting nature of a life that is limited by death. However, it is also true that when we are truly enjoying something and feel joy deeply, we somehow lose our sense of time. It is in this sense that we might say that joy surpasses time. Qoheleth is touching on this existential aspect of the experience of joy when he exhorts us to enjoy during this short lifetime and challenges us to live joy in the present moment. Those moments of joy should not only be “brief moments” – Qoheleth exhorts us to make the whole of our life an experience of joy.

IV.2. THE ROLE OF JOY

IV.2.1. THE JOY TEXTS AS A RESPONSE TO THE QUESTION OF PURPOSE

In chapter II and throughout this thesis we have suggested that the joy texts offer a response to the rhetorical question of purpose. While the first question of purpose in 1:3 opens the book, the second question of purpose in 2:3 is followed by the extensive discourse on “pleasure” in the parody of the king. However, it is the third question in Qoh 2:22 that precedes the first joy text in 2:24–26 which then leads into Qoheleth’s discourse on time. The first joy text offers a response to both the question of purpose and the ironic *הבל* refrain. Subsequently, the remaining questions of purpose are closely followed by the second, third, and fourth joy texts as we will outline below.

Just after the famous poem on time, the fourth question of purpose is repeated in 3:9, “What profit does the worker have from his work?” As opposed to the previous question in 2:22, the tone of the surrounding verses in Qoh 3 is theological and much more positive, particularly vv. 10–11. In fact, immediately afterwards Qoheleth provides the second joy text in 3:12–13: “I know that there is nothing better for them than to rejoice and do well during life; moreover, for every person who eats and drinks and sees the good in all his work – this is a gift of God.” This joy text responds to the question in 3:9 that asked what profit one gets from one’s work. The answer is itself to eat, drink, and “see the good” or enjoy one’s work. This purpose and reason are a gift from God and therefore, God provides the answer to the human being’s quest for meaning. Any other profit that one might gain from one’s work is passing and temporary. In fact, as we have learned from the king’s lesson of dissatisfaction in Qoh 1–2, there is no guarantee of authentic happiness. Joy, however, is the best profit and experience that one can gain, as it is personal, and nothing can take it away.

In a similar fashion, the third joy text in 3:22 follows the question in 3:21, “Who knows that the breath of the human being ascends upward, and the breath of the beast descends downward to the earth?” As opposed to the other questions, it is not directly about “profit” or “gain,”

but it is about outcome and, in some sense, about the afterlife. If taken ironically, the rhetorical question may sarcastically imply that there is no difference between human beings and animals since we all die alike. Nevertheless, Qoheleth offers the following answer in 3:22: “I have seen that nothing is better than that the human being should be happy in his activities, for that is his lot. For who will bring him to see what will occur after him?” First, this statement addresses only human beings and hence differentiates them from the “animals” mentioned in 3:21. Second, this joy text responds to the preceding question about the moment of death with a phrase that is unique to this joy text and not found elsewhere. Indeed, Qoheleth is questioning the human capacity to see and understand the future. This is a good example of how the joy text points back to the question that precedes it. Qoheleth 3:22 does not explicitly mention God, but it is set within a theological context which refers to the start and end of human life. In addition, it questions the future, something that only God can see.

The sixth question of purpose in the book of Qoheleth comes up in 5:15b: “What then does it profit them to toil for the wind?” The first half of the verse, 15a says: “This too is a grievous evil, that they go just as they came.” In other words, just as a human being is born, thus will s/he die. In this case, aspects from the first two questions of purpose, particularly the use of תרון “profit” are linked to the question of the afterlife that has been touched upon in 3:22. The fourth joy text in 5:17–19 follows closely thereafter and offers a response to this question. “Here is what I have seen to be good, that which is beautiful: to eat, to drink and to see the good in all one’s work in which one labors under the sun during the counted days of one’s lifetime which God gives him, because that is one’s portion...” The advantage or profit that comes to one who toils for the wind is precisely: to eat, drink and enjoy oneself in one’s work and this seems to be answered by the statement: “because that is one’s portion.” In Qoh 5:18, again, the act of enjoyment is directly associated with God, not only in that God gives joy but that God “enables” והשליטו the human being “to rejoice in his work” ולשמח בעמלו. Again, in the following verse 5:19, within the same context, “God answers by means of joy in his heart” האלהים מענה בשמחה לבו, a passage which could not be more direct or explicit in its manner of linking God with human joy.

Finally, Qoh 6:8–12 brings an end to the questions of purpose:

“What profit have the wise compared to fools, or what profit have the lowly in knowing how to conduct themselves in life? ‘What the eyes see is better than what the desires wander after.’ This also is breath and a chase after wind. Whatever is, was long ago given its name, and human nature is known; mortals cannot contend in judgment with One who is stronger. For the more words, the more breath; what profit is there for any

one? For who knows what is good for mortals in life, the limited days of their fleeting life, spent like a shadow? Because who can tell them what will come afterward under the sun?"⁵²²

These verses bring us to the conclusion of Qoh 6, after which Qoheleth will cease to state these questions. In Qoh 6:8 and 11, instead of using the usual *יתרון*, Qoheleth uses the word *יותר* from the same root to express the idea of profit.⁵²³ Qoh 7 introduces a series of pithy sayings and proverbs that comment on themes such as the end of one's life, the wise vs. the fool, pleasure vs. true joy. As we noted above, at first glance, 7:1–6 may seem to go against the message of the joy texts, praising mourning and sorrow over joy or pleasure. Verse 3 starts off by saying that "Sorrow is better than laughter," however, the second half of the verse may offer a clue to the intentionality of this section. "For when a face is sad the heart may be happy."⁵²⁴ Here Qoheleth hints at his understanding that a deeper sense to joy lies beyond "laughter," which at times may be superficial.

Consequently, the use of *שמחה* in verse 7:4 may be better understood as "pleasure" rather than joy. It is one of the uses of this root outside the theological context of the joy texts and it would make more sense that fools dwell in the "house of pleasure" rather than in the "house of joy." While the word *אבל* meaning "mourning" is frequently used in other books in contrast to *שמחה*, it is found only once in Qoheleth, here in 7:4. Instead, Qoheleth makes a deliberate contrast between *שמחה* and *הבל* throughout the book, rather than between *שמחה* and *אבל*. Schwienhorst-Schönberger also notes that *הבל* is related to joy, since the *הבל* passages are presented as Qoheleth's *via negationis* of "joy." The *via affirmationis* would be to see joy as God's gift, which is the central statement of Qoheleth.⁵²⁵ Again, in v. 6 the laughter of the fool is compared to the "crackling of thorn bushes under a pot." The thorn bushes are something that burn, wither, and disappear, just as *הבל*; here one moment and gone the next. Qoheleth is challenging his audience to cultivate a deeper sense of joy, not just fleeting laughter or temporary pleasure. In the next section, we will look closer at how the joy texts respond to the *הבל* judgment.

⁵²² Though this passage is taken from *New American Bible, revised edition*, 2010, I have modified it in regards to the translation of the word *הבל*.

⁵²³ This second word for "profit" comes up in 2:15, 6:8, 6:11, 7:11, 7:16, 12:9, and 12:12, all verses which question the "advantage" of the wise person over that of the fool.

⁵²⁴ This is a tricky verse to translate *טוב כעס משחק כִּי־ברע פנים יִטב לב* and there are numerous versions of this verse.

⁵²⁵ "Glück als Gabe Gottes – dies ist die zentrale Aussage des Buches Kohelet." Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Nicht im Menschen gründet das Glück* 297.

IV.2.2. THE JOY TEXTS AS A RESPONSE TO *HEBEL*

While we have just shown how the joy texts respond to the repeated question of purpose by suggesting that God's gift of joy gives our life meaning and purpose, we are left with what to make of the reality of הבל. This term is something that has mystified both interpreters and translators of Qoheleth, represented in numerous ways by the words, "futile," "absurd," "vanity," and "breath." We yearn for life everlasting and yet we are surrounded by reminders that everything will one day end and pass away. We find millions of ways to pretend that הבל doesn't exist, and we try to hide the fact that "all is הבל," by seeking to lengthen our lives and living under the illusion that what we acquire and purchase will help us live longer and more meaningfully. The sage Qoheleth, however, persistently reminds us that the truth of the matter is: "all is הבל." All will pass away, even our abundant savings, our greatest accomplishments, our highest honors, titles, and successes. This reminder is not made in order to depress us or lead us to despair, but as a way of teaching us to value what really matters.

As we have seen in chapter II, section II.3., הבל is a metaphor which signifies the fleeting, ephemeral aspect of life and it is frequently used as a judgment statement. Though the word הבל comes up 38 times in the entire book, the specific phrase "also this is הבל" or a similar variation of it appears a total of 15 times,⁵²⁶ and the phrase "everything is הבל" appears 6 times.⁵²⁷ Just as with the questions of purpose that come up seven times in the book, it is interesting to study where and in what context the הבל phrases appear. To begin, the general judgement that "everything is הבל" is found in the opening and closing refrains in 1:2 and 12:8 after the superlative הבל הבלים. In addition, we find it in 1:14, which begins the king's observations on all things that are done under the sun after the opening poem. The very first occurrence of "also this is הבל" appears in 2:1 as Qoheleth the king introduces the search for pleasure, which at the outset, he deems הבל. Two verses later in 2:3 we find the second question of purpose of the book: "what good is there for human beings to do under heaven the counted days of their lives?" The next four occurrences of "this too is הבל" come up in 2:15, 19, 21, and 23, once again in the context of the next "question of purpose" in 2:22. In the midst of these is, as well, the general conclusion "all is הבל" in 2:11 and 17. The short and curt conclusions: "also this is הבל" and the general exclamation, "all is הבל" seem to respond in an ironic and direct way to the questions of purpose. The human being gets nothing, profits nothing because "this too is passing and fleeting and temporary." However, in the previous section we had said that joy provided an answer to the questions of purpose. Therefore, what is Qoheleth's response to the question of purpose then? At least here at the beginning of the book we immediately encounter the first joy text in 2:24–26. Nevertheless, it too ends with the phrase "also this is הבל and chasing after the wind," in 2:26 as if Qoheleth is not yet fully convinced of his

⁵²⁶ In 2:1, 15, 19, 21, 23, 26; 4:4, 8, 16; 5:9; 6:2, 9; 7:6; 8:10, 14.

⁵²⁷ In 1:2, 14; 2:11, 17; 3:19 and 12:8.

first affirmation of joy. Regardless of his lack of conviction, this first joy text offers an initial response to both the question of purpose and the ironic הבל answer.

Qoh 3's reflection on time and the theological discussion surrounding it puts a break on this expression except for 3:19 where Qoheleth affirms the same fate for human beings and animals, saying that they all have the same life breath and "all is הבל." The הבל judgement later returns three times in Qoh 4 where Qoheleth describes temporal realities of work, human relationships, oppression, and the poor and rich. Numerous injustices observed under the sun are judged to be הבל. The only small section of this chapter which does not conclude with "also this is הבל" is 4:9–12 which speaks of the advantages of a life that is accompanied and not lived alone – "A cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart." It is significant that Qoheleth leaves out the הבל judgement from these verses and we must investigate the reason for this omission. These verses highlight the importance and lasting quality of human relationship and company as something that endures and offers a sort of "profit" or "advantage." It is not something that so easily passes away even though human life is fleeting. There are positive effects of human relationship that endure beyond space and time and hint at a quality of something lasting, of something almost "eternal."

The expression "also this is הבל" returns in verses 5:9, 6:2, and 6:9. As we saw in chapter III, Qoh 5:9 speaks of riches as always being insufficient and unsatisfactory. Qoheleth 6:9 also points to the futility of desiring and coveting more and more that which will never satisfy one's hunger. Not only are the questions of purpose reiterated in both 5:15 and 6:7–12, but the stinging הבל judgement proves as a reminder that no riches or acquisitions can ever satisfy a person. Nevertheless, serving as response to this dissatisfaction, the core and center of this entire section is the joy text in Qoh 5:17–19. The use of the הבל judgment in 6:2 points strongly to the contrast with the preceding joy text since 6:1–2 serves as a counterpart to the joy text. The fact that God does not empower one to enjoy the fruit of one's work, and a stranger enjoys it instead, is the culmination of הבל, here best understood as "futility" and "absurdity." What we find is that the repeated expression "also this is הבל" is almost always found in the same context as the question of purpose and finds its response or culmination in the joy texts. When the human being is faced with the reality of the ephemeral and fleeting aspect of life, s/he is left with only one option: to make the most of the present moment and enjoy it. Joy is therefore clearly connected to time and specifically to the ephemeral and transient dimension of human life which becomes most palpable in the reality of death. In the face of death, the experience of joy becomes more intense and acute. Joy is the vitality in face of the limited nature of life. Hence, joy maintains the upper hand in its relationship to time, and time is at the service of the ultimate end in life which is joy.

The last three occurrences of the expression appear in 7:6, 8:10 and 8:14 long after the questions of purpose have ceased. We just noted in the previous section that the "crackling of

thorn bushes under a pot” wither and disappear, just as הבל. The comparison was made to the laughter of the fool and therefore the expression judges fleeting laughter or temporary pleasure as a superficial expression of happiness. Finally, 8:10 and 14, which we will look at later in this chapter, offer some statements disproving the act-consequence theory and for Qoheleth they are the culmination of that which is judged to be הבל. These statements lead straight to the joy text in 8:15 which therefore confirms that Qoheleth offers joy as a response to all that which he sees as הבל in this world. Joy, therefore, takes precedence over these temporary and passing realities and the experience of joy surpasses the fleeting and breath-like aspect of time, which includes the reality of death.

As we already have noted in chapter IV, verses 2:1 and 8:14 mark the beginning and end of a long exposition where Qoheleth presents שמחה as a response to הבל. The expression “I said ... also that is breath” [אמרתי... גם־הוא הבל] in 2:1 forms an inclusion with “I said that also this is breath” [אמרתי שגם־זה הבל] at the end of 8:14. In 2:1 Qoheleth presents שמחה as a means of testing and in 8:15, Qoheleth offers a resolution of sorts: “Therefore, I praised joy.” Therefore, the use of שמחה opens two different moments in the development of the theme of enjoyment, a section from 2:1 – 8:14 where the הבל judgement appears throughout and another section from 8:15 – 11:8, where joy seems to completely displace or annul הבל. In this second section from 8:15 onwards, Qoheleth praises joy and we no longer find the הבל judgement. There is, however, one final הבל judgment in the future form “everything that is to come will be breath” which closes this second section, and which also concludes amid the final joy text in Qoh 11:7–10. At 11:8 and 10, we come full circle with the הבל phrase that had first defined שמחה in 2:1 and here it rounds off the final joy text, as well as announcing the end of the subsection. “To describe the time of youth, a time which one is called upon to enjoy, as הבל, suggests that הבל is far from a vacuous activity, but rather that it depicts something perhaps not fully comprehensible, something enigmatic, and this even for the sage.”⁵²⁸

In summary, the word הבל in Qoheleth refers mainly to three things: (1) the human work that seems to be unproductive or useless (2:1.11.19.21.23; 4:4.8; 5:9; 6:2); (2) the mastery of life according to wisdom that seeks to order human behavior and actions but seems futile given the fact that the righteous have the fate of the wicked (8:10–14) and the wise die like the foolish (2:15; 6:7–9); and lastly, (3) behind the הבל judgments is Qoheleth’s insight into human transience, which makes humanity equal to all creation (3:19) and which is behind most of the הבל affirmations. Almost all of that which has been judged as הבל is so in some way due to its temporality. Many of הבל’s occurrences describe the length of life, or different aspects or events of human life as temporary and fleeting.⁵²⁹ Temporality is a quality of the metaphor

⁵²⁸ Ogden, “Qoheleth XI 7-XII 8,” 32.

⁵²⁹ “Ecclesiastes goes on to enumerate many other aspects of life that are only temporary in nature and value, including personal efforts, joys and tragedies.” Fredericks, “הבל,” *NIDOTTE* 1:1006.

“vapor” or “breath,” but we can also draw more out of this metaphor. Breath, though undoubtedly a passing reality is also one that sustains life. Without breath, we cannot live, and we cannot experience joy. Breath therefore symbolizes this vital life-force which keeps us going and gives us a sense of purpose and future. Hence, הבל does not denote an end, but leads to the experience of life and joy. The breadth and depth of all things that in the end are הבל because they will come to an end, find their purpose and sense in the experience of joy which Qoheleth offers as the answer to our human longing for something that is lasting and eternal. That is why after 8:15, Qoheleth puts the final emphasis on joy rather than הבל.

IV.2.3. THE FINAL JOY TEXTS AND WISDOM

In the second half of the book, after the final questions of purpose in 6:7–12, Qoheleth ceases to state the questions of purpose explicitly. If we follow the logic that the joy texts “respond” to these questions, an examination of the context surrounding the remaining joy texts may give insight as to why Qoheleth no longer restates the questions of purpose.

Qoh 8:16–17, the section that follows the fifth joy text says: “I applied my heart to know wisdom and to see the business that is done on earth, though neither by day nor by night do one’s eyes see sleep, and I saw all the work of God: No mortal can find out the work that is done under the sun. However much mortals may toil in searching, no one finds it out; and even if the wise claim to know, they are unable to find it out.” Even though Qoheleth claims to see “every work of God,” he emphasizes that the human being cannot know, not even the wise person can understand. No matter how much one may “toil in searching” [יעמל האדם לבקש], one cannot find out. The message of Qoh 9:1–6, the verses that precede the sixth joy text, Qoh 9:7–9, is that there is the same profit for all, reward is not only for the best, but instead the just and the wicked receive the same lot (9:2). Therefore, Qoheleth’s response to the “unstated” question of profit and purpose in his discourse about the “same profit” is that there is no advantage to one over the other. The profit from life is joy itself and hence Qoheleth criticizes the act-consequence scheme that is prevalent in traditional Israelite understanding, once again highlighting the importance of joy. Finally, Qoh 11:1–6, the section preceding the seventh joy text 11:7–10, invites one to work just the same with or without profit, gratuitously. Work for the sake of the work itself. Enjoy the work. Qoheleth calls us to a sense of awe with v. 5: “Just as you do not know how the life breath enters the human frame in the mother’s womb, so you do not know the work of God, who is working in everything.” Again, Qoheleth invites us to recognize our place in the perspective of God’s greater project, God’s work of creation, and reiterates that though the human being “cannot know,” we can recognize with awe and wonder the goodness and beauty of God’s work. In v. 6 Qoheleth says: “In the morning sow your seed, and at evening do not let your hand be idle: For you do not know which of the two will be successful, or whether both alike will turn out well.” We do not control, and we cannot know

what fruit will come from our work, but we must work just the same as it is that work and our participation in God's creative work which gives us purpose and meaning. Therefore, the joy text in vv.7–10 culminates this exhortation to gratuitous work with the final exhortation to joy.

We have come to see how the context around the last three joy texts 8:15, 9:7–10 and 11:7–10 deals consistently with the human incapacity to know and at the same time the theme of wisdom. We no longer have any mention of *הביל*, and joy displaces the mention of this passing and fleeting quality of time. Nevertheless, we are faced with a contradiction: on the one hand, the human being has an insatiable thirst for wisdom and on the other, the human being becomes more and more aware of his limitations with regards to knowing. Qoheleth confronts us with the existential limitation of human understanding before the mystery of God, and hence, before the mystery of the human being. Hidden within this is also the question about profit and the purpose of life. The repeated conclusion seems to be that true wisdom consists in recognizing and accepting that one cannot always know, that God's creation is a mystery, and that we as human beings are only a small part of God's great creation. Therefore, there is no sense in asking the question of purpose because we already know its answer: no one can find out, not even the wise. Despite this, Qoheleth continues emphasizing the importance of joy for the human being. The indirect answer to the question of purpose is to learn how to live with joy all moments of one's work, not for the sake of the profit, but for the sake of the work itself, trusting that God will bring about the fruit if we faithfully fulfill our task. In this sense, wisdom may be understood as the capacity to enjoy in the present moment beyond the human limitations of knowledge and understanding. Therefore, wisdom is the culmination of the correct integration of the human experience of joy as lived in our limited time of life.

IV.3. THE SUPERIORITY OF JOY OVER TIME FROM A THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Throughout Qoheleth's entire treatise, there is a progression in the insistence and conviction of joy. From the beginning to the end, God is the source of joy and, in fact, for the experience of time and joy to be beautiful, God must somehow be involved. Qoheleth goes as far as saying that God reveals Godself through the joy placed in the human being and hence we can conclude that joy is the point where God is able to access the human experience. Joy, in turn, acts as the door through which the human being can enter and experience the divine dimension. Therefore, if the experience of joy allows the human being to touch God, then the person is also permitted to touch a divine quality of time contained within the very experience of joy.

The person must actively and willingly take up the opportunity to collaborate with God and enjoy fully and God surely gives the means and "enables" or "empowers" the human being to enjoy. Enjoyment is a God-given responsibility (5:19) for which the human person will be

called to account (11:9). Therefore, “in Qoheleth’s ethic of joy, the dual notions of God’s gift and human participation are not incompatible, but rather indispensable parts of the whole.”⁵³⁰ The following three aspects of God: God gives, God reveals Godself, and God invites the human being to collaboration are not unique to Qoheleth but are proper to the biblical God of the Hebrew Scriptures. To begin, the Genesis creation narratives describe God giving and providing life, revealing Godself to the human being by means of creation, and inviting the human being to have dominion over all creatures (cf. Gn 1:28), while cultivating and caring for God’s creation (cf. Gn 2:15). In other words, the human being is to be a fellow co-worker and co-creator with God. This same sequence may also be seen in the theology of the exodus where God sets his people free from slavery in Egypt and further completes this freedom by giving his laws and commandments. In this way, God reveals Godself through his Word and promises, and God calls the human being to collaboration by living in fidelity to God’s laws and therefore fulfilling his part of the covenant. This theology repeats itself again and again throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, where God continually gives, reveals Godself and invites humanity to collaboration. In the case of Qoheleth, as we have already seen, the gifts of God are principally time (which translates into life) and joy. In a special manner, the theologically charged experience of human joy is the gift that empowers the human being in his work and teaches him the attitude of revering God. In terms of the three aspects of God: God gives, reveals Godself, and invites the human being to collaboration, the unique characteristic when it comes to Qoheleth is that these elements are centered on and spring forth from the gift of joy. God gives the gift of joy and by means of joy reveals Godself, and the human being is consequently invited to participate in God’s joy by enjoying his work.

When we experience joy deeply, our sense of time is minimized and hence joy is connected to time and specifically to the ephemeral and transient dimension of human life which is most palpable in death. Nevertheless, joy maintains the upper hand in its relationship to time. Qoheleth recognizes that the gift of joy is the response to all that which is *הבל* in this world. Joy, therefore, takes precedence over these temporary and passing realities and hence, the experience of joy surpasses the fleeting and breath-like aspect of time. It is in this experience of joy where one tastes the dimension of eternity within limited time. By the end of the book, the mention of *הבל* fades away and joy displaces this passing and fleeting quality of time. While the human being has an insatiable thirst for wisdom, the human being becomes more and more aware of his limitations with regards to knowing. Qoheleth confronts us with the existential limitation of human understanding before the mysteries of God and the human being, which includes the question about profit and the purpose of life. Here once again the answer points to joy in one’s work in the here and now, surpassing the passing and temporal realities of life.

⁵³⁰ Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment*, 136.

Qoheleth progressively gives priority to joy, as we have seen in the development of his thought as the book develops, although I would still not go as far as saying that it is the central theme of the book. Nevertheless, the elevated significance of joy invites us to read the book of Qoheleth from the perspective that joy is the end and purpose of the human being.

V. ACT-CONSEQUENCE – REVERING GOD – JOY

In order to complete our study of Qoheleth's theological perspective in relation to the themes of time and joy, we must also discuss the texts which seem to critique the pattern of thought followed by ancient sages, namely, that every bad action has a bad consequence, otherwise known as the *Tun-Ergehen-Zusammenhang* or act-consequence principle. The early wisdom books typically defend the doctrine of retribution, but later texts, such as Qoheleth and Job have a different reaction to the solutions which are offered to the problem of evil.⁵³¹ They "show us that the concept of actions with built-in consequences was shaken to the foundation."⁵³² Qoheleth, "recognizes no relationship between act, situation, and reputation, having rejected any connection between a person and that individual's acts or state."⁵³³ Actually, as we will see in our study of the texts, Qoheleth replaces the principle of act-consequence with the notion of "revering God" as the foundation of ethics. After looking at these texts in Qoheleth, we will consider their relationship to the joy texts that are generally found in their proximity.

V.1. THE TEXTS THAT MENTION OR CRITIQUE THE ACT-CONSEQUENCE PRINCIPLE

V.1.1. QOHELETH 2:14–16. 26

Already in 2:14–16, Qoheleth has questioned the profit of being wise if the same fate befalls both the wise person and the fool, since both will die alike. This, too, Qoheleth calls הבל. If we associate wisdom with "being good" and folly with evil, then it would follow that

⁵³¹ "Proverbs is, next to Deuteronomy, the most stalwart defender in the Hebrew Bible of the doctrine of retribution... Everywhere it is asserted—or else taken for granted—that righteousness is rewarded and sin is punished (e.g. 11.5– 6)...[this is] lacking in intellectual sophistication and, to be frank, in realism. Job and Ecclesiastes introduce the needed element of sophistication and realism into the philosophy of wisdom, calling into question as they do the universal validity of the tenets of Proverbs." David J. A. Clines, "The Wisdom Books," in *Creating the Old Testament: The Emergence of the Hebrew Bible* (ed. S. Bigger; Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 269-91, 272.

⁵³² Koch, "Is there a Doctrine of Retribution," 82.

⁵³³ Hartmut Gese, "The Crisis of Wisdom in Koheleth," in *Theodicy in the Old Testament* (ed. J. L. Crenshaw; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 141-53, 143.

the good and evil are rewarded equally with death. At this point, therefore, death is no longer a punishment, but it is the fate of all.⁵³⁴ This is the first instance where Qoheleth notes an apparent lack of justice and seemingly questions the expected outcome. Therefore, there is a relationship between Qoheleth's concept of death and a lack of "expected" justice. In other words, Qoheleth's understanding of death can help us comprehend Qoheleth's concept of justice.

In the specific case of 2:26, however, the reward for the good is "wisdom and knowledge and joy" while the punishment for the sinner is "gathering and collecting for someone else." Nevertheless, as we noted in chapter II, while 2:26 seems to follow traditional expected thinking, at the end of the verse Qoheleth states: this too is הבל. We might therefore say that from the outset of the book, Qoheleth does not explicitly deny the standard belief and thinking, but all the same, begins to put it into question.

V.1.2. QOHELETH 3:16–21

In between our second and third joy texts 3:12–13 and 3:22, we have vv. 16–21 which for the first time explicitly refutes the act-consequence principle.

¹⁶ And still under the sun in the judgment place I saw wickedness, and wickedness also in the seat of justice. ¹⁷ I said in my heart, both the just and the wicked God will judge, since a time is set for every affair and for every work. ¹⁸ I said in my heart: As for human beings, it is God's way of testing them and of showing that they are in themselves like beasts. ¹⁹ For the lot of mortals and the lot of beasts is the same lot: The one dies as well as the other. Both have the same life breath. Human beings have no advantage over beasts, but all is breath. ²⁰ Both go to the same place; both were made from the dust, and to the dust they both return. ²¹ Who knows if the life breath of mortals goes upward and the life breath of beasts goes earthward?

Qoh 3:16 opens with Qoheleth's observations about a reversal of the expected, wickedness "in the judgement place" and "wickedness in the seat of justice." Interestingly, v. 17 notes that God will judge both the righteous and wicked and brings this judgment directly in relation with the theme of time: "since a time is set for every affair and for every work." The Hebrew phrase ends with the word **נפש**, not reflected in this translation, a well-known *crux interpretum* and the

⁵³⁴ "In the OT theology of retribution, a breach of covenant obligations was tantamount to treason; therefore, the inevitable sentence of such treason was death. Qohelet, however, observed that death was no respecter of person – death afflicted the faithful as well as the unfaithful. No longer could death be seen as retribution or punishment – it was the inevitable fate of all humanity." Richard Alan Fuhr, *An Analysis of the Interdependency of the Prominent Motifs within the Book of Qohelet*, Studies in Biblical Literature 151 (New York; Bern: Lang, 2013), 126.

key to this passage.⁵³⁵ It is an ironic allusion to the underworld, to the place and time after death.⁵³⁶ We would expect to find justice “there” however, the irony is that nothing is there.⁵³⁷ The evidence that we have is that just as animals, human beings too die; both apparently have the same end. These verses demonstrate Qoheleth’s disbelief in souls ascending. Qoheleth 3:21 may either be a rhetorical question expecting a negative answer or simply a statement of doubt and recognition of the impossibility of a human being grasping the deeper sense of reality.⁵³⁸ The latter seems to be the most likely possibility.⁵³⁹

The significant point that I would like to highlight is that this text disproving the act-consequence principle is right at the center of two joy texts. It almost seems as though Qoheleth wants to diminish the apparent lack of justice by emphasizing joy. Hence, though Qoheleth does not provide an explicit answer to explain God’s justice or apparent lack of it, Qoheleth affirms that God’s gift of joy exists regardless of when or how God will make justice. Once more, joy proves to be the overarching element that encompasses the incomprehensible reality of God’s justice. In other words, one who receives and exercises God’s gift of joy is able to sit with the paradox of God’s justice, and at the same time, apparent injustice. Joy harmonizes the contradictions and the differences, not with explanations but with a deeper internal assurance in the heart of the human being.

V.1.3. QOHELETH 7:15–20. 26

The Torah stressed that in order to be righteous, one must fulfill the law and would consequently be rewarded in this life.⁵⁴⁰ Therefore, it follows logically that the righteous person should be rewarded for his/her righteousness and prolong his/her life while the wicked person perishes. Qoheleth 7:15 uses the typical morally charged terminology: צדיק “righteous” and רשע “wicked.” The adversative notion in the phrase stems from the tension between the subject

⁵³⁵ For a thorough commentary on the discussion around this verse see, Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 292-295.

⁵³⁶ Gordis, *Koheleth*, 235.

⁵³⁷ Mazzinghi also sees an ironical nuance in םש: “c’è, come alcuni pensano, un giudizio di Dio dopo la morte; ma in realtà ‘là’, nell’altro mondo, non c’è proprio nulla.” Mazzinghi, *Ho cercato*, 213-214.

⁵³⁸ Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 308; Mazzinghi, *Ho cercato*, 58.

⁵³⁹ With regards to 3:21, while the preferred reading is an interrogative ה in front of העלה the MT vocalizes it as a definite article ה, and from what we know, Qoheleth does not subscribe to a distinction between mortals and beasts. “Nevertheless, the sage is alluding to a belief that righteous souls ascend to heaven, presumably without their decomposing physical bodies, which are in fact no longer needed.” Samuel L. Adams, *Wisdom in Transition: Act and Consequence in Second Temple Instructions*, JSJS 125 (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 146.

⁵⁴⁰ “So you shall keep His statutes and His commandments which I am giving you today, that it may go well with you and with your children after you, and that you may live long on the land which the LORD your God is giving you for all time.” Deut 4:40.

and its condition, because in 7:15 Qoheleth notes the ambiguity of human reality and is apparently surprised to observe that there is no consistent justice. On the contrary, justice in this present life is proven wrong by the sad reality that can be observed. Qoheleth defiantly breaks with tradition and indirectly affirms that following the law is no guarantee of success in this life.

Once again, it seems as though Qoheleth returns to the dichotomous vision of traditional thought in 7:26 by stating that the one pleasing to God will escape from Folly while the one who displeases God will be ensnared by her. In this verse, Qoheleth makes the distinction between טוב לפני האלהים “one who is pleasing to God” and חוטא “the one who displeases [God],” just as he did in 2:26. Therefore, our interpretation of 2:26 and the other uses of טוב and חוטא, in addition to the context in which the verse is found, will enlighten the meaning of 7:26. While in 2:26 the one pleasing to God received wisdom, knowledge and joy, and the offender received the task of gathering, here in 7:26 the focus lies on their different reactions to “the woman whose heart is a snare” and “whose hands are prison bonds.”⁵⁴¹ The one pleasing to God manages to escape from Folly while the offender is captured by Folly. The end of 7:26 is a logical consequence that seems to tune in with traditional wisdom. God will prize the one who “pleases him” by freeing him from the “woman’s” grip, while punishing the offender by letting him fall into “the woman’s” trap. Instead, we should understand these verses the other way around. Rather than God rewarding the one pleasing to him with the escape from Folly, the one who does manage to escape Folly is consequently pleasing to God. While, the one who allows him/herself to be trapped by Folly offends God. The act of escaping is its own reward and being trapped is its own punishment. This would therefore resolve the tension of reward and punishment. This also indirectly expresses the way one who reveres God will struggle in order to not be trapped by Folly. The point Qoheleth wishes to drive home is that during this ephemeral life, the one who reveres God comes forth with the best of both sides that seek balance.

Therefore, the human freedom to choose is a way of accessing God and hence is an affirmation of God, while the lack of freedom leads to a rejection of God. In this sense, ethics does not involve retribution and justice, but instead the choice of affirming or rejecting God. This same idea is also seen in the Biblical text of Jonah. The prophet Jonah was called by God to preach repentance to the people of Nineveh. At first, Jonah chooses to reject God’s command and ends up spending three days in the belly of a great fish. When he is set free and freely chooses to obey God’s initial command, he heads towards Nineveh and the people heed God’s call through Jonah, repent and consequently escape the retribution and wrath of God as punishment for their sin. In this free choice to repent, they came to accept God. In this sense, ethics does not have to do with justice and retribution, but rather with accepting or rejecting God.

⁵⁴¹ See section I.2.2. earlier on in this chapter for the interpretation of the woman as “Folly.”

This entire section 7:15–20, 26 takes the disapproval of the act-consequence principle one step further. Qoheleth’s explanation of God’s apparent lack of justice, just happens to come directly after 7:14 the “extra” joy text. Hence, we have once more the reminder that God’s gift of joy exists within and beyond these questions of justice.

V.1.4. QOHELETH 8:10–14

In Qoh 8:10–14, Qoheleth observes life under the sun and recognizes the disparity between what is expected according to traditional thought and the actual reality he sees. This pericope is typically separated into two sections that apparently contradict one another: vv. 10–12a, 14 which seem to reflect reality which opposes the act-consequence principle and vv. 12b–13 which apparently reflect tradition. However, even in vv. 12b–13 Qoheleth takes a step beyond traditional thought. Qoheleth understands revering God in a completely original way in this specific verse and everywhere in the book.

Here it is interesting to note that the צדיקים are made to be equivalent to “those who revere God,” while the רשע are “those who do not revere God.” For the first time, Qoheleth introduces these terms that have a clearly distinct moral character. However, when it comes to their reward or punishment in life, Qoheleth does not make a clear-cut distinction between the righteous and unrighteous, but instead the hinge of the distinction between those for whom it goes well or not lies on whether they “revere God.” In other words, it will be well for those who revere God, but it will not be well for the evil person, because s/he does not revere God. It would mean that the criterion for retribution is no longer whether one is righteous or evil, but whether one reveres God. We may therefore conclude that justice and reverence of God go hand in hand in Qoheleth.

This entire section not only disapproves of the act-consequence principle, but it decidedly goes beyond it, as it is traditionally understood. It instead redefines the criteria for God’s justice: those who revere God will experience a recompense for their behavior.⁵⁴² In addition, we encounter again the theme of joy, which seems to have an integral relationship to these questions of injustice as the entire section concludes with the joy statement in 8:15. We therefore conclude that one who reveres God is better equipped to experience joy.⁵⁴³ Once more we

⁵⁴² As we saw in chapter II, “fearing God” is understood by Qoheleth as an attitude that comes from freedom and gratuity, and ironically, not from fear, hence I refer to ירא אלהים or ירא מלפני אלהים as revering God.

⁵⁴³ “Egli intuì, mi sembra, una prospettiva nuova per lo spirito umano, una sua nuova dimensione che non seppe chiarire a se stesso né agli altri. Perché è vero che Dio tratta allo stesso modo il giusto e l’iniquo, ma una ricompensa c’è per chi abbia il timor di Dio. La giustizia non serve, non porta cioè, secondo la concreta accezione ebraica del termine, una salvezza; ma il caso è diverso per chi abbia il timor di Dio.” Sacchi, *Ecclesiaste*, 88.

note the connection between the overarching theme of joy and the attitude of revering God. Qoheleth explains the disqualification of retributive justice from the perspective of joy.

V.1.5. QOHELETH 9:1–6

As we studied in chapter IV, Qoh 9:1–6 speaks of how the righteous, the wise and their deeds are in God’s hands. There is one and the same fate for all, righteous, wicked, good, clean, unclean, etc., and that one fate is death, and this observation indirectly targets the question of retribution, though the act-consequence principle is no longer mentioned and much less defended.⁵⁴⁴ Qoheleth affirms the unfair equality that befalls all human beings. Directly following the despairing conclusion that death is the final end, with no remaining memory and absolute exclusion from that which is done under the sun, the immediate call is Qoheleth’s imperative to enjoy: “Go *then*, eat your bread in happiness and drink your wine with a cheerful heart; for God has already approved your works,” (9:7) kicking off the second to last joy text in 9:7–10. Here, once again, there is an association between the question of the fate that comes to all human beings, their recompense or lack thereof with regards to their behavior, and the call to joy.

V.1.6. QOHELETH 11:9

Finally, Qoheleth concludes the final joy text of the book it by stating: “God will bring you to judgment for all these things...” As we already saw in chapter V when we studied this text in depth, God’s very judgement is related to his imperative “enjoy life” and will hold people accountable to how much they have experienced joy.

V.2. ACT-CONSEQUENCE AND JOY

After having done a brief overview of the texts in Qoheleth that point to the act-consequence principle in some way or another, we notice a progression in Qoheleth’s thought. At first it seems as though Qoheleth acknowledges without denying the standard belief in the act-consequence principle, yet he begins to question it. Soon after, he provides evidence to disprove

⁵⁴⁴ “In 9,2-12 è in primo piano il problema della retribuzione, che rende più acuta la percezione del male e ne evidenzia l’assurdità in tutta la sua pienezza; la morte è il principio ultimo di verifica della validità della teoria tradizionale della retribuzione.” Vittoria D’Alario, “L’assurdità del male nella teodicea del Qohelet,” in *Initium Sapientiae* (ed. R. Fabris; vol. RBSupp 36; Bologna: Dehoniane, 2000), 179-97, 184.

the principle in 3:16–21. Hereafter, he consistently escalates his argument against the act-consequence principle until he redefines the criteria for God’s justice by saying that those who revere God will experience recompense. We also notice that every time he brings up the topic of God’s apparent lack of justice, a mention of the theme of joy is not far off.

As the book progresses, in fact, it becomes more and more obvious that the observations and affirmations about our equal and unfair fate are the very motivation to “enjoy life now.” Since we may say that true joy is not possible without justice, the assumption is that God will make justice in God’s way and in God’s time, even though Qoheleth does not know or dare to attempt an explanation of when or how. If joy is the way that God reveals Godself and makes Godself present, then we are assured that God is present in the life of the human being regardless of the apparent lack of justice. In fact, whether one enjoys is itself the object of God’s judgement. This only affirms and consolidates the fact that joy is not merited or deserved; instead, joy is a gift and as we have noted previously, even a responsibility.

V.3. COMING FULL CIRCLE FROM REVERING GOD TO JOY

If we look at the seven texts on joy in a chiasmic structure where the first would correspond to the seventh and the second to the sixth, then the third text 3:22 corresponds to the fifth text 8:15 and indeed, thematically, the preceding verses to each joy text 3:16–21 and 8:10–14, both similarly deal with the question of how God imparts justice. The conclusion of the discussion in both cases is the joy text itself, and both in fact begin with the formula “there is nothing better than...” Both verses respond directly to that which led up to them. Therefore, the joy texts not only offer a response to the rhetorical question, but they also respond to the problem of how God will make justice.

As we have seen throughout this chapter, the themes that repeatedly come up throughout Qoheleth, revering God, judgement and retributive justice, creation, and death, consistently connect in some way with joy. These themes enhance Qoheleth’s understanding of joy, the meaning he attributes to it, and give it a wider horizon. By recognizing how revering God, justice, creation and death relate to joy, we may conclude that joy is something deeper than a mere personal experience – joy is an all-encompassing reality that, as we have insinuated in earlier chapters, points to something that we might even call a “new creation” or “salvation.” Joy integrates and incorporates these diverse themes of Qoheleth.

Similarly, Qoh 9:1–6 which we studied in chapter IV, is followed by the sixth joy text, and the mention of God’s justice in 11:9 are the closing words of the seventh and final joy text

in 11:7–9. As Qoheleth develops his thought around the failure of the act-consequence principle, recognizing the limitation of this traditional doctrine, God’s justice becomes more and more of a mystery.⁵⁴⁵ We have repeatedly noted that Qoheleth does not speak of the afterlife or say that he believes in it. Nevertheless, tied closely to the question of divine retribution is the place for God’s judgement and the question of what happens at the moment of death. “Qoheleth does not deny the possibility that God’s judgment might take place somewhere outside of human experience.”⁵⁴⁶ In fact there are several passages in Qoheleth which seem to hint at such a belief, or at least do not explicitly exclude the thought: 3:17; 8:12–13; 11:9. Of course these passages do not speak of Qoheleth’s faith in God’s judgment, but they do seem to allude to it. In addition, his use of expressions such as “under the sun” or “under heaven” imply that Qoheleth believes in a distinction between what happens in human experience “under the sun” and what happens elsewhere. “Once convinced that the traditional doctrine of retribution fails to reflect human experience, one either has to give up the idea of justice or one has to push its execution into some realm beyond the evidence of human experience.”⁵⁴⁷ This might be pushing the limit, however, it is clear that “Qoheleth’s preoccupation with death and complete denial of an afterlife reflect his participation in an emergent debate during the Hellenistic period regarding eternal possibilities for the human soul/spirit.”⁵⁴⁸ One may take the stance that there is no recompense for moral behavior to the extreme of saying that everything is God’s work; if everything is a gift, then the human being does not need to do anything in order to receive this gift. However, we tread a fine line with the idea that human freedom does not exist, as some scholars might suggest.⁵⁴⁹

⁵⁴⁵ “...il Qohelet riconosce solo fino a un certo punto il valore della dottrina tradizionale, ammette che Dio giudica e punisce, ma il *come* e il *quando* di tale giudizio restano per lui un enigma.” Mazzinghi, “Esegesi ed ermeneutica,” 191.

⁵⁴⁶ Kathleen A. Farmer, *Who Knows What is Good? A Commentary on the Books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 205.

⁵⁴⁷ Farmer, *Who Knows What is Good?*, 206.

⁵⁴⁸ Adams, *Wisdom in Transition*, 152.

⁵⁴⁹ “Altro punto fondamentale di Qohelet è strettamente legato con la sua negazione del principio di retribuzione è che tutto nella storia è opera di Dio. Non è un’idea nuova in Israele, ma essa con Qohelet assume una rilevanza nuova, proprio perché strettamente confrontata con il principio di retribuzione. Se tutto è dono di Dio, e se l’uomo, nonostante tutta la sua capacità di fare, sostanzialmente non fa nulla, a che serve la giustizia? Abbiamo già detto che la risposta di Qohelet è che la giustizia non serve. Ma allora se tutto è opera di Dio, la giustizia stessa dell’uomo o la sua iniquità, non potrebbero essere anch’esse frutto di un’azione irresistibile di Dio? Il problema non fu formulato da Qohelet, ma egli lasciava gli elementi per impostarlo: è il problema della libertà umana e del suo rapporto con la libertà divina.” Sacchi, *Ecclesiaste*, 88.

VI. TURNING AWAY FROM PESSIMISM

I add my voice to those scholars who in recent decades have offered an increasingly positive turn to the theme of joy as it regards human life and its fundamental importance in the interpretation of Qoheleth. In particular, we have highlighted the studies and commentaries of Robert Gordis, who claims that joy is the basic theme of the book, Whybray who goes as far as saying that Qoheleth is a “preacher of joy,” and Lohfink who speaks of joy as “divine revelation” to humankind. More recently, commentaries by Krüger (BKAT) and Schwienhorst-Schönberger (HThKAT) are convincing thanks to their theological synthesis and turn away from a pessimistic interpretation. Eunny Lee’s study *The Vitality of Enjoyment in Qohelet’s Theological Rhetoric*, also presents a balanced and positive reading of the book and its theological themes in relation to joy. Though I would not go as far as saying that joy is the central or principal theme of Qoheleth, I would assert that joy proves to be the highlight of all the ‘times’ which make up the life of the human being for Qoheleth. It is a significant theme, especially when studied alongside the other important themes of Qoheleth. The human experience of joy in the present moment is where God encounters the human being.

It is fascinating that the same book can spark such radically opposite readings and interpretations. For this reason, the issue of perspective when reading Qoheleth is very important and Nietzsche’s theory of “perspectivism” may shed some light. According to Nietzsche, we cannot and do not experience the world objectively but rather, selectively, in a way that reflects our values.⁵⁵⁰ In the same way, we do not come to the text abstracted from our views, beliefs and values. My socio-cultural, religious upbringing and context undoubtedly influences the way that I approach the book of Qoheleth and my interpretation and reading of the text is very much attributable to my personal perspective, no matter how objectively I seek to read the text. I will not deny that my hope-filled Christian perspective, informed by the truths of the New Testament, influences the way that I read the book of Qoheleth. Just the same, I recognize and accept the existence of other valid interpretations of Qoheleth. That said, I think it is important to take into account the various theological and thematic angles present in the book in a manner that is as comprehensive as possible, something perhaps lacking on the part of the pessimistic interpretations that we will look at below.

Pre-determined judgements of Qoheleth’s outlook on life seriously affect interpretation. Qoheleth’s focus on time, emphasizing the transient nature of human existence, often leads

⁵⁵⁰ Particularly as knowers, let us not be ungrateful toward such resolute reversals of the familiar perspectives and valuations with which the spirit has raged against itself all too long... : to see differently in this way for once, *to want* to see differently, is no small discipline and preparation of the intellect for its future “objectivity”—the latter understood not as “disinterested contemplation” (which is a non-concept and absurdity), but rather as the capacity to have one’s Pro and Contra *in one’s power*, and to shift them in and out, so that one knows how to make precisely the *difference* in perspectives and affective interpretations useful for knowledge. Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil : On the Genealogy of Morality*, The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche 8 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), III, 12.

scholars to a negative or pessimistic interpretation. Often, a pessimistic view is *read into* Qoheleth's thought, and the ambiguities of the book lend themselves to facilitate and encourage these negative interpretations.⁵⁵¹ The interpretation of one of the key terms of the book, הבל, significantly impacts the understanding of the entire work. If הבל is understood in the traditional sense of "vanity," it may present a real challenge to reading the book as a coherent whole. This is because the repeated judgement "all is vanity" goes against Qoheleth's insistence on the call to enjoy life and its simple daily pleasures. It also seems to contradict Qoheleth's positive affirmation of divine justice and revering God. One of the foundations for the pessimistic interpretation of scholars such as Fox and Schoors is the understanding of הבל as "absurd" or "pleasure," respectively. To begin, Fox's judgment that for Qoheleth, הבל means "absurd" in the sense described in Albert Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus*, is a modern anachronism. One cannot prove that there is emotional value to a term because of its context alone. Fox's opinion is that a multiple rendering approach to translating הבל in Qoheleth may obscure Qoheleth's message which was built around the singular term. This may be behind the LXX's single rendering of הבל as ματαιότης.

However, as we have seen especially in section II.4. "The Root הבל" of Chapter II, הבל understood as "breath," something that is ephemeral and fleeting, dissipates this pessimistic fog and brings us to the realistic perspective that indeed all things will come to an end, a truth that I would not regard pessimistic in itself. While it is true that we have come to conclude that joy has the upper hand in Qoheleth's book, we do not go to the extreme of presenting an overly optimistic Qoheleth. Rather, we have maintained the realism of the ephemerality of life, while at the same time defending the human capacity to live joy in the here and now. Life is short and it will end one day, but this does not mean it cannot be a joyful experience. In fact, the more one is aware of life's brevity, the more one learns to live with purpose and intentionality each present moment, and the more one recognizes the dimension of gift together with the importance of detachment. While a more literal rendering of הבל as "breath" or "vapor" is possible and makes sense in most passages of the book, this does not take away the fact that in numerous places, הבל maintains the connotation of the incomprehensible and absurd. There is a brutal honesty in Qoheleth's thought when it comes to recognizing the real limitations of human beings, but as we have seen throughout this thesis this does not preclude positive and life-affirming possibilities. As passing as it may be, God's gift of joy is a good thing.

Additionally, life can be unjust and oftentimes it seems as though the hard work we have done bears no fruit and gives no profit. Nevertheless, these uncontrollable outcomes should not impede us from giving meaning to our work and enjoying the present moment gratuitously regardless of the outcome. This is a skill and virtue to learn in a world that becomes ever more interested in end-results, outcomes, and profits, all things which will also come to

⁵⁵¹ Earlier on in Chapter II we noted the example of Lavoie's description of "the poisoned gifts originating from the creator" (Jean-Jacques Lavoie, "Puissance divine et finitude humaine selon Qohélet 3,10–15," SR 31, no. 3-4 (2002): 287).

pass and will not last forever. Qoheleth's perspective on God together with the ever-important attitude of revering God brings balance and realism into the equation, in addition to bringing a deeper motivation and purpose to what we do.

The very characteristic of the cumulative joy which Qoheleth builds up throughout his book is a very strong argument for demonstrating that Qoheleth is not necessarily a pessimist. This of course, presupposes a more balanced and tendentially positive interpretation of שמח and שמחה which cannot be taken for granted. We have studied this root in depth in section II.3 "The Root שמח" of Chapter II. The joy passages are not random philosophical reflections or a narcotic to numb the reality of life's challenges, but these joy texts (second only to the הבל refrains in their purposeful redundancy) are essential to Qoheleth's strategy and theological argumentation. They appear at crucial points in Qoheleth's treatise, moving it forward and offering an answer to the question of purpose and the problems posed throughout the book. Despite Qoheleth's stark realism with regards to the limitations of life, there is a clear passion for life that pervades his treatise. "Qoheleth's persistent call to enjoy life simply cannot and must not be written off as a contradictory strain or a peripheral digression. It is vital to his teachings."⁵⁵²

As I have already observed, my issue with the use of the translation "pleasure" is that if we understand it purely in the hedonistic sense, it brings along with it a negative moral connotation. Jerome's comments reflect an interpretive assumption that has been operative for the subsequent interpretations of Qoheleth, namely that: "Qoheleth's commendation of enjoyment is a hedonistic impulse that is fundamentally at odds with genuine piety."⁵⁵³ Therefore, though "pleasure" may make most sense in the contexts of negativity and egotism, it does not make sense in the more positive and theologically charged joy texts, which do not only have an important place within the book of Qoheleth, but also escalate in emphasis as we have seen. On the contrary, I have argued that context is essential when it comes to the translation of this word.

Schoors' commentary is tremendously thorough and comprehensive especially in its treatment of philological questions of the text, however he sees no overarching literary structure but only thematic units, despite numerous suggestions from other scholars. This rejection of a comprehensive structure excludes or at least limits the possibility that a development will take place within the book. I do not argue for one particular literary structure, but as I have shown throughout this thesis, there is a clear development throughout the book marked specifically by the growing understanding of joy. Nevertheless, Schoors would agree that the first, sometimes quite negative, chapters do not retain the last word and are relativized by later statements, clearly pointing towards a development in Qoheleth's understanding throughout the

⁵⁵² Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment*, 81.

⁵⁵³ Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment*, 125.

book. In addition, he presents his view on the interpretations of הבל and joy which I have contested throughout this study.⁵⁵⁴

Most interpreters still emphasize the book's profound skepticism and stark negativity as its defining feature. Fox and Schoors fail to do justice to Qoheleth's notions on God, joy, and the gift of wisdom as held in counterbalance to the limits of human knowledge. Schoors' judgment of Qoheleth as a determinist colors the way that he reads the rest of the texts that deal with God, for example. However, this dimension is no longer viewed as a threat to biblical theology and faith but as a critical witness from within. Others have consistently questioned whether Qoheleth can be considered a theological work.⁵⁵⁵ Nevertheless, recent years have seen a turn to the theological message of the book and it has been described as "life-centered theology," a theology grounded in and stemming from the life experiences of ordinary people. While it is true that Qoheleth does not offer a systematic or sustained exposition about God, אלהים is among the most frequently used words, occurring 40 times. In addition, the book consistently returns to the question of God's activity, God's giving, judging, and acting. In argument by silence, therefore, the fact that we do not have a comprehensible explanation of who God is, is also telling. God is beyond human comprehension and understanding and nevertheless, God is very present and active throughout human life. God is not a reality that we can control and put in our pocket; essentially God is to be respected and revered and this is the foundation of Qoheleth's understanding of ethical human behavior, something which does not need to exclude God's invitation to enjoy life.

VII. QOHELETH'S THEOLOGY AND FINAL REMARKS ON JOY AND TIME

Qoheleth emphasizes an apophatic theology when it comes to understanding God throughout his treatise. Even though the human being may "see" every work of God, one is still not able "to find out" or "grasp" the work that God has done under the sun. As we cannot fully know God, we cannot know, reach or grasp God's work. God's work transcends what we can know or understand. This theological approach may give the impression that God is distant or unknown to the human being. However, as Qoheleth has told us, the human being is able "to see" all the work of God, and some of this work (if not all) is clearly done "under the sun." Therefore, we may conclude that God is active in the midst of the world. Since God is the one who gives joy, therefore the human being cannot experience joy without God.⁵⁵⁶ Nevertheless, joy is not the only means of witnessing God's presence and action in this life. For example, God is often mentioned in relation to the "task" ענין that God gives to seek and explore by

⁵⁵⁴ Antoon Schoors, "The Ambiguity of Enjoyment in Qoheleth," in *Ancient Near East, A Life! Festschrift Karel Van Lerberghe*, OLA 220 (ed. Tom Boiy; Leuven: Peeters, 2012), 543-56.

⁵⁵⁵ Roland E. Murphy, "Qoheleth and Theology?," *BTB* 21, no. 1 (1991): 30-33.

⁵⁵⁶ For more on this point see: Glasser, *Le procès du bonheur par Qohélet*.

wisdom (cf. Qoh 1:13; 2:23.26; 3:10; 4:8; 8:16). In addition, God gives the “portion” חֵלֶק to the human being, a manifestation of the divine in the human experience (cf. Qoh 2:10.21; 3:22; 5:17–18; 9:6.9; 11:2), as well as the experience of revering God which Qoheleth emphasizes throughout the book (cf. Qoh 3:14; 5:6; 7:18; 8:12–13; 9:2; 12:5.13). Finally, God is the one who is present, giving and taking away the breath of life at the start and end of the existence of the human person (cf. 11:5; 12:7). One thing that is certain throughout Qoheleth’s teaching is that God gives joy for “this time,” “this present moment” and not for the future or the life to come.

One of the most profound conclusions that we can draw from Qoheleth’s teaching is that God comes into contact with the human being by means of joy. “Joy is ecstasy. Through joy, God allows human beings to forget everything – themselves, their death, the brevity of their lives. To every human question, he provides the answer in joy. Joy comes from the creator and opens dialog with the creation.”⁵⁵⁷ The experience of joy is God’s way of breaking into the time of the human being’s life on earth, and hence it eventually takes precedence over everything, including “fleeting time” itself. Therefore, we might say that through joy the dimension of ‘the beyond’ already breaks into each moment of the here and now, and in this sense, joy brings God into the human experience and brings about a ‘new creation.’ The reality of הַבַּל is the utter confirmation that the human being is *not* God and is hence mortal and temporal and destined to an end. God is the only one who can hold both extremes together: the reality of הַבַּל and the call of joy. Qoheleth, therefore is not an optimist (saying that all is joy),⁵⁵⁸ nor is he a pessimist (saying that all is futile), but he is a realist and God’s manifestation through the gift of joy is the real answer to the questions and enigmas of this human life under the sun.

⁵⁵⁷ Lohfink, “The Present and Eternity,” 240.

⁵⁵⁸ Cf. Whybray, “Qoheleth, Preacher of Joy,” 87-98.

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