

Qohelet 1:12-2:26

An ancient template for modern research

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An exegesis for the course Seminar Old Testament

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PREFACE

This exegesis of Qohelet 1:12-2:26 has been made for the course Seminar Old Testament at the Evangelical Theological Faculty in Leuven. It involves an in depth research of the biblical passage as well as a translation to today's context in the form of a devotional application.

Based on the teachings of Qohelet himself, we are well aware that this structure is (probably) nothing new under the sun. We even hope it to be nothing new, because our goal was not to find neat structures, but to reconstruct the intentions of the biblical author. We hope this paper contributes to the research of Ecclesiastes.

Scriptural references are taken from the NIV Bible unless mentioned otherwise. The terms 'Qohelet' and 'Ecclesiastes' are both used for reference to the Bible book studied, the author is always called Qohelet.

INTRODUCTION

Qohelet has to be one of the most discussed books in the entire Bible. There is no consensus on its author, its time, its structure, its meaning and so on. In the length of this paper, it is impossible to investigate all the riches of the chosen passage. We have chosen to focus on the structure of the text, trying to derive the meaning from it. We do not dive into the discussion about the author and his time. Though Solomon may not have been the author, as many liberal and conservative scholars have argued, the text makes references to the Solomonic context and this intentionality is a feature we want to integrate in our exegesis.

In this introduction we want to address three topics: key expressions in Qohelet, themes in Qohelet and the place of the book in the Hebrew canon. The key expression are words or terms that recur a great number of times in Qohelet. Themes are more general ideas that Qohelet expresses.

Key expressions in analysing Qohelet 1:12-2:26

הֶכֶּל

For understanding the whole of Qohelet an essential word is הֶכֶּל. It appears numerous times in Ecclesiastes, often in combination with הַכֹּל ('everything'). The word הֶכֶּל occurs seventy-three times the Old Testament, of which thirty-eight times (perhaps only thirty-seven) in Qohelet.¹ Nine of which are situated in our passage. John Jarick points to the word play of Qohelet: 'If the poetic imagination takes a pen and adds the smallest of marks at the heart of this word [הַכֹּל]—that is to say, an extra stroke is added to the bottom right corner of the letter kaph, transforming that letter into a beth—an entirely different word appears: the word הֶבֶל.² He says this word play is difficult to translate, keeping into account both form and content, but suggests 'everything is nothing.'³ This beautifully grasps the paradoxical content of the words, but respects also the word play.

The literal translation of הֶכֶּל is 'vapour'. The word has know many interpretative translations, often negative such as 'vanity' or 'meaningless', thus implying a very pess-

1 Roland Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, WBC 23a (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1992), lviii.

2 John Jarick, "The Hebrew Book of Changes: Reflections on *hakkōl hebel* and *lakkēl z' mān* in Ecclesiastes." *JSOT* 90 (2000): 79-80.

3 *Ibid.*, 82.

imistic world view. Michael Fox chooses to translate this word as ‘the absurd’.⁴ He describes it as

‘a disjunction between two phenomena that are thought to be linked by a bond of harmony or causality, or that *should* be linked. Such bonds are the sine qua non of rationality, and all deduction and explanation presupposes them. Thus the absurd is irrational, an affront to reason — the human faculty that seeks and discovers order in the world about us.’⁵

Fox does not describe it as entirely negative. It is a word to describe the reality of human finiteness. This translation can also be found with Benjamin Berger, but he sees a more negative connotation: Qohelet is completely left empty handed after his research.⁶ Graham Ogden argues for a more neutral meaning: **הֶבְלֵל** identifies the enigmatic, ironic dimension of human experience.⁷ In view of the whole of Ecclesiastes, we agree that there definitely is a sense of irony or paradox in Qohelet’s writing.

Douglas Miller convincingly argues that the author adopted **הֶבְלֵל** as a symbol, representing the entirety of human experience.⁸ The word is one of Qohelet’s ‘racks’ we see having a didactic use. He takes a word not too familiar in Scripture and makes it a motto of his book. We need to be careful in categorizing as very negative though. This word is not the only important statement of Qohelet. It can only be correctly understood in relation with the other recurring key concepts.

In that sense, Ogden does not see the **הֶבְלֵל**-phrases as the point the author wants to make, although the phrase does appear in many concluding statements. The advice Qohelet gives in facing the many enigmas in the world, comes in the reiterating calls to enjoyment (Ec 2:24-26; 3:12-13, 22; 5:18-20; 8:15; 9:7-10; 11:9-10).⁹ The purpose of Qohelet can be found in the reappearing question about the gain for all the toil and anxious striving under the sun (1:3; 2:22; 5:16; 6:11).¹⁰ R. N. Whybray sees the **הֶבְלֵל**-phrases as a counterpart for the ‘enjoyment’-parts. These two are the most frequent themes in Qo-

4 Michael V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down & A Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans: 1999), 30.

5 *Ibid.*, 31.

6 Benjamin Lyle Berger, “Qohelet and the Exigencies of the Absurd,” *Biblical Interpretation* 9, no. 2 (2001): 173.

7 Graham S. Ogden, *Qoheleth, Readings*, 2nd ed. (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2007), 17, 21-26.

8 Douglas B. Miller, “Qohelet’s Symbolic Use of **הֶבְלֵל**,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 117, no. 3 (1998): 443-4.

9 Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 17.

10 *Ibid.*, 17, 27-30.

helet.¹¹ In view of this connection, we choose to follow a more multilayered interpretation of הֶבֶל. It is not entirely negative, but contains the paradoxical dimension of human endeavour.

רְעוֹת רוּחַ

Along with calling a great number of phenomena and situations הֶבֶל, Qohelet also describes them as רְעוֹת רוּחַ.¹² In seven of the nine times this phrase occurs, it is in combination with הֶבֶל, sharing the same context and referent. One might say that it is an emphasis of הֶבֶל.¹³ Also in the passage we are examining this somewhat symbiotic structure occurs four times (1:17; 2:11, 17, 26). Norbert Lohfink even connects the in 2:11, 17 and 26 with the 'evil' in vs. 19.¹⁴

חֵלֶק AND יִתְרוֹן

The frequency of יִתְרוֹן ('gain') and its related forms is also important in this view. Contrasted with the חֵלֶק of 2:10, also signifying a kind of gain ('portion') that can be achieved, יִתְרוֹן in vs. 11 represents a gain that seems distant. There are different types of חֵלֶק, sometimes it is the material wealth itself (2:21), but more often it is the pleasure caused by wealth (2:10; 3:22; 5:17, 18; 9:9). Even more precise, it is the pleasure *potential* in a man's wealth.¹⁵ יִתְרוֹן seems to be more than this. Qohelet wonders if there is any יִתְרוֹן at all, while he clearly states having acquired חֵלֶק. This term should be defined broad enough so that it includes the possibility of a gain beyond death for the faithful. Although Qohelet cannot be decisive on this based on his empirical method, his thoughts are running in that direction.¹⁶

This word occurs twice in our passage (2:11, 13). Keeping into account that 2:11 also contained הֶבֶל and רְעוֹת רוּחַ, we should already be aware of the special function of this verse in our structuring and searching for meaning.

11 R. N. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, Old Testament Guides (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1989), 64.

12 Fox, *Time to Tear Down & Time to Build Up*, 42.

13 Ibid., 45.

14 Norbert Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, A Continental Commentary, translated by Sean McEvenue (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2003), 53.

15 Ibid., 111.

16 Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 18, 27-30.

Themes in Qohelet

Based on this short overview of some key concepts we can now proceed to some general themes in Qohelet. Ogden relates to two famous Old Testament scholars to point out the difficulties of interpreting Qohelet: Heine sees Qohelet as the quintessence of scepticism and Delitzsch as the quintessence of pietism.¹⁷ These opposite interpretations should make us cautious in making statements about the meaning of Qohelet.

On one hand, Qohelet seems like a very strange book. Somehow it does not fit in the Bible. And yet on the other hand the book is remarkably familiar. Whybray speaks of Qohelet as a 'modern' book.¹⁸ Many of us recognize the questions that Qohelet poses. We like to refer to Qohelet as one of the most honest biblical books. Not honest in the sense of being true, but honest in the sense of being real. Qohelet offers us a reality that is not hard to imagine. You could call it a divine book that is really down to earth. Even more than a repentant king, an ascetic, a bitter skeptic or a preacher of joy, the author is a realist.¹⁹

It should already be clear that Qohelet has numerous what at first seem contradictory statements. It is a book of paradoxes. On the one hand everything seems meaningless, but on the other hand one should enjoy as much as possible. While many scholars have opted to view these contradictions as evidence for adding to and editing of the text, Fox argues that the contradictions in Qohelet are real and intended. He adds:

To be precise, Qohelet is not so much contradicting himself as *observing* contradictions in the world. To him they seem to be *antinomies*, two equally valid but contradictory principles. He does not resolve these antinomies, but only describes them, bemoans them, and suggests how to live in such a refractory world. The contradictions do not make the book incoherent. On the contrary, Qohelet's persistent observation of contradictions is a powerful cohesive force, and an awareness of it brings into focus the book's central concern: the problem of meaning in life. The book of Qohelet is about *meaning*: its loss and its (partial) recovery.²⁰

It is indeed remarkable that the findings of Qohelet are very consistent in concluding that the world consists out of paradoxes. The Patristic Fathers saw no problem with the

17 Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, Keil & Delitzsch, translated by M.G. Easton (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1968), 183; Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 11; R. B. Y. Scott, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes*, AB 18 (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1965), 192.

18 Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 11.

19 Roy B. Zuck, "A Theology of the Wisdom Books and the Song of Songs," in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, ed. Roy B. Zuck (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991): 245; Douglas B. Miller, "What the Preacher Forgot: The Rhetoric of Ecclesiastes," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 62 (2000): 235.

20 Fox, *Time to Tear Down & Time to Build Up*, 3.

paradoxes in Ecclesiastes. Even in the list of the biblical canon compiled by Melito of Sardis (late second century AD) Qohelet acquired a place and he retained that position.²¹ Remarkably contrasting with this general statement is Gregory Thaumaturgos, who says that the more inconsistent statements represent the more foolish Solomon or a profane interlocutor.²² Charles Kannengiesser speaks of a hermeneutical decision called *prosopopoeia*, which means a dramatization or a putting of speeches into the mouths of characters. This observation is also found in both Gregory of Nyssa's *Homilies on Ecclesiastes* and Jerome's *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*.²³

We do not agree with a view on Ecclesiastes being merely sceptical and negative. John Drane speaks of cynicism in Qohelet, but in doing that we believe him not acknowledging the paradox established in the book.²⁴ Raymond Dillard and Tremper Longman point to the recent development of scholars seeing Qohelet as a preacher of joy instead of a mere sceptic. Their own point of view though is that one has to make a lot of twists and turns to come to this conclusion.²⁵ Eugene Merrill does not agree with that and argues that Qohelet in the first place 'reflects a sound, orthodox view.'²⁶ We also prefer a more balanced approach of Qohelet. It is without doubt a given that Qohelet from time to time gives us a negative view on the vicissitudes of life. But in it all we still receive a message of hope: enjoy life, because it is a gift from God. The world can be paradoxical sometimes and Qohelet beautifully grasps this.²⁷

Qohelet as Wisdom and/or Poetic Book

Although not so much in the patristic period, many later scholars have questioned Qohelet being part of the biblical canon, especially in the Wisdom corpus.²⁸ This has mostly to do with the negativity of Qohelet. If one follows the conviction we stated in the previous paragraphs, this reason has been minimalized.

21 J. Robert Wright, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament IX (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005), xxiii.

22 Charles Kannengiesser, *Handbook of Patristic Exegesis, Vol. I* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2004), 302.

23 *Ibid.*, 302-3.

24 John William Drane, *Introducing the Old Testament* (Oxford: Lion, 1987, rev. 2000), 119.

25 Raymond B. Dillard & Tremper Longman III, *Inleiding op het Oude Testament*, 2nd ed. (Heerenveen: Groen, 2002), 312-3.

26 Eugene H. Merrill, *Everlasting Dominion: A Theology of the Old Testament* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 633.

27 W. Sibley Towner. "The Book of Ecclesiastes: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," in *Introduction to Wisdom Literature, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Wisdom, Sirach*, NIB 5, eds. Leander E. Keck, Thomas G. Long e.a. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997): 277.

28 Zuck, "Theology of Wisdom Books," 243.

Of the entire Old Testament and more specific the Ketuvim, only three books are categorised as wisdom literature: Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes.²⁹ Some commentators add Song of Songs to that list, because it deals with wisdom in courtship, Solomon is mentioned several times and the whole book is ascribed to Solomon.³⁰ Whybray says on that:

Despite the lack of evidence that Qoheleth was familiar with specific non-Jewish literary works, the idea has persisted that he is to be understood as heir to a wide-spread international 'wisdom tradition', which has flourished in Egypt and Mesopotamia from very ancient times, and of which the wisdom books of the Old Testament [...] were products.³¹

He continues by saying that Qohelet is concerned with some of the same problems of human life.³² In that sense Ecclesiastes has been compared to a journal or a confession, like Pascal's *Pensées* or Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*.³³

Another approach to the four Bible books mentioned before and a fifth one—Psalms—is seeing them as poetic books, as has already been done by Cyril of Jerusalem (*Catechetical Lecture* 4.35). Epiphanius spoke of 'five poetic works' and Gregory of Nazianzus of the five 'poetic books'.³⁴ Longman confirms the general acceptance of poetry in Ecclesiastes, but also points our attention to the latest blur in distinction between poetry and prose. He gives Ecclesiastes as an example for this.³⁵ Quite remarkable for the narrative in Ecclesiastes is the present individuality. The 'I' in the Psalter is often quite impersonal, it has the function of a relationship the reader can share. By contrast, Ecclesiastes gives us a more individualised statement.³⁶ Qohelet's style as a whole is more individualised than that of other ancient first-person narratives.³⁷ Gerald Janzen sees the 'under the sun'-phrase as an emphasis on that individuality. It expresses an uncertainty, indi-

29 Bruce K. Waltke & David Diewert, "Wisdom Literature," in *The Face of Old Testament Studies: A Survey of Contemporary Approaches*, eds. David W. Baker & Bill T. Arnold (Leicester: Apollos, 1999): 295; Zuck, "Theology of Wisdom Books," 207.

30 Ibid.

31 Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 57.

32 Ibid.

33 Michael V. Fox, "Qohelet (Ecclesiastes)," in *Hebrew Bible: History of Interpretation*, ed. John H. Hayes (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2004): 179.

34 James E. Smith, *The Wisdom Literature and Psalms*, Old Testament Wisdom Series [electronic version] (Joplin, Mo.: College Press Pub. Co., 1996), available on Logos Research Systems.

35 Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, NICOT (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998), 23.

36 Eric S. Christianson, *A Time to Tell: Narrative Strategies in Ecclesiastes*, JSOT Supplement Series 280 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1998), 34.

37 Ibid., 35.

vidually experienced through the weary work, and at the same time offers a national, eschatological hope for a better future.³⁸

THE QUEST FOR STRUCTURE

Many works have been written on the structure of Ecclesiastes. The number of different structures proposed for the whole of Ecclesiastes and more specific our chosen passage, is about as large as the number of scholars that have quested for structure. Scholars agree on the complexity of Ecclesiastes.³⁹ Schwienhorst-Schönberger writes: 'Eine allgemein anerkannte Darstellung der *Kompositionsstruktur* des Koheletbuches existiert derzeit jedoch nicht.'⁴⁰

There are three main approaches towards finding structure in Qohelet. The first approach is the one Franz Delitzsch suggests: the approach that is not much concerned with structure.⁴¹ Robert Wright brings to attention that the ancient Christian commentators for example were not much concerned with the structure of Ecclesiastes.⁴² A problem with this way of a-structure is that many passages stay unclear. What exactly is their meaning? It is difficult to know when you do not see where the author put an emphasis.

The second approach starts with the content and tries to find passages that treat the same content. The text is thus structured based on the books themes. Examples of this approach can more or less be found with Aalders⁴³, Archer⁴⁴, LaSor e.a.⁴⁵, and Brown⁴⁶. The main issue with this method is that one works in a somewhat illogical way. While the author structured his thesis in order to communicate it, one should first try to discover the author's structure in order to discover his thesis. By starting at the thesis,

38 J. Gerald Janzen, "Qohelet on Life 'Under the Sun,'" *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 70 (2008): 481.

39 William P. Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, Interpretation (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 2000), 15.

40 Ludger Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet*, Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Alten Testament (Freiburg: Herder, 2004), 47.

41 Delitzsch, *Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, 188.

42 Wright, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*, xxii.

43 G. Ch. Aalders, *Het Boek De Prediker*, Commentaar op het Oude Testament, eds. G. Ch. Aalders, W. H. Gispen & J. Ridderbos (Kampen: Kok, 1948).

44 Gleason Leonard Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), esp. 525-7.

45 William S. LaSor, David A. Hubbard & Frederic W. Bush, *Old Testament Survey: The Message, Form, and Background of the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapid, MI; Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1996), 501-4.

46 Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, esp. 15-18.

one suggest being able to take the standing point of the author and thus determining his themes. We would opt this being to bold of a statement.

A third and final approach has a more linguistic starting point. The scholar tries to identify markers in the text and derives the content and the message from the structure found. Examples of this approach are Christianson⁴⁷, Fox⁴⁸, Lohfink⁴⁹, Schwienhorst-Schönberger⁵⁰ and Steinberg⁵¹. The last few year narrative and literary criticism get more attention and—though we need to carefully examine the findings of these approaches—we opt for this method. Of course a text is written with a purpose (and so it has content), but we want to investigate that purpose based on a narration analysis and not on the assumption that we can grasp the author's intent by a mere 'quick' reading of the text. To use the words of Addison Wright: 'In [Ecclesiastes] structure is not a secondary or aesthetic matter, but is of the utmost importance for exegesis.'⁵²

The expressed difficulty in structuring Qohelet should make us aware of the complexity of our passage. Whybray sees Ecclesiastes 1:12-2:26 in comparison with some of the other 'stories' in Qohelet as being of much greater complexity.⁵³

While we do not entirely agree on Eric Christianson's structural remarks, we do follow his narrative reading of Qohelet.⁵⁴ Though he warns us that the definition of 'a narrative' is to great degree depended on cultural settings and that as far as genre is concerned, one genre (in this case, a narrative) does not exclude others, Christianson convinces us not to read Ecclesiastes as a mere collection of unconnected wisdom sayings.⁵⁵ This encourages to see Ecclesiastes as a whole and to investigate the underlying structure of the different narrative parts. Despite the fact that according to Delitzsch 'all attempts to show a plan or thematic development are doomed to failure',⁵⁶ we want to try making a contribution to the current research. In view of the time spent on this analysis we can fully agree with William Brown, in stating that 'seeking structure in Qoheleth's

47 Christianson, *Time to Tell*, esp. 45-50.

48 Fox, *Time to Tear Down & Time to Build Up*, esp. 27-153.

49 Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, esp. 43-57.

50 Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet*, esp. 46-53, 205.

51 Julius Steinberg, *Die Ketuvim: Ihr Aufbau und ihre Botschaft*, Bonner Biblische Beiträge 152 (Hamburg: Philo, 2006), esp. 319-39.

52 Addison G. Wright, "Ecclesiastes (Qoheleth)," in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, eds. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer & Roland E. Murphy, 2nd ed. (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 2000): 489.

53 Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 34.

54 Christianson, *Time to Tell*, 255-8.

55 *Ibid.*, 256.

56 In: Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 14; cf. Delitzsch, *Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, 188: '[all attempts to find a plan] have hitherto failed, and will fail.'

turbid discourse is, frankly, an exercise in frustration.⁵⁷ Luckily even frustration can be rewarding from time to time.

A starting point

We were presented a structure by Julius Steinberg and because it offers a clear and coherent examination of the text, we want to use his structure as a starting point.⁵⁸ According to Steinberg, Ec 1:3-3:9 can be structured as follows:⁵⁹

1:3	Frage: <i>Welchen Gewinn hat der Mensch von seinem Mühen unter der Sonne?</i>
1:4-11	Gedicht: Es gibt nichts Neues unter der Sonne.
1:12-15	These: <i>Werke</i> sind Nichtigkeit.
1:16-18	These: <i>Weisheit</i> ist Nichtigkeit.
2:1-2	These: <i>Genuss</i> ist Nichtigkeit.
2:3	Ankündigung des Experimentes mit <i>Genuss, Weisheit</i> und <i>Werken</i>
2:4-10	Durchführung des Experimentes mit <i>Werken, Weisheit</i> und <i>Genuss</i>
2:11	Ergebnis: <i>Der Mensch hat keinem Gewinn unter der Sonne.</i>
2:12-17	Auswertung: <i>Weisheit</i> ist Nichtigkeit angesichts des Todes.
2:18-23	Auswertung: <i>Werke</i> sind Nichtigkeit angesichts des Todes.
2:24-26	Auswertung: Es gibt nichts Besseres als den <i>Genuss</i> aus der Hand Gottes.
3:1-8	Gedicht: Alles hat seine Zeit.
3:9	Frage: <i>Welchen Gewinn hat der Mensch von seinem Mühen?</i>

STRENGTHS

We did not merely chose this structure because it was presented to us. We believe Steinberg presents a strong argument for his proposal. A first strength of this model, is the re-appearing threesome works, wisdom and pleasure. These key elements help to structure the text in three major parts: 1:12-2:2, 2:3-11 and 2:12-26.

A second strength is that the presented structure bring the surrounding poems into account. Steinberg's proposal shows us a connection between the two poems. He does not go into detail, but as one can see, he relates them to one another. This is interesting since they represent two major themes of the entire passage. The first poem gives a negative view on human endeavour, the second poems gives a more neutral approach: there is a time for everything, so enjoy your life while you can.

57 Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, 15.

58 Other structures we appreciate a lot are found in: Christianson, *Time to Tell*, 45-50; Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet*, 204-5.

59 Steinberg, *Ketuvim*, 326.

A third strength is the connection between the surrounding questions (1:3; 3:9) and 2:11. Provan recognizes 1:3 as the leading question of the book.⁶⁰ Steinberg shows the relation between the frame of the chiasm and the very centre of it. Make notice that one of the key concepts is recurring in all three verses: יְתָרוֹן.

WEAKNESSES

We want to present a modified structure because we found some weaknesses in analysing the structure in light of our own observations on the biblical text. A first weakness of Steinberg's proposal is the difficulty in finding the works, wisdom and pleasure division in 2:11-26, as we will comment on more detailed in the subsequent pages. Steinberg conveniently find the division there as well, but according to us it is not so clear.

Another difficulty is the remarkable resemblance between 2:11 and 2:12. They both start with the exact same words: וּפְנִיתִי אֲנִי, which according to us indicates a closer relation than acknowledged in Steinberg's suggestion. This is somewhat confirmed in the fact that the 'result' of vs. 11, is not a general result. This verse focusses on works and not on wisdom and pleasure. It is strange that we do not find the reappearing trio here again. Off course this might suggest a point of attention, but the content of the verse does not convince us of that. We do not get the idea that this verse pops out. Further, the keyword יְתָרוֹן is only appearing three times in our passage (next to the 1:3 and 3:9): once in 2:11 and twice in 2:13. This is could emphasize a stronger connection between 2:11 and 2:12-13.

Next to that, the presented structure draws little attention to the final part (Ec 2:24-26), which is according to us (and some other scholars as we will show later) at least as important in Qohelet's experimental conclusion as 2:11. This is not clear in the structure presented by Steinberg. While it is great to find a chiasm—an often used structure in Hebrew writings—we are not convinced by the core of that chiasm. First of all 2:24-26 are 'banned' to the frame of the text and in doing so more than one parallel is overlooked. Second, 2:3-10 have a much stronger connection than one could think based on this structure.

60 Iain Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, NIVAC (Grand Rapid, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 67.

A slightly modified structure

After having addressed some difficulties with the structure proposed, we now want to offer our own variation on the subject. We came to find that our structure represents the design of modern scientific research, having the basic elements: thesis and summary, research, and conclusions.

THESIS AND PRESUPPOSITIONS (Ec 1:12-2:2)

The thesis of the author is made in Ecclesiastes 1:12-2:2. Qohelet reassures us in this passage of his capability to do research on what can be gained in life.⁶¹ After briefly having introduced himself and his capabilities—being royalty favours a great amount of resources—Qohelet starts his research. As is normal for modern research as well, he starts with a general introduction on the subject. He divides his preliminary observations in three categories: works, wisdom and pleasure. Of all three he introduces the subject, than gives his presuppositions on the subject: all subjects are meaningless and/or chasing after the wind and they produce at best nothing too negative. The passage can thus be divided into three smaller parts: the first dealing with works (Ec 1:12-15), the second with wisdom (1:16-18) and the third with pleasure (2:1-2).

To support this division a further argument is that a similar structure can be found in all three parts. First Qohelet gives the goal of his research, specifically the will to do research on works (1:12-13a), wisdom (1:16-17a) and pleasure (2:1a). An indication for this statement is the repetition of the inquiring heart ('my heart' לִבִּי; vss. 1:13, 16, 17; 2:1). Christianson's narrative analysis seems to support this division. He indicates that Qohelet's narrative stance, which is first applied in Ecclesiastes 1:12, is repeated in Ec 1:16 and 2:1a.⁶²

Secondly, Qohelet already presents us with presuppositions of his research, stating that none of the researched areas is more than chasing after the wind (רְעוּת רוּחַ, vss. 1:14, 17b) and that they are meaningless (הַבֵּל, vss. 1:14; 2:1b). The use of both terms in 1:14 and the return of each of them in 1:17b and 2:1b seems to support our structure, especially keeping into account the importance of these phrases in the whole of Qohelet (see page 4f.).

61 Ray C. Stedman, *Is This All There Is to Life? Answers from Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Discovery House, 1999), 18.

62 Christianson, *Time to Tell*, 48.

Finally Qohelet shows us through a poetic structure his reasons for these presuppositions: nothing can be added to what has already been done (1:15), wisdom increases sorrow (1:18) and joy invokes foolishness (2:2). All three poetic structures are parallelisms. We would even argue that they are synonymous parallelisms, though Ecclesiastes 1:18 is the only very explicit one. Whybray agrees on calling 1:15 and 1:18 synonymous parallelisms, but does not see this in 2:2.⁶³ Ogden confirms the parallel between Ec 1:15 and 1:18, calling them aphorisms, but—like Whybray—does not see the similarity with Ec 2:2.⁶⁴ While the character of this verse is different, it definitely has a parallel structure. One can rightly question whether this verse is poetic though. One of the biggest differences with 1:15 and 1:18 is 2:2 being a personalised statement. The other two verses are given as general or objective truth, but this verse is very subjective. Nevertheless we would argue for a similarity between 1:15, 18 and 2:2.

Based on these findings, we can structure the first part of Qohelet's research as follows:

1:12-13a	Research on works
1:13b-14	Meaningless / chasing after the wind
1:15	Works produce nothing
1:16-17a	Research on wisdom
1:17b	Chasing after the wind
1:18	Wisdom produces sorrow
2:1a	Research on pleasure
2:1b	Meaningless
2:2	Pleasure produces something?

Though some critical remarks on this structure are in order—especially on the poetic similarity between 1:15, 18 and 2:2—we do believe that this structure makes sense. Longman presents a similar structure for 1:13-18.⁶⁵ Lohfink agrees on the three main division of the 'previews' of the experiment, as he calls them.⁶⁶

63 Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 33, 35.

64 Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 40.

65 Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 78.

66 Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 43.

RESEARCH (Ec 2:3-10)

In Ecclesiastes 2:3-10 we reach the actual experimental phase of Qohelet's inquiry. This phase is structured chiastic. In 2:3, the experiment is announced. Qohelet plans on researching pleasure, wisdom and works. In the next verses Qohelet presents us his data (2:4-10). First we see his experience with works: Qohelet builds, plants, gardens, harvests, collects... (vss. 4-8). Next he experiments with wisdom: his wisdom, and the power that comes with it, increases (vs. 9). Finally Qohelet lets us know that he keeps nothing from his heart; he experiences all the pleasure in the world (vs. 10). This passage can thus be structured as follows:

ntmeeriExp announced	2:3	Pleasure	Wisdom	Works
	2:4-8			Works
	2:9		Wisdom	
ntmeeriExp carried out	2:10	Pleasure		

An additional indication for this approach is again a (here) double appearance of לְבִי in both verse 3 and 10, thus including this passage and emphasizing its connectedness.

CONCLUSIONS (Ec 2:11-26)

The last part of Qohelet's research is without doubt the most complex. Putting vs. 11 with the following verses is a rare division. We only found it once next to our own observation. Lohfink—a scholar who chooses a linguistic approach in structuring the text—also prefer to place 2:11 in the bigger part of 2:11-26.⁶⁷ Before proposing a proper structure we first want to give some observations.

Three times the combination of 'chasing after the wind' (רְעוֹת רוּחַ) and 'everything is meaningless' (הֶבֶל) appears, namely in vs. 11, 17 and 26. Next to defining vs. 11 as a first conclusion of Qohelet,⁶⁸ Ogden sees vss. 24-26 as a positive counterpart of the negative conclusion of vs. 11.⁶⁹ His argument for this is quite strong and we would like to follow him in this statement. Again, we see that the two important indicators הֶבֶל

67 Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 51-4.

68 Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 46.

69 *Ibid.*, 52.

and *רעות רוח* are present in these verses. As stated before, one could see a connection between *רעות רוח* and the 'evil' of 2:21. That evil is already announced in 2:17 with the previous use of *רעות רוח*.⁷⁰ To our opinion this makes that vs. 11 and vs. 26 are to be seen together. The same goes for vs. 17 and vs. 21.

Secondly the recurring themes (works, wisdom and pleasure) are not so clearly and consistently divided this time. We find works in 2:11-12, 17-23; wisdom in 2:12-16 and pleasure in 2:24-25. All three subjects are found in 2:26. Remarkable is that while in the previous verses works, wisdom and pleasure are being questioned as ways of gaining, in vs. 26 wisdom and pleasure are presented as gifts from God, while works is presented as a burden.

Thirdly, the *לבי* we saw as an literary indication in both previous parts, occurs three times in this part (twice in vs. 15 and once in vs. 20). Though being very careful with statements about these occurrences, we should be aware of these presences.

Fourthly, there is a connection between 2:17 and 2:18. Both these verse start with the—in this passage unique—'I hated' (*ושנאתי*). It arranges the verses so they stand parallel to each other.

Finally, in 2:12, 16, 18 and 21 there is a reference to the people living after the wise man and the worker. In 2:16 the focus is on the remembrance of the wise. In 2:12, 18 and 21 the focus is on the succession of the worker. This appearance could indicate the change in the narrative. The author's observations as far as the next generations is concerned, provide an important support in the conclusions Qohelet makes.

Based on our proper observations and the added findings of scholars we want to structure this passage as follows:

70 Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 53.

2:11	<u>Conclusion: Nothing is gained under the sun</u>
2:12	A: What about <i>wisdom</i> ? B: What about works?
2:13-15	A': <i>Wisdom</i> is better than folly / they share the same fate
2:16-17	A'': One's <i>wisdom</i> is not remembered after death
2:18-21	B'': One's <i>works</i> are not honoured after death
2:22-23	B': <i>Works</i> are meaningless
2:24	C: What about <i>pleasure</i> ? C'': <i>Pleasure</i> come from the hand of God
2:25	C': <i>Enjoy</i> your life!
2:26	<u>Conclusion: God is gentle to the righteous and harsh on the wicked</u>

Let us clarify our choices. As mentioned before, some scholars see a strong connection between 2:11 and 2:(24-)26. We too see this relationship. Both contains the recurring *הַבָּל* and *רְעוֹת רוּחַ*-phrases. Those conclusions offer the frame for the whole passage. One could argue that the poems framing this passage (1:4-11) and (3:1-8) support the 'two contrasting conclusions'-structure. The first poem deals with the fact that there is no gain under the sun. This recurs in the conclusion stated in 2:11: 'Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; *nothing was gained under the sun*' (emphasis mine). The message of the second poem is that there is a time for everything. Though less obvious than the previous comparison, 2:26 is a conclusion that has this tendency to positive thinking. One receives things necessary at their time.

In the core of the part one find the three recurring themes. In 2:12 the questions are raised what to think of wisdom and works. Qohelet gives answers to both questions in an interconnected way. He gives his conclusions (A' and B') and also gives a main reason for these conclusions (A'' and B''). Both reasons deal with the next generations. They have a strong connection (*וְשִׂנְאֵתִי* in vs. 17 and 18; *רְעוֹת רוּחַ* in vs. 17 put on the same place as *רְעָה* in vs. 21; the theme of next generation in vs. 16, 18 and 21).

The reader is yet somewhat surprised. What happened with the pleasure-theme? That is why Qohelet poses a kind of rhetorical remark in vs. 24: 'There is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink, and make his soul enjoy good in his labor' (2:24; ASV). Interesting is that many non-English translation put this down as a question,

which we think grasps the flow of the narrative better. The answer is obvious (vs. 25): Qohelet enjoys more than anyone, so it is obvious that the reader should too?

OVERVIEW OF STRUCTURE

In putting all three subdivisions together we came up with the following overall structure. It still represents our current vision on good research. One starts with some observations and a thesis. Next the scholar does the actual research and he concludes with—how can it else be—his conclusions. If it was a more poetic influenced scholar, one would be much surprised in seeing him using poems as a frame for the whole of the research, as nowadays many scholar introduce and or conclude their chapters with a baffling quote. All of this we see in the method of Qohelet:

Frame	
1:3	<u>What does man gain under the sun?</u>
1:4-11	<i>There is nothing new under the sun</i>
Thesis	
1:12-15	Works are meaningless / chasing after the wind
1:16-18	Wisdom is chasing after the wind
2:1-2	Pleasure is meaningless
Research	
2:3	Experiment announced: pleasure, wisdom, works
2:10	Experiment carried out: works, wisdom, pleasure
Conclusions	
2:11	<i>Man gains nothing new under the sun</i>
2:12-23	Wisdom and works are meaningless
2:24-25	Enjoy life
2:26	<i>God gives to the ones who seek Him</i>
Frame	
3:1-8	<i>There is a time for everything</i>
3:9	<u>What does the worker gain from his toil?</u>

Evaluation

It should be clear that we are defending the structure presented above. Our arguments in favour of this structure are presented there, so we will not repeat them. We do want to give some weaknesses of our model.

One of the major problems with our structure are the recurring threesome works, wisdom and pleasure. While in 1:12-2:2 and 2:3-10, these themes are very explicit and separate, the division is not so clear in our conclusion part. One could argue for a division of the two if one puts 2:11 (negative on works) in contrast with 2:26 (positive on wisdom and joy), but the connection is not as strong as in the previous subdivisions. Another problem with that is vs. 17 which deals with works, is placed under 'wisdom'. As said before, according to us the emphasis of this passage is on the two somewhat paradoxical conclusions of vs. 11 and vs. 24-26.

The whole of our division is not as 'smooth' as many other divisions. We tried to give an honest overview of our observations and this resulted in a structure that is not chiasmic and does not have a simple division. We had to make choices as far as our structure is concerned. For example we did nothing with the 'my heart' in 2:11 and 2:13, while in other passages this was a key in structuring in (1:12-2:2 and 2:3-10).

In trying to structure a biblical text, sometimes the scholar is faced with what one could call a tiny amount of key markers. In the passage we have examined quite the opposite is the case. It contains a high density of recurring concepts and markers. So dense even, that one has to make choices. Maybe someday a scholar will find a structure bringing them all into account, but for the time being no-one has already done so.

THE QUEST FOR MEANING

In this section we want to give an explanation of Ecclesiastes 1:12-2:26. First we briefly want to repeat the general subject. Next we want to give an explanation of the different sections and last but not least we want to formulate the message of our passage and attached to that a devotional application.

Subject

The argumentation provided in the previous paragraphs, shows Qohelet as an investigator of works, wisdom and the acquisition of pleasure. How these three things are related to a possible gain and how to react on them in this difficult world is the subject of Qohelet 1:12-2:26.

Explanation

After giving a general introduction (Ec 1:1-11), Qohelet introduces himself. What follows, is 'his testimony.'⁷¹ Brown points out that this kind of testimony is not unique in ancient literature.⁷² The remarkable thing though is that Qohelet does not boast him having all the riches in the world. Instead, we get a picture of a failing royal enterprise.⁷³ All the achievements of Qohelet do not satisfy him.

THESIS AND PRESUPPOSITIONS (Ec 1:12-2:2)

Though later showing the lack of meaning in applying wisdom, Qohelet clearly precedes his thesis by identifying wisdom as his method of investigation.⁷⁴ Through observation and critical (or wise) interpretation he inquires what at first seems meaningless. His search for meaning of it all starts with quite desperate presuppositions: when looking at work, wisdom and pleasure, Qohelet sees three futile subjects. Could it be that there is nothing more to life than this paradoxical existence? 'Various creation stories of the ancient world told how the gods had overcome the forces of chaos and had set up a system in which all those who toil under the sun could be confident of seedtime and harvest, of heat and cold, all at the proper time.'⁷⁵ Qohelet apparently was not convinced of this. He wanted to do proper research. It is clear that Qohelet offers by no means an argument not to investigate. Nili Shupak argues that it was common for ancient near eastern royalty to have this desire of investigating the world:

In Recto 1–4 [of *The Complaints of Khakheperre-sonb*] the author [a priest from the 18th Egyptian Dynasty, 1550-1292 BC] expresses his desire to say new things. These concerns of the Egyptian priest are very similar to those of the architect Amenhetep of the 18th Dynasty and his Hebrew counterpart Ecclesiastes. Amenhetep sings his own praise as one who "has a hearing heart seeking (ḏ' r.f) counsel regarding strange things, like one whose heart understands them" (*Urk.* IV 1817,8–9); cf. Khakheperre-sonb's "the quest (ḏ' r) of phrases with searching heart." This spirit of inquiry is also characteristic of Ecclesiastes who uses his heart as an instrument to search out and to gain knowledge.⁷⁶

71 Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, 28.

72 *Ibid.*

73 *Ibid.*, 29.

74 *Ibid.*

75 Jarick, "Book of Changes," 79.

76 Nili Shupak, "The Complaints of Khakheperre-sonb," in *Canonical Compositions from the Biblical World*, COS 1, eds. William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger (Leiden; New York: Brill, 1997): 104-5.

First Qohelet focuses on works. He sees that none of the works being done, really establish something: 'What is twisted cannot be straightened; what is lacking cannot be counted' (Ec 1:15). Qohelet wonders if this is a true presupposition. Augustine contrasted this passage with the Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount. Vanity is contrasted with poverty of spirit (*Sermon on the Mount* 1.1.3; cf. Mt 5:3).⁷⁷ Michael Carasik carefully suggests that the first part of the parallelism is a warning for the reader of Qohelet.⁷⁸ The researched meaning of life is 'crooked' and it can not be straightened. So in the entire book one will not be able to find a single straight line.

Secondly, being an authority on wisdom, Qohelet also believes wisdom to be chasing after the wind. In the contrast with the more positive use in 1:13 we see that Qohelet does not define wisdom as such as negative. Here a godless wisdom is explored. As can be noticed in all the wisdom books,

'[a]n individual is "successful" as he directs his life in accord with God's divine design, His plans for the world. Seeing God's moral order, sensing from divine revelation what God desires and has planned for mankind, one is then challenged by the wisdom literature to conduct his life in line with those principles established by the Creator. To the extent an individual follows these principles or rules of God's order or pattern for life, to that extent he is able to cope with realities, and to enjoy inner order and harmony. Neglecting God's order leads to disorder and chaos; heeding God's design results in satisfaction and peace.'⁷⁹

Gregory of Nyssa suggested the Incarnation of God himself being in order to assist humans in their quest for wisdom (*Homilies on Ecclesiastes* 2).⁸⁰ We have to be careful in determining what Qohelet is saying. He shows us that wisdom as a goal in life is not rewarding.

Finally Qohelet puts pleasure to our attention. Again, Qohelet has some negative remarks. What is the purpose of being joyful? Nothing, it seems. Qohelet has know all the pleasure in the world, but still sense a kind of emptiness in his life. What in the world can fill this emptiness? To Gregory of Nazianzus this experiment already indicates that man should focus on stable things. Many issues in life float on the wind and are unstable. Life

77 Ibid., 202.

78 Michael Carasik, "Qohelet's Twists and Turns," *JSOT* 28, no. 2 (2003): 207.

79 Zuck, "Theology of Wisdom Books," 213.

80 Wright, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*, 202.

can only be gained in putting our eyes on God (*On His Brother St. Caesarius, Oration 7.19*).⁸¹

RESEARCH (Ec 2:3-10)

In this section, Qohelet starts his actual research. What soon comes to attention is the utter lack of God's presence. Pleasure is gained or made from all the efforts made and the wisdom Qohelet has (2:3). The great omnipresent 'I' make tremendous efforts in both works and wisdom. He established himself an empire, denying himself nothing (2:10).⁸² Everything he achieved, is described as the result of his commitment. He even tries to gain a somewhat forced pleasure. But is it possible at all to 'make pleasure'?⁸³

On the other hand, Gregory of Nyssa points out that the desire to find out what man can do best (2:3) is a genuine and that it is beautiful desire. A flaming desire that will only increase in the face of doing the good thing (*Homilies on Ecclesiastes 2*).⁸⁴ We notice a similarity with the previous part. Not the research as such is bad, but the absence of God in research is. It is research that is focused on the researched subjects itself, while not having the desire to know God more as both the driving force and the goal. Merrill rightly draws to our attention that Qohelet's method does not imply a lack of divine inspiration in Ecclesiastes.⁸⁵ One might even suggest that the research as such is not divine in any way. The mere conclusions Qohelet states are clearly important enough to deserve a place in the canonical Bible.

In this passage we are presented the magnificence of Qohelet's riches. Longman sees the mentioning of the trees in 2:5-6 as a reminder of the splendour of the Garden of Eden.⁸⁶ One is taken to the sum of all human imaginative desire: paradise. Sibley Towner points out that the things described in the research of Qohelet are universally appreciated. All human beings agree that food, drink, comfort and intimacy are goals to be pursued and are likely to produce a measure of human happiness.⁸⁷

81 Ibid., 203-4.

82 Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet*, 215.

83 Ibid., 209.

84 Wright, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*, 207-208.

85 Merrill, *Everlasting Dominion*, 633.

86 Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 91.

87 Towner, "The Book of Ecclesiastes," 298.

CONCLUSIONS (Ec 2:11-26)

Qohelet gives us a dual conclusion: a discouraging one and an encouraging one. First, Qohelet has a negative thought about the results of his research. The result of the universal quest man has, turned out to be disappointing.⁸⁸ Despite the many attempts to achieve in life, Ambrose helps us to remember that man shall never be satisfied (Ec 2:17). Everyday man eats and drinks, but that only satisfy the hunger and thirst for a short period (*Death as a Good* 7.28).⁸⁹ The idea that the days of man are filled with sorrow is also found in the Apocrypha.⁹⁰ The Wisdom of Solomon for example reports: ‘Short and sorrowful is our life’ (Wis 2:1). Man should know its place and avoid ‘philosophies of life which regard the created world or human enjoyment as an end in itself.’⁹¹

In trying to convince his audience, Qohelet is not afraid to talk about death. Especially in 2:13-17 he points out that death makes nonsense of all human pretensions.⁹² He has similar views on material possessions (or achievement) in 2:18-23.⁹³ This is an important lesson for people who like to put their trust in their own capabilities and do nothing but striving for more, be it wisdom, possessions or pleasure. Chrysostom already indicated that those things are vain since they have no useful end (*Homilies on Ephesians* 12).⁹⁴ In that the righteous and the wicked share the same fate. Qohelet fortunately identifies death as the great leveller.⁹⁵

Gregory Thaumaturgus—a pupil of Origen who made a Christian paraphrase of Ecclesiastes, being the earliest extant, complete work on Ecclesiastes⁹⁶—does not entirely agree with Qohelet in stating that the fool and the wise share the same fate. He says that they have nothing in common. That fact also counts for the remembrance after death (*Paraphrase of Ecclesiastes* 2.16).⁹⁷ We only partly agree with him. Look at our recent history. One remembers Hitler as much as Ghandi. It is true that they are remembered in a different way, but being righteous not necessarily implies stronger remembrance. In the

88 Ibid.

89 Ibid.

90 *Apocrypha of the Old Testament*, ed. Robert Henry Charles (Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, 2004), 1:525.

91 Archer, *Survey of Old Testament*, 525.

92 Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 69.

93 Ibid.

94 Wright, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*, 208.

95 Robert K. Johnston, *Useless Beauty: Ecclesiastes through the Lens of Contemporary Film* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 19.

96 Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 1; Kannengiesser, *Handbook of Patristic Exegesis*, 302.

97 Wright, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*, 216.

same way earthly wisdom is applied by both the good and the evil. The difference is being made in their goals with wisdom and not in their wisdom as such.

On the other hand, and more in the line of Gregory Thaumaturgus, Qohelet clearly saw that his conclusion was only partly true. That is why he added a positive conclusion as well: the righteous receive gifts from God. According to Johnston, it is important to make a distinction 'between the author's "intention" (his frontal assault on our misguided attempts to make life significant) and his "intentionality" (his mind-set or underlying consciousness, which recognizes that God's gifts in life are to be enjoyed).⁹⁸ Seeing 2:26 as the positive counterpart of vs. 11, the readers of Qohelet are encouraged to enjoy life. Though there is nothing new under the sun and God can establish everything himself, He chose to give man not only the opportunity to work and to be wise, but also to enjoy. Whether it will be in this life or the next, the righteous will be the ones having a true gain. As Zuck puts it: 'Qoheleth was demonstrating that life without God has no meaning. He was demolishing confidence in man-based achievements and wisdom to show that earthly goals as ends in themselves lead to dissatisfaction and emptiness.'⁹⁹

Common to all calls to enjoy life (2:24-26; 3:12-13; 22; 5:18-20; 8:15; 9:7-10; 11:9-10) is the absolute 'lack of self-pretension, ambition or obsession.'¹⁰⁰ Eating and drinking represent far less complex ways of enjoyment than the ways expressed in 2:3-10. It is a call to enjoyment in simplicity. That is somewhat remarkable in view of the royal boast given in 1:16; 2:4-10. Qohelet has the intention to rest in the more simple things in life. Interesting in this context is Jesus' allusion to the wealth of Solomon. Jesus compares Solomon with the lilies (Lk 2:27 Par) and says that the great king himself had not so much glory.¹⁰¹ God is nowhere to be found in all the meaningless toils of the royal experiment. God's hand is seen in the simple enjoyment of life:

Am Ende des königlichen Experiments kommt Gott ins Spiel. In der königlichen Lebenswelt von 2,3-23 kam Gott nicht vor. Er wird mit keinem Wort erwähnt. Lediglich in 1,13 wird im Gestus eines distanzierten Beobachtens gefragt bzw. gesagt, ob bzw.

98 Robert K. Johnston, "Confessions of a Workaholic: A Reappraisal of Qoheleth," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 38 (1976): 14.

99 Ibid., 245.

100 Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, 37.

101 Cf. David W. Pao & Eckhard J. Schnabel, "Luke," in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, eds. G.K. Beale & D.A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007): 330.

dass es ein schlechtes Geschäft sei, 'das ein Gott den Menschen aufgetragen hat, dass sie sich damit plagen.'¹⁰²

One should be careful in making wisdom a negative theme in Qohelet. Wisdom, one of the important subjects in Qohelet, is shown to us as a gift from God (2:26) in contrast with the burden that seems to be originated by Him (1:13). Though Qohelet does not specifically express this, it is implicit that God possesses wisdom in an absolute degree.¹⁰³ In the other Wisdom books, God is also shown as the origin of wisdom. In Proverbs man is encouraged to pursue wisdom (Pr. 1:33; 2:2; 4:6-8; 8:17). Job asks twice where wisdom can be found (Job 28:12, 20). Later he states that only God knows (28:23; cf. 12:13).¹⁰⁴ Ecclesiastes shows the same thing and encourages to let this knowledge go together with a divine awe for or fear of God (Ec 3:14; 5:7; 7:18; 8:12-13; 12:13), thus re-affirming the command of the Torah to 'fear your God' (Lv 19:14, 32; 25:17, 36,43).¹⁰⁵ Qohelet 'celebrates the triumph of faith, not the triumph of human spirit. [...] The time to enjoy life in the fear of God is now.'¹⁰⁶

Message

As is the conclusion of Qohelet, we believe the message of this passage being twofold as well. On the one hand one should realize the finiteness of human efforts. People are often tempted to becoming workaholics, or to boasting off with their wisdom or drowning themselves in the shoreless sea of pleasure. What Qohelet does, is showing that those things are meaningless. In focussing too much on work, we are likely to become a kind of Martha, who did not see that work is not the most important thing in life (Lk 10:38-42). Jesus shows her having wrong priorities: 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her' (vs. 41-42).

There lies great danger in overestimating the importance of (earthly) wisdom. As Christians, we should be aware of these dangers. Paul warns us for this, quoting Isaiah 29:14: 'For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us

102 Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet*, 76.

103 Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 67.

104 Zuck, "Theology of Wisdom Books," 213.

105 Ibid., 215.

106 Bruce K. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 963.

who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written: “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate” (1 Cor 1:18-19; cf. 1:20-25).¹⁰⁷

One should also be careful in trying to seek earthly pleasure. This quest will consume humankind, but it will not satisfy it. True satisfaction lies in the gift of joy, given to us by our great God. Qohelet thus teaches us to enjoy life, for it is a gift from God. ‘Life offers itself as a gift from the Creator. Life begs to be enjoyed for what it is, even given its contradictions.’¹⁰⁸ This can be contrasted with Qohelet being described as a hedonist.¹⁰⁹ Hedonism pursues pleasure for the sake of pleasure itself. Qohelet clearly shows that hedonism is pointless. Contrasted with hedonism one finds enjoyment in God’s gifts. In that lies the simplicity of enjoyment. Modern culture promotes many products as the way to inherit the earth, but the end up being disappointing. After all, ‘most people faced a harsh reality every day, which allowed no self-deception about human nature and destiny.’¹¹⁰

DEVOTIONAL APPLICATION

Maybe it is good to end this exegesis with an application. Let us consider our own academic and research-based toils. Scholars are encouraged to investigate the world in the most broad sense. Establishing more and more, pride becomes a sin likely to tempt the scholar. Realising that ‘everything is nothing’, one should try to achieve a humble posture in doing research. The interesting thing is that Qohelet came to this conclusion through his research, so it is by no means a call to abandon the academic world. It is a call for healthy critique towards one’s efforts.

Everything is nothing, but still worth enjoying. In a beautiful contextualization of Ecclesiastes, viewing ancient wisdom through the lens of contemporary film, Johnston grasps the paradox in Ecclesiastes and in doing so an application for our personal lives:

Toil is without profit, yet we are to enjoy it. Wisdom is valuable, yet it also reveals life’s bitterness and is vulnerable to folly. Life is at times arbitrary and unjust, even if God is just. Life is precious, yet death cancels out everything. All life is *hebel*; and joy is both possible and good.¹¹¹

107 See also: Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, 31.

108 Johnston, *Useless Beauty*, 19.

109 Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 37.

110 *Ibid.*, 82.

111 Johnston, *Useless Beauty*, 38.

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