Times as Task, Not Timing: Reconsidering Qoheleth's Catalogue of the Times

Jesse M. Peterson
Department of Theology and Religion, Durham University, Durham, England
jpeter34@gmail.com

Abstract

This essay examines Qoheleth's Catalogue of the Times poem in Eccl 3:2–8. I argue that the two most common scholarly interpretations of the poem's overall meaning fail to sufficiently account for its literary context and that an underdeveloped alternative reading is to be preferred. When we read the poem in light of two other closely related passages, 1:4–11 and 3:9–15, it becomes clear that a poem ostensibly about "time" is much less concerned with "timing" than is typically thought, but instead signifies Qoheleth's frustration with the inevitable equilibrating tendency embedded into every human task.

Keywords

1   Introduction

This essay examines Qoheleth's Catalogue of the Times poem in Eccl 3:2–8. I argue that the two most common scholarly interpretations of the poem's overall meaning fail to sufficiently account for its literary context and that an underdeveloped alternative reading is to be preferred. When we read the poem in light of two other closely related passages, 1:4–11 and 3:9–15, it becomes clear that a poem ostensibly about "time" is much less concerned with "timing" than

is typically thought, but instead signifies Qoheleth's frustration with the inevitable equilibrating tendency embedded into every human task. Before providing further context for my interpretation, I will provide a translation of the poem:

(1) For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under
     heaven:
(2) A time to be born[1] and a time to die,
     A time to plant and a time to uproot what is planted,
(3) A time to kill and a time to heal,
     A time to tear down and a time to build up,
(4) A time to cry and a time to laugh,
     A time for mourning and a time for dancing,
(5) A time to throw stones, and a time to gather stones,
     A time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing,
(6) A time to seek and a time to lose,
     A time to keep and a time to throw away,
(7) A time to tear and a time to sew,
     A time to be silent and a time to speak,
(8) A time to love and a time to hate,
     A time of war and a time of peace.
                    Eccl 3:1–8

1.1 *The "Proper Times" Reading of Eccl 3:2–8*

Scholars have long debated the meaning of Qoheleth's famous poem. One common interpretation has been to read the poem as referring to the proper, appropriate, or opportune time at which to act.[2] There is a rightness to an

---

1 A minority of commentators, such as Blenkinsopp, "Ecclesiastes 3:1–15," 56–57; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 160; Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 28–29; Kamano, *Cosmology and Character*, 83, have argued that לָלֶדֶת as a *qal* infinitive construct must be translated in the active sense, "to give birth," rather than the passive, "to be born." But the vast majority of commentators find the passive sense grammatically acceptable since the infinitive construct form is "neutral in respect of voice, namely the active form can be passive in force" (Joüon-Maraoka §124s, citing Gen 4:13; 6:20; Josh 2:5; 11:19; Esth 7:4; Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 237, additionally cites Deut 31:17; Jer 25:34; Hos 9:11), and the passive sense is preferable here in light of the parallel with לָמוּת. Defenders of the active sense often prioritize the parallel with לָטַעַת, "to plant," but all twenty-eight activities in the poem are human activities, and it would be rather odd to expect a person to "be planted," thus the parallel is of little value in determining the sense of לָלֶדֶת.

2 Scholars who advocate this interpretation include Plumptre, *Ecclesiastes*, 50–51, 126–131; Galling, "Das Rätsel"; idem, "Der Prediger," 93–95; Zimmerli, "Das Buch," 167–175; Loretz, *Qohelet*, 252; Fox, *Rereading*, 191–214 (which is a reprint of Fox, "Time"); Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*

action when done at a particular time, and the wise person will be cognizant of that timing and so choose to act appropriately when the time comes. Thus the emphasis falls upon human agency (in both recognizing and choosing to act) and upon the fact that some times are better than others with respect to a given activity. According to this view, Qoheleth's subsequent comments on the poem in 3:9–15 convey his frustration over humanity's inability to *know* the times and thus to find success in this way.[3]

This interpretation certainly has its strengths. First, it is quite reasonable to expect that a poem which contains twenty-eight occurrences of the word עֵת ("time") would be about *timing*. Moreover, the infinitive constructs prefixed by – ל seem naturally, both in Hebrew and in their English translations, to convey a sense of what one ought "to do" (just as in English phrases such as "time to wake up!" or "time to go!"). An intuitive reading of the poem on its own, apart from its context in Qoheleth, seems to give credence to this conclusion.[4] Second, there are other texts from the wisdom corpus that similarly indicate the rightness or wrongness of a certain action as contingent upon its timeliness (Prov 15:23; Sir 1:23–24; 4:20, 23; 20:7, 20). Third, 3:11a could be read as good support for this understanding: that God "makes everything beautiful in its time" would mean that things go well ("beautifully," NET) for the one undertaking an action when it is performed "in its [proper] time."

On the other hand, there are evident problems facing this reading. The first problem I will mention involves part of the poem's content, but the others relate to the poem's awkward fit (given this reading) with Qoheleth's commentary in 3:9–15. First, the opening line of v. 2 discloses that there is "a time to be born, and a time to die." As many have noted, if the point of the poem were to emphasize human agency and ethical duty, it would be strange to begin with a pair of activities ostensibly beyond human control. Michael Fox acknowledges

---

(OTG), 36–37; Perdue, *Wisdom & Creation*, 216–217; Schultz, "Sense of Timing"; Bundvad, *Time*, 90–109; Köhlmoos, *Kohelet*, 116.

3   See Fox, *Rereading*, 206; Whybray, *Ecclesiastes* (NCBC), 73; Galling, "Der Prediger," 95.

4   It is for this reason that several scholars suggest that the original poem, as a free-floating entity, did carry the traditional "proper times" sense, but that it was picked up by Qoheleth who then utilized it for different purposes, e.g., Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 31; Köhlmoos, *Kohelet*, 116; Whybray, *Ecclesiastes* (NCBC), 67, 70; Wright, "For Everything," 327; Fischer, *Skepsis*, 224. It is not crucial, for our purposes, to stake a claim on the question as to whether Qoheleth originally penned the poem or whether he is simply citing an inherited piece (and the question becomes even more hermeneutically complex for scholars who think that "Qoheleth" is a fictional character constructed by the author of Ecclesiastes). I am more inclined toward the view that Qoheleth penned it, but my argument will not depend on it, since if he did not originally write the poem, the important question is how he is *interpreting* it and conveying it to his audience—what he considers its message to be in its contribution to his work as a whole.

that this initial pair cannot be chosen but posits that the remainder of the poem's activities can be.[5] Yet this only restates the problem, as it seems unlikely that Qoheleth would begin the poem with a pair of exceptions to the poem's general message. It is more sensible to presume the author would commence the poem with a pair of actions that sum up (or at least accurately reflect) the intent of the poem as a whole, especially in light of the poem's highly parallel structure.

Second, if the poem's aim is indeed to exhort its readers to choose to act at the "proper time," this implies that the poem is in some way a celebration of human agency. Yet slightly after the poem in 3:14, it is precisely the role of human agency within God's scheme that Qoheleth denies: "Whatever God does endures forever; there is no adding to it, nor is there any subtracting from it. God has acted [...]." Third, if the focus of the poem concerns humanity's ability to choose the correct time for action, Qoheleth's pessimistic question immediately following the poem in 3:9 strikes the reader as counterintuitive. Why should the call to act at an opportune time lead to the conclusion that there is no lasting gain? To make sense of 3:9, the "proper times" view must import the unstated premise that people lack *knowledge* of the poem's times or opportunities and for that reason fail to take advantage of them, resulting in the exasperated question of v. 9, "What gain?" But the verse does not itself state this. A reading in which v. 9 constitutes a more direct, fitting response to the poem in 3:2–8 is to be preferred. Fourth, Qoheleth in 3:17 links back to the diction of 3:1–8, yet the one activity "there is a time for" in this verse is only an act of God—his judgment—not one possible for humans to choose.

1.2 *The Common Determinist Reading of Eccl 3:2–8*

Many scholars have argued for an entirely different reading of the poem, what may be called the determinist reading. They contend that Qoheleth's reference to the times is not signifying the right time for a human to act, with the correlating implication that the person might well miss the opportunity. The poem is not *prescribing* the proper times at which the wise person should choose to act, but is instead *describing* the fact that God has ordained all of the times at which the activities reflected in the poem will occur.[6] Scholars do not always

---

5   See Fox, *Rereading*, 201–209.
6   Commentators defending one variant or another of a determinist reading for the passage include Rudman, *Determinism*, 40–44, 83–98; idem, "Determinism and Anti-Determinism," 97–106; Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 39; Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 227–282; Enns, *Ecclesiastes*, 51–56; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 158–174; Fox, *Contradictions*, 190–196 (previous to Fox's change of mind; see n. 11); Gordis, *Koheleth*, 228–234; von Rad, *Wisdom*, 228–230; 263–265; Hengel, *Judaism*, 1:121; Zimmerli, "Wisdom"; Scott, *Ecclesiastes*, 220–221; Jastrow, *Gentle Cynic*, 141; Wildeboer, "Der Prediger," 131–134; Wright, *Koheleth*, 338–345; Delitzsch, *Ecclesiastes*, 254–264; Ginsburg,

convey this determinism in the same terms, but on the stronger articulations of this reading, "time" (עֵת) refers to "a time for human action which is predetermined by God, and in accordance with which human beings must act."[7] We are in the realm, then, not of ethical duty, but metaphysical necessity.

There are several attractive features to the determinist reading of 3:2–8 over against the "proper times" reading. First, the determinist reading makes much better sense of the commentary section immediately following the passage, that of 3:9–15, where Qoheleth provides us with the lens through which he is reading the poem. In particular, Qoheleth's lamenting question in 3:9 could follow naturally from the idea that all human behavior is preprogrammed, much more naturally than it follows an admonition for readers to act at the proper time.[8] Further, 3:14 represents, at minimum, a strong proclamation of God's sovereignty and the inability for humans to change his plans, thus aligning nicely with the determinist reading. Finally, as already mentioned, Qoheleth in 3:17 links God's judgment to the phrase from 3:1, "(there is) a time for every matter"—perhaps implying that the phrase has been more closely tied to divine rather than human action all along.

The determinist view also confronts its own obstacles, however. The primary problem is that this view sometimes assumes a brand of determinism that is far more particular than Qoheleth's words necessitate. It is not only that God is intervening in human affairs in real-time; it is also the case, as mentioned above, that all human actions are foreordained by God in advance, such that humans will necessarily act in accordance with the predetermined divine will at the moment established for them to do so. This is, at least, what several scholars claim. For instance, Morris Jastrow writes:

> The happenings of this world are preordained by God and take place in the order and at the time determined by the great Power who governs all things […]. The time when a man is to be born is fixed as is the time of his

---

Coheleth, 303–314. Crenshaw, "Eternal Gospel," regards the original poem as a piece of wisdom instruction concerning the right time, but which "in its present setting cannot be an affirmation" of this. Rather, taken up by Qoheleth it "laments the pre-determined monotony of all human affairs" (34–35). Blenkinsopp, "Ecclesiastes 3:1–15," offers an interesting variation in that he takes 3:1–8 to be Qoheleth's quotation of an earlier "Stoicized Jew" to which Qoheleth then responds critically. Machinist, "Fate," also emphasizes determinism (and "fate") in Qoheleth, but without specific reference to 3:2–8.

7   Rudman, *Determinism*, 200. Additional scholars representing this view will be provided below.

8   E.g., Wright, *Koheleth*, 188, draws such a connection: "Times of war and peace, though apparently brought about by the exercise of man's free action (which is not denied), are still under the control of the Most High. Man, however, has no profit in all his labour, for he has no certain power to regulate his own destiny."

death (3:2)—fixed as definitely as the time for sewing seeds and for pulling up the ripened plant. If everything is preordained, it is idle to make the effort to change things.[9]

Otto Kaiser likewise comments, "These times are strictly determined […] there are preordained, pre-qualified times for everything we may undertake."[10] Others express Qoheleth's views in the same manner.[11]

However, it appears that these scholars have imputed to Qoheleth a version of determinism derived not from the text of Qoheleth itself but from other, mostly later ancient Jewish texts, as well as theological and philosophical traditions. Despite the linkage between the two claimed by Gerhard von Rad,[12] there is nothing in Qoheleth of the sort of determinism one finds in much of the Jewish apocalyptic literature or the sectarian literature of Qumran. This strict form of determinism found in these latter corpuses is indeed marked by explicit statements that God exercises complete control over the thoughts and deeds of individuals and has even planned these since before the creation of the world.[13] Thus, while the determinism of the Qumran community may well match these scholars' descriptions, it is much less clear in the case of Qoheleth.

---

9   Jastrow, *Gentle Cynic*, 141.

10 Kaiser, "Fate," 7.

11 To those already provided we could add Lauha, *Kohelet*, 63–64, 68; Scott, *Ecclesiastes*, 198, 226, 233; Delitzsch, *Ecclesiastes*, 254–255. Rudman, *Determinism*, 59 also argues for a hard determinism in the book, referring to "the list of predetermined actions and emotions in 3.1–8" and consistently positing that for Qoheleth "all human business is predetermined by God" (54, cf. 89, 126, 128, 131, 138, 149, etc.). Fox, *Rereading*, 197, writes: "If by *'et* Qohelet means a unique moment on the time-line, he is assuming a strong determinism: every act and event is assigned in advance a moment at which it will occur." Fox acknowledges that that was his view in his *Contradictions* monograph. In *Rereading*, however, Fox now sees "a less rigid sort of determinism" (197) in line with the proper times view described earlier, since "the timing of most of the actions in the Catalogue is to some degree in man's control" (201).

12 See von Rad, *Wisdom*, 263–283.

13 E.g., "From the God of Knowledge comes all that is and all that happens. Before ever they existed he established their whole design and when, as ordained for them, they come into being, it is in accord with his glorious design that they accomplish their task, and there is no changing" (1QS 3.15–16); "Surely apart from you the way cannot be perfected, nor can anything be done unless it please you. You teach all knowledge and all that shall be, by your will shall it come to pass" (1QS 11.16–18); cf. 1QHa 18:7–11; 4Q417 I, 1.10–12; 4Q180 I 2–3. See the discussion in Merrill, *Qumran and Predestination*; Stauber, "Determinism"; Popovic, "Apocalyptic Determinism." Such clear-eyed determinism is also manifest even in some non-apocalyptic Jewish works, such as Judith: "All that happened then, and all that happened before and after, was your work. What is now and what is yet to be, you have planned; and what you have planned has come to pass. The things you have

A second problem for many determinist interpretations of 3:2–8 (and 3:1–15) is that they fail to account for the important contribution of 3:15, the culminating verse of the section yet one that is often swept to the side in discussions about determinism in Qoheleth. Typically, talk of God's *pre*-determination or *pre*-ordination of events assumes a linear timeline, with the deity's causations standing at the front end of a domino-like series of events (A, B, C, etc.). Yet the thought of time's cyclicality which Qoheleth broaches in 3:15—itself alluding back to 1:9—jars against the linear-time metaphysic which determinist readings frequently presume. This will be taken up in greater detail later on, but the point for now is that scholars have not sufficiently reckoned with the tension between (a) the determinist readings of the book in which distinct events are thought to be plotted out in advance along a progressive historical time-line, and (b) the book's prominent theme of cyclicality, which places all human activity under a shroud of repetition and denies any sense of linear movement or historical progress. These are two very different notions, and I will argue that only the latter is of Qoheleth. Nonetheless, a sense of "determinism" in the book can be maintained if it is reoriented to comport with the book's theme of cyclicality.

1.3 An Alternative Reading of Eccl 3:2–8: Cyclical, Anthropological Determinism

To these two predominant views of the times poem, then, I wish to propose a third alternative, what I will (somewhat cumbersomely) call *cyclical, anthropological determinism*.[14] This phrase is meant to highlight three closely interrelated aspects of Qoheleth's worldview communicated by use of the poem, in conjunction with other passages. These we may summarize in reverse order:

(a) God has *determined*, or, caused to bring about, the essential nature of the world and human existence. Yet, in distinction from the common determinist view, the sense of "determine" here refers not to the preordination and real-time intervention of unique, individual events plotted along historical time, but instead refers to the establishment of a broad framework or structure within which human existence occurs.[15]

---

foreordained present themselves and say, 'We are here.' All your ways are prepared beforehand." (Jdt 9:5–6).

14 Clearly, the latter of these implies I am not in complete disagreement with the "determinist" view just represented. But I think any reference to determinism in Qoheleth demands much qualification; we need to take a fresh look at what *kind* of determinism the book does or does not espouse.

15 On this point I find much kinship with Clines, "Predestination," 533–534: "Predestination for Ecclesiastes does not mean that the particular acts of individuals are fixed in advance

(b)   This broad framework is *anthropological*. It concerns what humans can
       and cannot do, both their capacities and limitations, not with respect
       to their "free will" in some specific instance but with respect to the very
       structure of their existence as a whole and the "task" assigned to them by
       the deity. Qoheleth uses the controlling metaphor of a "business," with its
       employer and employed, in order to explicate this aspect of the divine-
       human relationship.

(c)   This anthropological structure which God has set in place is *cyclical*.
       Human activities oscillate ceaselessly (reflecting nature itself) and thus
       the events of the present and future are nothing but reiterations of what
       has already happened in the past.[16]

This three-fold reality is one which Qoheleth finds deeply troubling. Beyond
describing it, Qoheleth also makes clear its negative value for human beings.
The remainder of my essay will defend this tripartite notion in Qoheleth by
examining Eccl 1:4–11 and 3:9–15, along with their significance for interpreting
the poem in 3:2–8.

2   Cyclicality in Eccl 1:4–11

The first step toward this third reading of 3:2–8 begins with a point that various
commentators have acknowledged but insufficiently developed—namely, the
strong similarities between the poem of 3:2–8 and that of 1:4–11.[17] We need to

---

       by God, but rather that the possibilities open to humans and the value of human activi-
       ties are settled in advance by the framework of God's created order, which terminates
       everything with human death"—although I will want to add more to the framework than
       that it terminates in death.

16   Since the word "cyclical" has been used in various ways, it is important to be clear that
       by using the term I do not intend to refer to a certain *order* in which a series of different
       events should occur. I agree with Fox, *Rereading*, 200, when he writes: "Qohelet does not
       here speak of time as a cycle in which crying follows laughing, which follows crying, and
       so on *ad infinitum*. Several 'crying times' may follow in succession before it is right to
       laugh. Rather, he describes a *binary pairing of opposed event-types as a structural property
       of reality*, not as a temporal sequence" (emphasis added). If the various spheres of real-
       ity are structured in binary pairs then both sides will eventually take place, and if we
       are dealing with only two constituents, then this is still alternation in a broader sense.
       In other words, a movement such as A-A-A-B-B-A-B-B-B is reducible to A-B-A-B, and is
       cyclical in that sense. "Cyclical," then, is still a helpful word to use for the phenomenon
       in question, because it conveys a notion of repetition in which reiterations take place
       through an oscillatory back-and-forth movement, as in, for instance, the oscillating cycles
       of power within a two-party political system.

17   See, e.g., Dell, "Cycle," 187; Loader, *Polar Structures*, 90. Others are listed in n. 30 below.

discuss 1:4–11 in order to explore the theme of cyclicality as it appears there. Once the presence of cyclicality becomes clear in 1:4–11, we will have more reason to take notice of it in 3:1–8 and 3:9–15:

(4)   A generation goes, and a generation comes,
       but the earth remains forever the same.

(5)   The sun rises, and the sun sets,
       and hurrying back to its place, it rises from there again.

(6)   Going to the south and circling back down to the north,
       turning and turning goes the wind,
       and upon its circuits the wind returns.

(7)   All the streams go into the sea, but the sea is never filled.
       To the very place from which the streams flow[18] they return.[19]

---

18   MT אֶל־מְקוֹם שֶׁהַנְּחָלִים הֹלְכִים שָׁם (lit. "to the place which the streams flow there") should be emended to אֶל־מְקוֹם שֶׁהַנְּחָלִים הֹלְכִים מִשָּׁם (lit. "to the place which the streams flow from there," i.e., "to the place from which the streams flow") on account of haplography of the מ in מִשָּׁם. This is reasonable in light of the many surrounding occurrences of final *mem* as well as the support for this reading found in Symmachus (εἰς τὸν τόπον ἀφ᾽ οὗ οἱ ποταμοὶ πορεύονται) and the Vulgate (*ad locum unde flumina reuertuntur*), though it must be noted that the latter probably depends upon the former. Several other contextual factors lend support to this reading over its primary alternative, "to the place *to which* the streams flow": (a) Though the Masoretic pointing aligns שָׁם with the following הֵם שָׁבִים לָלָכֶת and many scholars assume this reading, שָׁם should be read as concluding the prior phrase, אֶל־מְקוֹם שֶׁהַנְּחָלִים הֹלְכִים. A phrase involving a noun of place (or source), a relative pronoun (אֲשֶׁר or שֶׁ), and a verb of movement should normally be followed by a שָׁם which is suffixed by either מ- (מִשָּׁם, "from there," i.e., "from which," e.g., Gen 3:23; 10:14; 24:5; Num 23:13; etc.) or the directional ה (שָׁמָּה, "to there," i.e., "to which," e.g., Gen 20:13; Exod 21:13; Lev 18:3; etc.) in order to disambiguate the relative pronoun; שָׁם by itself is insufficient when either a source or destination needs to be identified. Positing מִשָּׁם as concluding the prior phrase thus solves the issue. (b) The employment of both אֶל־מְקוֹם and שָׁם in 1:7 corresponds to the use of both terms in 1:5. In 1:5, אֶל־מְקוֹמוֹ refers to the sun's movement *back to* its original starting point (from B back to A), and שָׁם indicates the place from which the cyclical movement will begin again ("it rises there" implies "rises *from* there," not "rises *to* there"). According to the reading I am proposing, the same is true in 1:7: אֶל־מְקוֹם refers to the streams' movement back to their origin or source—not to the sea—and שָׁם again signifies that original location from which the water cycle renews, not its polar opposite (the sea). (c) The complicated syntax of 1:7b seems rather superfluous and devoid of new informational content if the meaning is merely that the streams keep flowing into the sea, a point already established in 1:7a. Rather, the syntactical features—particularly, the fronted prepositional (אֶל) phrase with מְקוֹם, the use of the relative שֶׁ, the presence of שָׁם (מִשָּׁם), as well as the verb שוב and the particular construction לָלָכֶת + שוב which will be highlighted in the next footnote—all point to a more complex idea, one of cyclical return.

19   There is a lack of consensus concerning the translation and sense of שָׁם) הֵם שָׁבִים לָלָכֶת). Some (e.g., Schoors, Longman, Schwienhorst-Schönberger, Lohfink, Whybray, Plumptre, Ellermeir) take שָׁבִים as referring to a return from the sea back to the streams' source

(8)　All words are weak,[20] one is not able to speak.
　　 An eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor is an ear filled with hearing.

(usually coupled with an additional reference to the cycle starting again at this source, due to לָלֶכֶת), while others (e.g., Seow, Gordis, Weeks, Murphy, Krüger, Barton, McNeile, Wright) take it to convey a unidirectional continuation of waters traversing from rivers to sea. Those of the latter opinion usually add "again" to the translation, noting that שׁוּב coupled with an infinitive construct can mean "to do [X] again," a sense found in eight of the forty-two occurrences in classical Hebrew where the two are conjoined (Deut 24:4; 30:9; Isa 6:13; Ezek 8:17; Hos 11:9; Ps 104:9; Job 7:7; Ezra 9:14). But I will suggest a modification of the first view, modified in that I do not see לָלֶכֶת as indicating an additional cycle or movement beyond the "return" conveyed by שָׁבִים. Evidence in support of this reading and against the unidirectional reading is that the exact construction used here—שׁוּב followed by הלך in infinite construct—is an apparent idiom attested four times elsewhere in classical Hebrew and in all cases can only refer to a "return" in the sense of "going back" the way something came (i.e., returning from B back to A, after having gone from A to B), rather than "going *again*" (i.e., repeatedly going from A to B). See Eccl 5:14; 1 Kgs 12:24; 13:17; 1QHa 26:15 [= 4Q427 VII 1.20]). This apparent idiom should take precedence over the occasional sense of "to do again" just outlined. In none of these instances can the meaning of the construction be, "go again" (in the sense of going from A to B multiple times); it always refers to a "turning back" (go back to A from B, having originally come from A). In light of these, it seems best to translate הֵם שָׁבִים לָלֶכֶת as simply "they return" (in the sense of turning back), instead of "they continue to go/flow." The cited texts also show that לָלֶכֶת in the construction is essentially redundant and idiomatic, presumably clarifying the sense of the preceding שׁוּב as indeed a "backward" return. It is best left untranslated if "return" is used, and it should not be rendered as implying an additional purposive clause, "*in order to* go/flow" in Eccl 1:7. In sum, the verse alludes to a "going" and a "turning back," not an additional "going" beyond that double-sequence, nor a continual "going" in the same direction. This latter half of the verse thus provides the *reason* for the claim of 1:7a that "the sea is never filled": no sooner do the streams arrive there than they begin their trip back home.

20　הַדְּבָרִים יְגֵעִים is a difficult phrase in that (a) דְּבָרִים may mean either "things" or "words," and (b) יְגֵעִים has been taken as an adjective, "weary, tired," or, with a causative sense, "wearying, tiresome," while still others regard it as a participle, "laboring, toiling." Those who translate הַדְּבָרִים as "things" do so on the assumption that it summarizes the content of 1:4–7. But the reference to speech in the very next line (לְדַבֵּר) implies we are dealing here with "words." An often overlooked factor is the theme of the impotence (and futility) of words, which appears not only in 1:8b but throughout the book. We may note the apparent parallels between, e.g., 1:8aβ (לֹא־יוּכַל אִישׁ לְדַבֵּר, "one is not able to speak") and 6:10c (אָדָם לֹא־יוּכַל לָדִין, "a person is not able to dispute"), as well as, more loosely, 1:8aα ("All הַדְּבָרִים are weary") and 6:11 ("where there are many דְּבָרִים, futility only increases"). Cf. also 5:3, 7; 10:14, which make the point that a "multiplication" of words is profitless. All of this evidences a well-established theme in Qoheleth that words are powerless to change the (often frustrating) circumstances in which human beings find themselves in the world. This makes decent sense of 1:8a, if we can allow it to be slightly elliptical. I have translated יְגֵעִים as "weak" in light of the above and since it is a small semantic leap from "weary" to "weak" (cf. instances of the verbal form in Eccl 10:15; Isa 40:28, 30, 31; 57:10; Jer 45:3; Pss 6:6; 69:3; Lam 5:5).

(9)   That which has been—it is what will be.

And that which has happened—it is what will happen.

And there is nothing new under the sun.

(10) Is there anything of which one can say—"Look here! This is new!"?

It already has been, in the ages which were before us.

(11) There is no remembrance of former people, nor of those who are yet to exist.

There will be no remembrance of them, nor of those who will exist later still.

Eccl 1:4–11

A particular conception of cyclicality consistently emerges from 1:4–11. Beginning with 1:4, here Qoheleth does not say that "a generation comes and a generation goes," but the inverse: "a generation goes (הֹלֵךְ) and a generation comes (בָּא)." This inversion is one indication he is thinking cyclically: he specifically chooses to highlight the moment of the turn or transition, the passing of the torch between two generations, one passing away and the other coming to be.[21] This focus sets the stage for what will follow, as Qoheleth draws upon nature's oscillatory movements in order to emphasize two qualities inherent to the human experience: its cyclical and ateleological character.

Next, in 1:5 Qoheleth describes that from the phenomenological perspective, the sun rises in the east, then traverses to the opposite side of the sky, but eventually circles back to the place where it began—"panting" (שׁוֹאֵף) along the way—and soon repeats the whole process over again. "Its place" (מְקוֹמוֹ)

---

21   A common understanding of 1:4 posits a contrast between the transient "generations" (דּוֹר) and the permanent "earth" (אֶרֶץ), where אֶרֶץ is understood literally, as the physical *terra firma* upon which humans dwell. But Fox, "Qohelet 1:4," has alternatively argued that אֶרֶץ in v. 4 "does not mean the physical earth, but humanity as a whole" (cf. Gen 6:11; 11:1; 1 Kgs 2:2; Ps 33:8). Fox is followed by Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 106; Enns, *Ecclesiastes*, 33, among others. It would be odd for Qoheleth to emphasize the permanence of the physical earth in 1:4b, at the very commencement of the book's argument, since that emphasis recurs nowhere else in the poem nor book at large. What seems more sensible in the context of the poem is that Qoheleth is highlighting the same kind of "permanence" he has in mind in 1:9–11, namely, the character of human experience as a cyclical phenomenon. Though one generation replaces another, and the particulars change, ineluctable traits of human being remain. Weeks, *Ecclesiastes 1.1–5.6*, 272, suggests that it is also quite possible that the word can be used broadly enough to include both humans and their physical habitation, just as with "the world" in English.

here refers to its starting point, from which it rises again.[22] The opening words of v. 6 present an initial ambiguity concerning the subject of the participial actions, "going to the south and turning back to the north," but the vast majority of modern commentaries and translations rightly regard this as a somewhat crafty way to introduce the wind, rather than a continuation of the sun's movement in the sky.[23] In this case, as with the sun, there is a traverse from one point (from its starting point "to the south"), and then a return to its antipode ("north"). The pair of repeated participles that follow, סוֹבֵב סֹבֵב, have often been rendered, "circling, circling," though a few commentators have expressed reservations.[24] But the point is not so much that the wind is literally traveling in circles. This phrase should be read through the initial use of סבב in 1:6a, where it refers to the "turning back" from a northward direction to a southward direction (cf. Qoheleth's use of סבב in 2:20 and 7:25 for "I turned"). In light of this, as well as the parallel with the sun and streams (including the parallel use of שוב in 1:7), it is not likely Qoheleth is imagining a geometric circle, but something more like parallel tracks in which a 180-degree "U-turn" is undertaken in order to bring back the object to its starting point (see figure below). The movement envisioned is less like a hurricane's swirl than a boomerang's forward-and-back reprise, and it is this "turning, (re)turning" that persists unhindered.[25]

In 1:7 Qoheleth describes that the streams, too, start at their source and then traverse over to the sea, before finally turning back to the original source. The repetition of this process, if not quite explicitly stated in this case, is certainly implied. Hence the surprising fact that despite the constant movement of the streams into the sea, "the sea is never filled." What is going into it is always coming out; its gains are always counterbalanced by losses.

In each of the four verses in 1:4–7, then, we have a set of opposite binaries establishing an A-B structure:

---

22   An interesting parallel is found in a Babylonian text, which highlights the ancients' readily acknowledged ignorance as to how the sun returns to מְקוֹמוֹ:
      "To unknown distant regions and for uncounted leagues
      You press on, Šamaš, going by day and returning by night.
      Among the Igigi there is no one who toils but you […]."
      BWL, 128–129, lines 43–48

23   Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 6, says "this translation is certain." For a review of this verse in the history of Jewish exegesis, see Japhet, "Goes to the South."

24   See, e.g., Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism*, 49.

25   Whether or not the north-south axis represented the most common wind-pattern experienced by Qoheleth, it was probably chosen as a compliment to the more obvious east-west dichotomy already taken by the sun (see Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 108).

	A	**B**
generation	goes	comes
	הֹלֵךְ	בָּא
sun	rises	sets
	וְזָרַח	וּבָא
wind	south	north
	אֶל־דָּרוֹם	אֶל־צָפוֹן
streams	sea	source
	אֶל־הַיָּם	אֶל־מְקוֹם

With each pair of binaries, the point is essentially two-fold: (a) that the activity or movement in each case repeatedly "travels" between the two binary poles, oscillating back and forth; and, (b) as a result, the movement never arrives anywhere "new" (cf. 1:9–10). It merely continues traversing along already-trodden ground (cf. v. 6, "circuits"), never arriving at something outside this familiar schema, something which might constitute "gain" or "surplus" (יִתְרוֹן). Hence the movement is confined to endless cycles, perpetual repetition.

All of this can stand on its own from 1:4–7, but a cyclical conception is all the more confirmed once we read 1:9–11. Verse 9 is as clear and concise a statement of cyclical time as one is likely to find in the ancient world. The future is identified with the past, foregoing any structure which might cultivate the possibility for newness. Yet, unlike many of Qoheleth's contemporaries, Qoheleth's version of cyclical time is not a metaphysical theory per se, supposing that every precise state of the universe will eventually repeat itself, and do so again and again eternally. Rather, Qoheleth's notion of cyclicality is abstracted up a level from the world's physical (or metaphysical) constituents, into the realm of classifications, types, and archetypes. It is the same *types* of events and activities that will recur *ad infinitum*.[26] (Given that it is still a theory about

---

26   I concur with Fox, *Rereading*, 168: "The assertion that 'there is nothing new under the sun' cannot apply to events as specific, unique occurrences. World War II, the book of Qohelet, the death of Lincoln—these had not happened before. But in some sense Qohelet would regard their reality as inhering in their realizing of archetypes: war, book, assassination. Only in that way can he deny their newness." Cf. Jastrow, *Gentle Cynic*, 122–123: "The variations in the repetition do not affect essentials"; Frydrych, *Under the Sun*, 119: "The predictability of Qoheleth's world happens on an abstract phenomenal level, pertaining to issues such as birth and death, joy and sorrow, but does not extend to the lower detailed level of specific human actions and their consequences." That is why the theme of repetition and cycles does not contradict ideas prominent elsewhere in Qoheleth about life's unpredictable nature (e.g., 9:11–12; 11:1–6). The precise circumstances may be unknown and unpredictable, but the broader picture and patterns will only repeat themselves. Cf.,
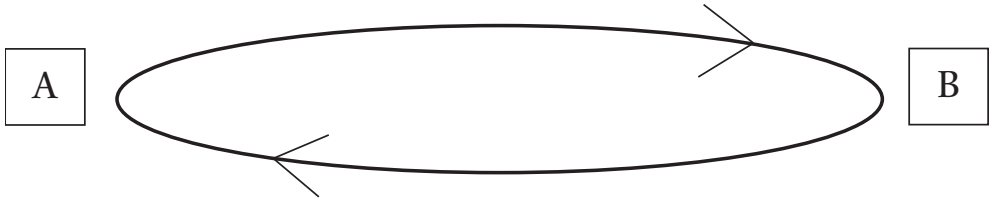
the way reality is structured, however, we may call Qoheleth's idea a "quasi-metaphysical" theory.)

The statement in 1:10 is an immediate practical application of the principle of cyclicality declared in 1:9. If someone thinks they can ever legitimately exclaim, "Look! This is new!"—they are mistaken. Since whatever happens now is categorically equivalent to what has happened before, there technically can be no "new" thing—nothing which is unclassifiable into the already familiar categories. The fundamental aspects of human existence, just as the movements of the sun, wind, and waters, have already been well established. And henceforth, "it is known what a human being is." (6:10)

Qoheleth concludes the poem in 1:11 by denying proficiency to human memory (אֵין זִכְרוֹן). While at first glance this may seem an outlier to his prior discussion, a connection can be made when we consider that what humans remember of their predecessors are the anomalies—those deeds which stand out as "new" and unique from the unending stream of information. By drawing up the lines to claim that there really are no new distinctions among human behavior, Qoheleth has established a framework in which memory is powerless. The "new" feeds the cultural memory; where nothing is new, nothing is remembered.

Seeing the theme of cyclical time in Qoheleth, and particularly in 1:4–11, is certainly no novel proposal. Readers of the book have been discerning this theme from the very earliest interpretations on record,[27] and the great majority of commentators on this passage have taken it as describing cyclical realities to one degree or another.[28] The fact that Qoheleth commences his book with a lengthy poem about cyclicality implies that this is indeed an important, even central, aspect of his philosophy. The entire poem, 1:4–11, serves as the

---

too, Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 24: "Even the monotonous cycles of nature defy prediction—*that* they will repeat is sure, but *when* and *how* remain obscure."

27   See, e.g., the discussion in Augustine, *Civ.* 12,14.

28   Those who have particularly highlighted this theme in recent years include Dell, "Cycle," 183–185; Whybray, "Ecclesiastes 1:5–7"; Carasik, "Qohelet's Twists and Turns"; Perry, *Ecclesiastes*, 55–57. On the other hand, the cyclical interpretation of 1:4–7 is challenged in Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism*, 46–53.

answer to Qoheleth's opening question in 1:3, "What gain is there?" With its depiction of well-worn cycles that fail to effect change, the poem clearly provides a negative answer.[29] This is all the more confirmed by the way Qoheleth picks up the discussion two verses later in 1:13, referring to the "bad business" God has given humans, and that all that is done is *hebel* and striving after wind. With this understanding of 1:4–11 in view, we may now turn to 3:1–15.

3   Reading Eccl 3:2–8 in Relation to 1:4–11

A strong case can be made for reading the Catalogue of the Times poem of 3:2–8 in light of the bipolar cycles theme of 1:4–11.[30] First, 3:2–8 is clearly structured in terms of binary pairs, which in every case present mutually exclusive opposites. Since a similar A-B structure also marks 1:4–7, this fact alone provides some clue that the two passages may share a conceptual link and should perhaps be read similarly.[31] Second, the poem of 3:2–8 is directly followed by

---

29   There are a few readings of Qoheleth's cyclicality theme, particularly in 1:4–11, that understand him as regarding it positively. For example, Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 40, says that the poem implies nothing negative but only "praises the cosmos as glorious and eternal in this image of cyclic return." Similarly, Dell, "Cycle," 189, commenting on "the cycle of life as controlled by God" and "the cycles in the natural world," writes, "There is a positive aspect to the simple description of the interaction with the natural world that cheers the human spirit [...]. The author displays [...] an appreciation of the circularity of the process." And Knopf, "Optimism," suggests that the thrust of Qoheleth's cyclical language is "the inevitable law and rationale of our world." (198). But these readings, in fact, miss the point. Readers *may* deduce that repeating phenomena are orderly, and that order is good. But this is not the conclusion Qoheleth draws from these phenomena. Features of the natural world such as order or consistency are little valued by the sage if they do not result in *gain* for human beings. Given that Qoheleth frames 1:4–11 in relation to the question concerning gain in 1:3, the poem's declaration of the world's gainless, cyclical nature is the direct, negative answer to that question and the passage's central point.

30   Other commentators who read 1:3–11 and 3:2–8 (or 3:1–15) as connected and mutually interpretive include Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 75–76; Enns, *Ecclesiastes*, 52; McNeile, *Ecclesiastes*, 15; Gese, "Crisis," 147–148; Kaiser, "Qoheleth," 86.

31   Several scholars have noted the importance of opposites for Qoheleth (either in this pair of passages, or more broadly), e.g., Perry, *Ecclesiastes*, 84: "What both [1:3–11 and 3:2–8] have in common, at a deeper structural level, is neither the 'time' nor the particular desire or *khepets* [...] but the perspective of a totality composed of opposites." Horton, "Koheleth's Concept," finds Qoheleth's "doctrine of opposites" throughout the book, positing that the sage "assumes that reality occurs in pairs" and "argues for the diverse and contradictory nature of existence" in which "nature provides life and death, war and peace, patience and anger, as well as good luck and misfortune." Scott, *Ecclesiastes*, 235, too, summarizes: "Everything has its opposite (cf. 3:1–8), so that man must not count on the continuance of either good or bad fortune."

the same rhetorical question which introduced the poem of 1:4–11: "What lasting gain is there for a person ('worker' in 3:9) in (all) his toil?"

1:3	מַה־יִּתְרוֹן לָאָדָם בְּכָל־עֲמָלוֹ שֶׁיַּעֲמֹל תַּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ
3:9	מַה־יִּתְרוֹן הָעוֹשֶׂה בַּאֲשֶׁר הוּא עָמֵל

1:3   What lasting gain is there for   a person   in all his toil which
        he toils under the sun?
3:9   What lasting gain is there for   the worker   in what
        he toils?

Third, the subsequent verse (3:10) virtually repeats a sentence which had followed closely after the conclusion of the poem in 1:4–11, concerning the "business" God has given humans.

1:13	הוּא עִנְיָן רָע נָתַן אֱלֹהִים לִבְנֵי הָאָדָם לַעֲנוֹת בּוֹ
3:10	רָאִיתִי אֶת־הָעִנְיָן אֲשֶׁר נָתַן אֱלֹהִים לִבְנֵי הָאָדָם לַעֲנוֹת בּוֹ

1:13   It is a bad   business   that God has given humans to be busy
with
3:10   I have seen the   business   that God has given humans to be busy
with

This means that some of Qoheleth's most immediate interpretive comments on the book's opening poem likewise comprise his commentary of the second poem. If the immediately adjacent comments on each passage are nearly identical, this would seem a strong indicator that the content and overall meaning of the two poems is regarded similarly by Qoheleth. Thus, if the subject matter of the first poem is that of the cycles and repetition in earthly existence, we might well expect this same essential message in the second poem. Fourth and finally, the fact that 1:4–11 and 3:2–8 represent two of the book's three poems (the third being 12:1–7) and that 1:3–11 opens and 3:1–15 concludes the book's opening core unit (1:3–3:15) are further indicators that the two poems ought to be mutually interpreted.[32]

---

32   See Kaiser, "Qoheleth," 84: "Only in 1:3–3:15 do we find what is obviously a carefully planned composition." Michel, *Untersuchungen*, 1–83, and Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism*, 44–76, regard 1:3–3:15 as a kind of overture of Qoheleth's main ideas. Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 5, notes that the book's primary opening unit (1:12–2:26) is flanked by poems (1:3–11; 3:1–9, in his divisions) which both either begin or end with the question concerning "gain" for human beings.

If we are correct to read 3:2–8 in light of 1:4–11, then the following features emerge as significant. When Qoheleth says that "there is a time for [A] and a time for [B]," the emphasis lies not on the precise *timing* at which A or B occurs—whether chosen by the astute individual or ordained by God—but on the fact that the opposite realities of *both A and B* will inevitably occur, not just one or the other.[33] That two opposing realities will always (sooner or later) manifest themselves implies that embedded into the created order itself is a kind of equilibrating tendency, a drive toward "zero." This homogenizing proclivity naturally prompts the question of 3:9, "What gain?" Further, just as in 1:4–11, what is implied in 3:2–8 is not only that A happens and then B (its opposite) happens [A → B], but additionally, the constant *oscillation* between A and B [A → B → A].[34] There is a cyclicality intrinsic to everything done under the sun such that human activity in any given sphere continually oscillates between two poles. To expand on two of Qoheleth's own examples: People plant in the spring but inevitably uproot in the fall. Spring will come again soon enough, though, and round it goes. People laugh with joy at the baby's birth but weep with mourning at the elder's funeral days later. Yet laughing will reprise in due course. This is the way the world turns. This is the nature of time as humans experience it.[35]

We should note, too, that in 1:4–11 Qoheleth's concern is neither ethical (in the sense of the "proper times" reading of 3:2–8) nor determinist (as though the main point were to convey God's temporal preordination of the movements in the natural world). Rather, the emphasis in 1:4–11 is merely descriptive—this

---

33 Similarly, Barbour, *Story of Israel*, 54–76, stresses that in the poem "everything happens" (56): "Qohelet's times […] are not primarily 'right' times, but simply times when something happens" (55). I concur with Barbour that the point is more *that* all these things happen than precisely *when* they happen, but our interpretations differ in that Barbour would still plot the events of 3:2–8 along a linear timeline ("they are different points on a *temporal* continuum […] the variety of human experience as a linear series of times […]," 57), whereas I see them as occurrences on polar ends of the oscillating cycles. Cf. Loader, *Polar Structures*, 30.

34 There are other ancient Jewish texts in which the notion of binary opposites is emphasized, and in some it is spoken of in terms of sequence, one following after the other. See T.Ash. 1:3–4; 5:1–2; Sir 18:25; 33:14–15. The closest parallel to Eccl 3:2–8 may be Sir 34:28–31, which emphasizes that opposite actions undermine each other and result in gainlessness (though Sirach's concern is particularly with the efficacy of piety).

35 A few commentators have characterized 3:2–8 as cyclical (often, but not always, connecting it back to 1:4–11), even if this element has not received the strongest accent in their interpretation. Cf. Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, 98; Jarick, "Hebrew Book of Changes," 91; Wright, *Koheleth*, 342; Scott, *Ecclesiastes*, 221; Hankins, "Internal Infinite," 46–47; Dell, "Cycle," 187; Bundvad, *Time*, 91.

cyclical manner is the way the world works—and the sage's negative evalua-
tion of this description is inferred by Qoheleth's comments immediately lead-
ing into ("What gain is there for a person […]?" [1:3]) and following the poem
("It is a bad business […]" [1:13]). Thus the same is arguably true for the poem in
3:2–8. In this latter case, Qoheleth's negative evaluation of the poem's content
becomes clear in 3:9–15.

4   Support from Eccl 3:9–15

(9)   What lasting gain is there for the worker in that which he toils?

(10) I have seen the business that God has given to humans to be busy with.
      (11) He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has, moreover,
      set the desire for perpetuity[36] in their hearts, yet without any ability
      for humanity to discover the work that God has done from beginning
      to end. (12) I realized that there is nothing good for them except to be
      joyful and to do what is worthwhile in one's life. (13) Moreover, every
      person who eats and drinks and sees good in all his toil—this is God's
      payment. (14) I know that all that God does—it remains forever; upon it
      nothing can be added, and from it nothing can be taken away.[37] God has
      acted so that people might fear before him.

---

36   The well-worn scholarly debate concerning that which God has placed into human
     hearts—הָעֹלָם—has produced a range of interpretive options: (a) "eternity" (LXX (αἰῶνα);
     McNeile; Lohfink; Seow; Schoors; Weeks); (b) "world" (Vulgate *mundum*); (c) "ignorance,"
     "darkness," "obscurity," derived from either *DCH*'s עלם I, "to hide" (as in Eccl 12:14) or עלם
     II, "to be dark" (Crenshaw; Frydrych; Scott; Barton; Plumptre); (d) "toil," derived from
     amending עֹלָם to עָמָל (Fox; Ginsburg), inter alia. I have taken it in a sense closest to (a),
     but I share with others the concern that "eternity" imports a Western philosophical and
     theological category likely foreign to Qoheleth's thought. Rather, I regard the idea here
     that humans desire a long-term *telos* to work toward and such an accomplishment would
     ensure them an enduring name for posterity. This notion, found elsewhere in the book, is
     apparently compressed into the single word, הָעֹלָם, and I have tried to capture this with
     "perpetuity" (cf. Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 80, "distant time"), though "desire for" has been added
     to communicate the assumed sense.

37   As elsewhere in later biblical Hebrew, אַיִן followed by an infinitive construct may express
     impossibility ("nothing can") rather than mere negation ("nothing is"). See Esth 4:2; 8:8;
     Ezra 9:15; Ps 40:6.

(15)   Whatever has been—it already was.[38]
        And whatever will be—it already has been.
        And God seeks to do what has already been pursued.
            Eccl 3:9–15

It is virtually unanimous among commentators that 3:9–15 represents Qoheleth's commentary on the poem of 3:2–8, a "philosophische Zusammenfassung."[39] Thus if our reading of the poem's meaning is on track, we should expect support from 3:9–15 as well. We will now walk through 3:9–15, noting several ways in which these verses do in fact support the present argument.

Beginning with 3:9, we have already noted the close parallel between 1:3 and 3:9. The only notable difference between them is the identification of the toiler here as "the worker" (הָעוֹשֶׂה) rather than the more generic אָדָם, and this itself is significant for our argument. Why would Qoheleth describe the activities in 3:2–8 as the "toil" of a "worker"? Our answer depends on connecting the use of this word to v. 10. Here too we have just seen the tight parallel between 1:13 and 3:10. The "business" (or "job," "task"; עִנְיָן) given to humanity is identified as "bad" (רָע) in 1:13, and there is no reason to think it has escaped that characterization two chapters later. In 3:9–10 Qoheleth has thus proceeded from a poem describing twenty-eight human activities to a characterization of the human predicament in terms of the "worker" who "toils" and the "business" given to people "to be busy with." We may conclude from this prevalence of "business"-oriented language following the poem that 3:9–10 serves to summarize 3:2–8 as something like the "job description" allotted to humankind.

---

38   Holmstedt and Jones, "Tripartite Verbless Clauses," identify the הוא in מַה־שֶּׁהָיָה כְּבָר הוּא as one of many instances of a tripartite verbless (or nominal) clause in the HB where "the pronoun [...] should be read as the resumption pronoun in a dislocation," as opposed to other cases of the construction in which they identify the pronoun as a copula. As an instance of left-dislocation (a term from linguistics), 3:15a has the structure, "X—it is Y" (cf. also 1:9; 2:23; 3:21; 4:8; 5:18; 6:2). But 3:15a is particularly unique in that there is no Y component (no predicate nominative). Instead, Qoheleth's stress is on the כְּבָר ("already"), which adverbially modifies an implicit copula, hence "already was." The implicit copula is rendered past tense by its pairing with כְּבָר and due to context. Another unique aspect to this text is the word order—in such a case הוא should normally precede כְּבָר. But in both of the first two stiches of the verse כְּבָר is focus-fronted (another linguistics term). In their commentary, Holmstedt et al., *Qoheleth*, translate 3:15a, "Whatever is—it was already," which is congruent with my own rendering. As with 1:9–10 and 3:15b, Qoheleth is contrasting two periods of time and stating that the occurrences of the later period (whether, from Qoheleth's point of view, they are past, present, or future) are always only repetitions of what had already occurred before them.

39   Schellenberg, *Kohelet*, 74.

Furthermore, the common determinist reading of 3:2–8 claims that the lack of gain Qoheleth identifies in 3:9 is owing purely to God's predetermination of all human actions. Yet, since 3:9 is a clear echo of 1:3 it is reasonable to assume that the lack of gain in 3:9 relates closely to the same lack in 1:3. There the statement introduces the poem of 1:4–11, and 1:4–11 says nothing concerning God's determination of events, emphasizing instead the cyclical nature of existence. Thus the complaint concerning lack of gain in 3:9 is more sensibly read as a response to the world's cyclical, repetitive nature (as expressed in 3:2–8) than as a consequence of hard determinism. What the discussion in 3:9–15 adds to 1:3–11 is the clarification that behind the cycles of existence stands a "prime mover"—or better, "prime recycler"[40]—who has pushed the cycles into motion. But it is foremost the cycles that elicit the response of מַה־יִּתְרוֹן, not strictly the notion of a determinist, interventionist deity.

The implications of this understanding are already significant for showing how my proposed reading differs from the common determinist reading of 3:2–8. Qoheleth encourages us to think of humanity as employees of the divine employer, the cosmic "CEO." What does the CEO of a company "determine," with respect to the CEO's employees? To take a familiar modern example, the workers on Henry Ford's factory assembly line presumably did not feel some external, physical compulsion to move their hands in a particular direction at a specific time, according to the behest of the man in charge. He was not a puppet-master in that strictest sense. What Henry Ford did control was the workers' "job description": he assigned their general (repetitive) task, and it was theirs to carry out. I suggest that the case is similar with Qoheleth's humanity and their deity: God has determined the fates of humans only insofar as he has assigned them the "task" (1:13; 3:10) of carrying out mutually counterproductive, gainless activities (3:2–8).

While the Ford example is meant only as a heuristic, further considerations support the suggestion that Qoheleth viewed humanity's relation to God through an employer-worker model. First, some scholars have proposed that Qoheleth is presented as a "businessman," since a striking number of his favorite terms are commercial or economic terms: יִתְרוֹן ("gain"), חֶסְרוֹן ("loss"), שָׂכָר ("wage, reward"), חֶשְׁבּוֹן ("accounting"), מנה ("count"), חֵלֶק ("share"), עִנְיָן ("task, business"), עָמָל ("toil, labor").[41] Second, Stuart Weeks argues that another such

---

40   Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, 45.

41   See Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism*, 34–37, and Dahood, "Canaanite-Phoenician Influence," 30–52, 191–221, who lists twenty-nine commercial terms used in the book and concludes, "the over-all picture delineated by Ecclesiastes suggests a distinctly commercial environment" (220–221). Cf. Kugel, "Qohelet and Money."

term, מַתַּת, can mean "payment" in a broader sense than its common translation, "gift," since "the Hebrew probably bears no implication that what is offered has not been earned."[42] Thus the rendering, "this is God's payment," in 3:13 would cohere well with the business metaphor we have already seen in 3:9–10. The divine CEO may employ unwitting laborers to carry out his bidding, but they are not unpaid slaves—they are hired servants. They may not reap the desired "lasting gain," but he does at least grant his employees a wage. Third, as is well known, several other ancient Near Eastern texts present humanity as created to labor for the gods (e.g., Enuma Elish, the Atrahasis Epic, Enki and Ninmah, Song of the Hoe, *KAR* 4). So it is not unreasonable that Qoheleth would have viewed humanity similarly—at least as God's "workers," if not slaves.

Proceeding to 3:14, this verse elicits two main questions: (a) What is the referent for "all that God does" (כָּל־אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה הָאֱלֹהִים)? (b) What does it mean that it "will be forever" (יִהְיֶה לְעוֹלָם) and that there can be no "adding to it" (עָלָיו אֵין לְהוֹסִיף) nor "subtracting from it" (וּמִמֶּנּוּ אֵין לִגְרֹעַ)? Regarding the first, determinist readings of the book often assume that God's עשה refers to an act of divine determination concerning various human events—God's "will" or "plan"—which is then subsequently enacted in the human sphere.[43] In reference to the activities listed in 3:2–8, then, "there is a time for planting" would mean something like, "God has preordained that Joe will plant at 8:22am on May 7th, 1978," and innumerable other such instances. As a universalized doctrine, the claim is that God determines every specific activity on the part of every person for all time.[44] But, as I suggested earlier, this is far too expansive an idea to import into the poem's relatively bridled phrasing, especially when a much simpler hypothesis is possible. Apart from the two abstract nouns at the poem's end, the activities listed in 3:2–8 are comprised of infinitive constructs,

---

42 Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism*, 73, referencing Sir 42:7; 1 Kgs 13:7; Prov 25:14; Ezek 46:5, 11.

43 E.g., Ginsburg, *Coheleth*, 312, comments on 3:14, "all the affairs of human life alluded to [in 3:1–9], which God has preordained are immutably fixed, that no ingenuity or industry […] can affect it in the slightest degree" and posits that עשה here carries the sense, "to appoint, to ordain, to fix." Similarly, Garrett, *Ecclesiastes*, 300, "no one can thwart or change God's will"; Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 123, "no one can change God's plan."

44 E.g., Blenkinsopp, "Ecclesiastes 3:1–15," 62, believes that 3:14 refers to "the divine act by which God has predisposed everything to happen at certain times and in certain ways," and that "Qoheleth probably has in mind written decrees, tablets of destiny, on which the events of a human life are inscribed in advance and by which they are divinely predetermined." Similarly, Ginsburg, *Coheleth*, 312: "The second lesson which Coheleth learned from the facts described in 1–9 is, that all the affairs of human life alluded to, which God has preordained, are *immutably* fixed, that no ingenuity or industry, however great, can affect it in the slightest degree" (emphasis original).

the most abstract grammatical form for identifying a verbal activity. All concrete details normally included with a finite verb, such as the subject, tense (timing), mood, and aspect are left completely unstated. On my reading, Qoheleth's choice of the infinitive construct is fitting since the poem is merely stating that the named activities do inevitably occur, and occur cyclically at that, as part and parcel of the general human "job description" assigned by God. When, how, and by whom specific actions come to be performed are not the questions Qoheleth—nor Qoheleth's deity—finds relevant. God's עשה, then, is simply the assigning and maintaining of this broad human task. If this is correct, then the poem is hardly an ode to the sort of hard determinism so commonly presumed. What has been determined is not a specific timing, but a general task.

As for the second question, Qoheleth says that "all that God does—it will be forever" (כָּל־אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה הָאֱלֹהִים הוּא יִהְיֶה לְעוֹלָם,) and the denial that there is any "adding to it" (עָלָיו אֵין לְהוֹסִיף) or "subtracting from it" (וּמִמֶּנּוּ אֵין לִגְרֹעַ) rules out the possibility that any human agent could change what is divinely wrought. But the "it" (הוּא) can be construed in two different ways, according to the two versions of "determinism" on offer. On the common view, it is God's foreordained *decision about* a specific future event (such as, again, "Joe will plant at 8:22am on May 7th, 1978"—or the universal collection of all such events across time) that is deemed eternal and immutable. The meaning of 3:14 would be that what God *decides* with respect to those events remains true forever—it is a settled choice and will definitely happen. But on the reading I am proposing, it is not God's decision about future actions which is deemed unchangeable, but the actions themselves—the cyclical and therefore ultimately unchanging activities which typify human existence (3:2–8).[45] Qoheleth's use of a verb of action, עשה, rather than a verb for deciding, combined with the verb's imperfect form (יַעֲשֶׂה), argues for the latter option. Qoheleth is saying that what God *does*, the state of affairs he establishes and maintains (which itself entails human action), remains in place indefinitely. Despite the constant motion and alternations, the lack of forward movement implies a situation that ultimately remains the same. As we will see, the next verse fully supports this reading, whereas it fails to comport with a reading of v. 14 concerned with foreordained decisions.

Finally, then, we come to 3:15. I have translated the first two clauses as, "Whatever has been—it already was. And whatever will be—it already has been." The allusion to 1:9 is clear, and the alignments below represent the division of time shared between 1:9–10 and 3:15.

---

45   Similarly Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 35: "It is worth noting that Qoheleth is speaking of the immutability of the divine *deed*, not word" (emphasis original).

Distant past	Future	Recent past[a]	Distant past	Recent past	Future
	הוּא שֶׁיִּהְיֶה	מַה־שֶׁהָיָה = 1:9	כְּבָר הוּא =	= מַה־שֶׁהָיָה	3:15a
כְּבָר הָיָה לְעוֹלָמִים		(חָדָשׁ) הוּא = 1:10	= כְּבָר הָיָה[b]		אֲשֶׁר לִהְיוֹת 3:15b

a   Just as with the English use of the perfect tense, in many cases the Hebrew perfect tense includes both the (recent) past and the present, thus מַה־שֶׁהָיָה, which I translated, "whatever has been," is often translated "whatever *is*." See Isaksson, *Studies*, 50; Schoors, "hāyâ."

b   It is also possible that כְּבָר הָיָה would function here as "recent past" and could be translated with "is" (so Isaksson, *Studies*, 29), but in either case it is the "already," the antecedency with respect to אֲשֶׁר לִהְיוֹת, that is stressed.

Qoheleth had concluded the poem in 1:4–11 by asserting through abstract temporal use of היה the cyclical nature of the world he had previously conveyed by natural imagery (1:5–7). Now in 3:15, closing out the section which began with twenty-eight concrete examples of human activities, he once again employs היה to construct temporal phrases only slightly modified from those in 1:9–10. The effect, as in 1:9–10, is to equate the events of disparate eras and thereby strike the clear note of cyclicality. In both cases he has clarified and generalized with abstract propositions what had previously come in the form of poetic concreteness: that there is nothing new, that whatever should happen in the future can only reiterate past events. A further connection between the two passages is that 1:9 and 3:15 both begin with מַה־שֶׁהָיָה, "whatever has been." In 3:15 this phrase means essentially, "Take any example from the list just provided—whether planting, uprooting, crying, laughing, or any other. Whatever given activity you pick, that same activity (and its opposite, its subversion) has already been done before and will be done again." The parallels between 1:9 and 3:15 are hardly coincidental, and most commentators recognize them. What is surprising, however, is how little the cyclicality of 3:15 is taken into account with regard to the interpretation of 3:1–15 more broadly. Many commentators betray a certain unease here and either seem to avoid situating the verse within a "proper times" or determinist reading of the wider passage or else do so in too simplistic a manner.[46] But the point about cyclical-

46   Rudman's treatment of the verse (*Determinism*, 93–94) is one such example, offering little more than that "all is controlled by God."

ity is more central to Qoheleth's thought in 3:1–15 than is typically recognized. Any interpretation of the passage must reckon with its implications.

Moving to the latter part of the verse (3:15b), on an initial reading the final clause, וְהָאֱלֹהִים יְבַקֵּשׁ אֶת־נִרְדָּף, seems entirely out of place. Literal translations such as the RSV render the line, "God seeks what has been driven away," or the like, but that leaves ambiguous its meaning in context. Several ancient versions and older commentaries often find here a reference to God helping those who are on the societal periphery (taking נִרְדָּף as "persecuted"),[47] but as Plumptre reports, this "introduces an idea quite foreign to the train of thought."[48] This final line of the unit of 3:1–15 is, in fact, climactic. That is because it coalesces the two strands of cyclicality and determinism in a way that had previously been implied but not yet made explicit.[49] What has been "driven away"—or better, "pursued"—is none other than the events of the past. In saying that God "seeks" them, Qoheleth means that God seeks to bring them back around, to repeat them.[50] The verse is climactic in that even though the cyclical theme appears as early as 1:4–11, it is only here in 3:15 that Qoheleth explicitly identifies God as its catalyst and sustainer. The world's cyclical nature is not due merely to impersonal forces; it has been established by God, and he is the one who keeps the circle revolving. Again and again he pushes the "merry-go-round" of human existence around for yet another spin. It is in this way, by means of ordaining and propelling the cycles of time, rather than through the ad hoc control of minute events or human actions, that Qoheleth's deity exercises his sovereignty.[51] Yet in his role as the propagator of cycles, Qoheleth thinks of God as the great "underminer." Where humans believe themselves to be running along a marathon track headed toward a finish line, God has quietly placed a treadmill under their feet, so that they end up going nowhere, making no progress.

---

47   See LXX, Targum, Peshitta, Sir 5:3 (possible allusion), Hengstenberg, *Ecclesiastes*, 111–112.

48   Plumptre, *Ecclesiastes*, 134.

49   So Holmstedt et al., *Qoheleth*, 134.

50   So Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 90; Wright, *Koheleth*, 345; Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, 103; Tyler, *Ecclesiastes*, 90; McNeile, *Ecclesiastes*, 63; Gordis, *Koheleth*, 234; Blenkinsopp, "Ecclesiastes 3:1–15," 62–63; Pfeiffer, "Peculiar Skepticism," 107; Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 100. Cf. Vulgate, *et Deus instaurat quod abiit* ("and God restores what has passed").

51   Similarly Fox, *Contradictions*, 195: "The events God brings to pass steamroller over whatever man can do, so nothing new can interrupt the awesome cycles of events that God has ordained."

5   Ecclesiastes 3:2–8 as Gainless Activity

Returning to Eccl 3:2–8, I suggest that in the context of the book of Qoheleth the underlying claim of the "times" poem concerns neither an admonition to act at the proper time nor a pronouncement about God's determination of every human action. Rather, the poem primarily demonstrates humanity's inability to achieve יִתְרוֹן, a meaningful *telos*.[52] Human lives are filled with activity, running this way and that, seeking and losing, laughing and crying. Yet, much like the cyclical movements of nature described in 1:5–7, it is activity whose bipolar nature ultimately undermines itself and thus allows no forward progress. This assignment of gainless activity is, for Qoheleth, the "bad business" that God has given humans.

It is sometimes posited that one side of each of the poem's antithetical pairs [A] represents what is "good" or "desirable" and the opposite side [B] represents what is "bad" or "undesirable."[53] While in some cases the two sides of a given pair might intuitively divide into positive and negative values (e.g., "being born" vs. "dying", "mourning" vs. "dancing"), in many cases it is far from obvious which of the two actions would represent a more positive or negative value in relation to the other (e.g., "planting" vs. "uprooting," "throwing stones" vs. "gathering stones," "keeping silent" vs. "speaking"). Rather than assume that the division between positive and negative value runs through each pair, I propose that what Qoheleth finds problematic and what elicits the question "What gain?" in 3:9 is not the activity of one side or the other in itself, but simply the fact that the two activities bear opposite intentions or directions and therefore cancel one another out.[54]

In the parallel passage of 1:4–7, it is not that one side of the pole is undesirable in relation to the other—there is nothing troublesome, for instance, about the sun's rising or setting in itself, nor the wind's southward or northward blowing. What Qoheleth deems problematic about these circumstances is that the oscillatory movement incessantly undermines itself, thereby canceling out any יִתְרוֹן, any "profit" or "surplus," any achievement of something "new."[55] The

---

[52]   An understanding of יִתְרוֹן as the final goal toward which one's toil (עָמָל) is aimed emerges from the usage in 1:3; 2:11; 3:9; 5:15; cf. יוֹתֵר in 6:7–8a.

[53]   See Loader's complex chiastic structure in Loader, "Sonnet," followed by Wright, "For Everything"; Jarick, "Hebrew Book of Changes."

[54]   Horton, "Koheleth's Concept," 6, refers here to a "'principle of cancellation,' wherein two events take place, but the one cancels the other." Cf. Frydrych, *Under the Sun*, 43–46; Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 96.

[55]   Similarly Blenkinsopp, "Ecclesiastes 3:1–15," 61: "In a word, the basic issue for Qoheleth is whether these actions [in 3:2–8] can have some *surplus value* (*yitrôn*, profit) carrying

same applies to the pairs in 3:2–8. We need not assign each action as "desirable" or "undesirable" simpliciter. It is enough that as recurring alternates they can arrive nowhere other than where they started. This lack of positive gain itself is what Qoheleth deems undesirable.

6   Conclusion

Reality, Qoheleth believes, is regulated by its oscillatory nature; this mitigates deep loss, but also withholds "lasting gain" (יִתְרוֹן). Whether or not Qoheleth penned the poem in 3:2–8, his reading of it highlights the lack of gain for the human "worker" carrying out his assigned activities under the divine employer. The poem provides a panoply of the sorts of paired antithetical activities human beings inevitably and repeatedly carry out, in which every "doing" gets "undone." Thus, despite its common associations, Qoheleth's Catalogue of the Times is not primarily a poem about timing, about *when* things ought to or will happen. Rather, it is a poem about value, the value of the human task. Regardless of their timing, all of the activities which typify human lives are self-sabotaged by an equilibrating tendency which undermines any would-be gains, arriving only back at "zero."

Bibliography

Barbour, Jennifer. *The Story of Israel in the Book of Qohelet: Ecclesiastes as Cultural Memory*. OTM. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Barton, George A. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes*. ICC 17. New York: Scribner, 1908.

Blenkinsopp, Joseph. "Ecclesiastes 3:1–15: Another Interpretation." *JSOT* 20 (1995): 55–64.

Brown, William P. *Ecclesiastes*. IBC. Louisville: John Knox Press, 2000.

Bundvad, Mette. *Time in the Book of Ecclesiastes*. OTRM. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Carasik, Michael. "Qohelet's Twists and Turns." *JSOT* 28 (2003): 192–209.

---

beyond the mere doing of them"; Good, *Irony*, 185: "Time too cancels out profit [...]. Man's actions add up to nothing, each balanced by one from the other side. Hence, ironically, as man acts responsibly with the deed appropriate to every present moment, he ensures that he does not come out ahead."

Clines, David J.A. "Predestination in the Old Testament." Pages 524–541 in *On the Way to the Postmodern: Old Testament Essays, 1967–1998, vol. 2*. Sheffield: Sheffield University Press, 1998.

Crenshaw, James L. *Ecclesiastes: A Commentary*. OTL. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987.

Crenshaw, James L. "The Eternal Gospel (Ecclesiastes 3:11)." Pages 23–55 in *Essays in Old Testament Ethics: J. Philip Hyatt in Memoriam*. Edited by James L. Crenshaw and John T. Willis. New York: Ktav, 1974.

Dahood, Mitchell J. "Canaanite-Phoenician Influence in Qoheleth." *Bib* 33 (1952): 30–52, 191–221.

Delitzsch, Franz. *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*. Translated by Matthew G. Easton. CFTL 54. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1891.

Dell, Katharine J. "The Cycle of Life in Ecclesiastes." *VT* 59 (2009): 181–189.

Ellermeier, Friedrich. *Qohelet I/1. Untersuchungen zum Buche Qohelet*. Herzberg: Jungfer, 1967.

Enns, Peter. *Ecclesiastes*. THOTC. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011.

Fischer, Alexander A. *Skepsis oder Furcht Gottes? Studien zur Komposition und Theologie des Buches Kohelet*. BZAW 247. Berlin: de Gruyter, 1997.

Fox, Michael V. *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999.

Fox, Michael V. "Time in Qohelet's 'Catalogue of Times.'" *JNSL* 24.1 (1998): 25–39.

Fox, Michael V. *Qohelet and His Contradictions*. Sheffield: Almond, 1989.

Fox, Michael V. "Qohelet 1:4." *JSOT* 13 (1988): 109.

Frydrych, Tomáš. *Living Under the Sun: Examination of Proverbs & Qoheleth*. VTSup 90. Leiden: Brill, 2002.

Galling, Kurt. "Das Rätsel der Zeit im Urteil Kohelets (Koh 3, 1–15)." *ZTK* 58 (1961): 1–15.

Galling, Kurt. "Der Prediger." Pages 73–125 in *Die fünf Megilloth*. 2nd ed. Handbuch zum alten Testament 1. Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1969.

Gese, Hartmut. "The Crisis of Wisdom in Koheleth." Pages 141–153 in *Theodicy in the Old Testament*. Edited by James L. Crenshaw. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983.

Ginsburg, Christian D. *Coheleth, Commonly Called the Book of Ecclesiastes*. London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1861.

Good, Edwin M. *Irony in the Old Testament*. BLS 3. Sheffield: Almond, 1981.

Gordis, Robert. *Koheleth: The Man and His World*. 3rd ed. New York: Schocken, 1968.

Hankins, Davis. "The Internal Infinite: Deleuze, Subjectivity, and Moral Agency in Ecclesiastes." *JSOT* 40 (2015): 43–59.

Hengel, Martin. *Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in their Encounter in Palestine during the Early Hellenistic Period*. 2 vols. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981.

Holmstedt, Robert D., John A. Cook, and Phillip S. Marshall. *Qoheleth: A Handbook on the Hebrew Text*. BHHB. Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2017.

Holmstedt, Robert D., and Andrew R. Jones. "The Pronoun in Tripartite Verbless Clauses in Biblical Hebrew: Resumption for Left-Dislocation or Pronominal Copula?" *JSS* 59 (2014): 53–89.

Horton, Ernest. "Koheleth's Concept of Opposites: As Compared to Samples of Greek Philosophy and Near and Far Eastern Wisdom Classics." *Numen* 19 (1972): 1–21.

Isaksson, Bo. *Studies in the Language of Qoheleth: With Special Emphasis on the Verbal System*. AUUSSU 10. Uppsala: Uppsala University, 1987.

Japhet, Sara. "Goes to the South and Turns to the North (Ecclesiastes 1:6): The Sources and History of the Exegetical Traditions." *JSQ* 1 (1993): 289–322.

Jarick, John. "The Hebrew Book of Changes: Reflections on *hakkōl hebel* and *lakkōl zemān* in Ecclesiastes." *JSOT* 90 (2000): 79–99.

Jastrow, Morris. *A Gentle Cynic*. Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1919.

Kaiser, Otto. "Qoheleth." Pages 83–93 in *Wisdom in Ancient Israel: Essays in Honour of J. A. Emerton*. Edited by John Day, Robert P. Gordon, and Hugh G.M. Williamson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Kaiser, Otto. "Fate, Suffering, and God: The Crisis of the Belief in a Moral Order in the Book of Ecclesiastes." *OTE* 4 (1986): 1–13.

Kamano, Naoto. *Cosmology and Character: Qoheleth's Pedagogy from a Rhetorical-Critical Perspective*. BZAW 312. Berlin: de Gruyter, 2002.

Knopf, Carl S. "The Optimism of Koheleth." *JBL* 49 (1930): 195–199.

Köhlmoos, Melanie. *Kohelet: Der Prediger Salomo*. ATD 16.5. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015.

Krüger, Thomas. *Qoheleth: A Commentary*. Hermeneia 21. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004.

Kugel, James L. "Qohelet and Money." *CBQ* 51 (1989): 32–49.

Lauha, Aarre. *Kohelet*. BKAT 19. Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1978.

Loader, James A. *Polar Structures in the Book of Qohelet*. BZAW 152. New York: de Gruyter, 1979.

Loader, James A. "Qohelet 3:2–8: A Sonnet in the Old Testament." *ZAW* 81 (1969): 240–242.

Lohfink, Norbert. *Qoheleth: A Continental Commentary*. Translated by Sean E. McEvenue. CC. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003.

Longman III, Tremper. *The Book of Ecclesiastes*. NICOT. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997.

Loretz, Oswald. *Qohelet und der alte Orient: Untersuchungen zu Stil und theologischer Thematik des Buches Qohelet*. Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1964.

Machinist, Peter. "Fate, Miqreh, and Reason: Some Reflections on Qohelet and Biblical Thought." Pages 159–175 in *Solving Riddles and Untying Knots: Biblical, Epigraphic, and Semitic Studies in Honor of Jonas C. Greenfield*. Edited by Ziony Zevit, Seymour Gitin, and Michael Sokoloff. Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1995.

McNeile, Alan H. *An Introduction to Ecclesiastes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1904.

Merrill, Eugene H. *Qumran and Predestination: A Theological Study of the Thanksgiving Hymns*. STDJ 8. Leiden: Brill, 1975.

Michel, Diethelm. *Untersuchungen zur Eigenart des Buches Qohelet*. BZAW 183. Berlin: de Gruyter, 1989.

Murphy, Roland E. *Ecclesiastes*. WBC 23A. Dallas: Word, 1992.

Perdue, Leo G. *Wisdom & Creation: The Theology of Wisdom Literature*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1994.

Perry, T.A. *The Book of Ecclesiastes (*Qohelet*) and the Path to Joyous Living*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

Pfeiffer, Robert H. "The Peculiar Skepticism of Ecclesiastes." *JBL* 53 (1934): 100–109.

Plumptre, Edward H. *Ecclesiastes or the Preacher*. CBSC. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1881.

Popovic, Mladen. "Apocalyptic Determinism." Pages 255–270 in *The Oxford Handbook of Apocalyptic Literature*. Edited by John J. Collins. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

von Rad, Gerhard. *Wisdom in Israel*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1972.

Rudman, Dominic. "Determinism and Anti-Determinism in the Book of Koheleth." *JBQ* 30 (2002): 97–106.

Rudman, Dominic. *Determinism in the Book of Ecclesiastes*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2001.

Schellenberg, Annette. *Kohelet*. ZBK 17. Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2013.

Schoors, Antoon. *Ecclesiastes*. HCOT. Leuven: Peeters, 2013.

Schoors, Antoon. "The Verb hāyâ in Qoheleth." Pages 229–238 in *Shall Not the Judge of All the Earth Do What is Right? Studies on the Nature of God in Tribute to James L. Crenshaw*. Edited by David Penchansky and Paul L. Redditt. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2000.

Schultz, Richard L. "A Sense of Timing: A Neglected Aspect of Qoheleth's Wisdom." Pages 257–267 in *Seeking Out the Wisdom of the Ancients. Essays Offered to Honor Michael V. Fox on the Occasion of his Sixty-Fifth Birthday*. Edited by Ronald L. Troxel, Kelvin G. Friebel, and Dennis R. Magary. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2005.

Scott, Robert B.Y. *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes*. AB 18. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965.

Seow, Choon-Leong. *Ecclesiastes*. AB 18C. New York: Doubleday, 1997.

Stauber, Chad Martin. "Determinism in the Rule of the Community (1QS): A New Perspective." Pages 345–358 in *Celebrating the Dead Sea Scrolls: A Canadian Contribution*. Edited by Peter W. Flint, Jean Duhaime, and Kyung S. Baek. Atlanta: SBL, 2011.

Tyler, Thomas. *Ecclesiastes: A Contribution to Its Interpretation*. London: Williams and Norgate, 1874.

Weeks, Stuart. *Introduction and Commentary on Ecclesiastes 1.1–5.6*. Vol. 1 of *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Ecclesiastes*. ICC. London: T&T Clark, 2020.

Weeks, Stuart. *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism*. HBOTS 541. New York: T&T Clark International, 2012.

Whybray, R. Norman. *Ecclesiastes*. NCBC. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989.

Whybray, R. Norman. *Ecclesiastes*. OTG. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1989.

Whybray, R. Norman. "Ecclesiastes 1:5–7 and the Wonders of Nature." *JSOT* 13 (1988): 105–112.

Wildeboer, Gerrit. "Der Prediger." Pages 109–168 in *Die fünf Megillot* (*Das Hohelied, Das Buch Ruth, Die Klagelieder, Der Prediger, Das Buch Esther*). Edited by Karl Bude, Alfred Bertholet, and Gerrit Wildeboer. KHC 17. Freiburg im Breisgau: J.C.B. Mohr, 1898.

Wright, Addison G. "'For Everything There is a Season': The Structure and Meaning of the Fourteen Opposites (Ecclesiastes 3,2–8)." Pages 321–328 in *De la Tôrah au Messie: Études d'exégèse et d'herméneutique bibliques offertes à Henri Cazelles pour ses 25 années d'enseignement à l'Institut Catholique de Paris* (*Octobre 1979*). Edited by Maurice Carrez, Joseph Doré, and Pierre Grelot. Paris: Desclée, 1981.

Wright, Charles H.H. *The Book of Koheleth, Commonly Called Ecclesiastes*. The Donnellan Lectures. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1883.

Zimmerli, Walther. "Das Buch des Predigers Salomo." Pages 123–253 in *Sprüche, Prediger, Das Hohe Lied, Klagelieder, Das Buch Esther*. Translated and explained by Helmer Ringgren, Walther Zimmerli, and Otto Kaiser. ATD 16. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1967.

Zimmerli, Walther. "The Place and Limit of Wisdom in the Framework of the Old Testament Theology." *SJT* 17 (1964): 146–158.