QOHELET’S PHILOSOPHIES OF DEATH

This thesis is presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Murdoch University, 2009.
I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

.............................................

(Kathryn Imray)
ABSTRACT

This thesis arises at the meeting place of a philosophical and a thanatological treatment of the book of Qohelet. A philosophical treatment is defended on the grounds of previous studies of the type of thinking evidenced in the text, as well as a comparison with ancient notions of philosophy which suggest that philosophy concerns the type of questions asked, the method of answering the questions, the answers to the questions, and the purpose of the endeavour. A thanatological treatment is defended both on the grounds of previous studies of the text as well as on the grounds of clear evidence that the text is very concerned with the issue of death. From a philosophical perspective it is assumed the book says something about such themes as beauty, knowledge, states of being, ethics, and the benefits of a philosophical outlook. These philosophical categories are combined with the text’s thanatology. The thesis therefore presents: a death aesthetic, in which death can be beautiful; an epistemology of death, in which we are shown to possess certain knowledge of our own mortality in contrast to the lack of understanding we possess about the events of life; a phenomenology of death, or a study of the state of being dead, in which it is seen that death can only ever be the object of our gaze, and we can never experience our own death; an ethics of death, or more precisely an ethics of suicide, in which it is asked, if suicide is appropriate, under what conditions it is better to be dead than alive; and, finally, the death-based nature of the philosophy itself, in which it is seen that one cannot be wise without thinking on death, and that such thoughts confer a particular sort of life on the wise person.
# CONTENTS

Acknowledgments  iv  
Abbreviations  v  

## 1. Introduction  
### 1.1. Literature survey  
#### 1.1.1. Death in Qohelet commentaries  
#### 1.1.2. Death in Qohelet in broader Hebrew Bible studies  
#### 1.1.3. Studies on death in Qohelet  
#### 1.1.4. Summary of literature survey  
### 1.2. Qohelet as a philosophical text  
#### 1.2.1. Qohelet as a philosophy in response to Greek philosophy  
##### 1.2.1.1. Hellenistic period (Gordis)  
##### 1.2.1.2. Persian period (Seow)  
##### 1.2.1.3. Conclusions regarding dating  
#### 1.2.2. Qohelet as philosophy as a natural development within the Hebrew intellectual tradition  
##### 1.2.2.1. Scholarly debate on Qohelet’s status as philosophy  
##### 1.2.2.2. Conditions necessary for philosophy  
### 1.3. The thanatological method  
#### 1.3.1. Qohelet’s rhetoric of ambiguity and its impact on method  
##### 1.3.1.1. Structural ambiguity and contradictions  
##### 1.3.1.2. Grammatical and syntactical ambiguity  
#### 1.3.2. Conclusions regarding method  
#### 1.3.3. Textual considerations  
### 1.4. Summary of chapters  

## 2. Nature and the Death Aesthetic  
### 2.1. Types of death in the Catalogue of Times  
#### 2.1.1. Introduction to the Catalogue  
#### 2.1.2. References to death in the Catalogue  
##### 2.1.2.1. ‘Natural’ death, or any death at all (3:2)  
##### 2.1.2.2. Killing (3:3)  
##### 2.1.2.3. Death in war (3:8)  
##### 2.1.2.4. Destruction and mourning (3:4, 5, 6, 7)  
#### 2.1.3. Conclusions regarding types of death in the Catalogue  
### 2.2. Deaths as events in nature  
#### 2.2.1. Time in the Catalogue  
##### 2.2.1.1. הַיָּמִים (3:1)  
##### 2.2.1.2. הָיוֹת and הַיָּמִים in 3:1  
#### 2.2.2. Conclusions regarding הָיוֹת and הַיָּמִים in 3:1  
#### 2.2.3. Time and seasonality in 1:2-11  
#### 2.2.4. Conclusions regarding time and seasonality of death  
### 2.3. Time, death, and beauty  


2.3.1. Appropriateness and beauty
  2.3.1.1. Qoh 3:11
  2.3.1.2. יָדָא in 3:1
  2.3.1.2.1. Contested uses of יָדָא
  2.3.1.2.2. יָדָא in Qohelet
  2.3.1.2.3. The use of יָדָא in 3:1
  2.3.1.2.4. יָדָא in the Hebrew Bible
  2.3.1.2.5. יָדָא in Qohelet
  2.3.1.2.6. יָדָא in Qoh 8:17
  2.3.1.2.7. יָדָא in 3:1
  2.3.1.2.8. יָדָא in 3:1

2.3.2. Conclusions regarding time, death, and beauty

2.4. Conclusions regarding nature and the death aesthetic

3. The Knowledge of Limits and the Limits of Knowledge
  3.1. מַלְאָל in the Hebrew Bible
  3.1.1. מַלְאָל in Qohelet
  3.1.2. מַלְאָל in Qohelet
  3.1.3. Relation of מַלְאָל and מַלְאָל
  3.1.4. Conclusions regarding מַלְאָל

3.2. מִשְׁלָה in the Hebrew Bible
  3.2.1. מִשְׁלָה in Qohelet
  3.2.2. מִשְׁלָה in Qoh 8:17
  3.2.3. Summary of relationship between מִשְׁלָה and מִשְׁלָה
  3.2.4. A comparison of 3:11 and 8:17
  3.2.5. Conclusions regarding מִשְׁלָה

3.3. Conclusions regarding 3:11

4. What it is to be Dead
  4.1. The subjective experience of being dead
  4.1.1. The list of losses (9:5-6, 10)
    4.1.1.1. הָלָךְ
    4.1.1.2. יָדוּעַ
    4.1.1.3. מַלְאָל
    4.1.1.4. תַּעַבֵּר
    4.1.1.5. מַמְלַכָּה
    4.1.1.6. שֵׁבָר
    4.1.1.7. מָשָּׁא, שְׁפָתָה, אֶחָד
    4.1.1.8. אֹיְבָר
4.1.1.9. Conclusions regarding list of losses 197
4.1.2. Personal eschatology as cosmic eschatology 199
4.1.2.1. The poem on aging and death (11:9-12:7) 199
4.1.2.1.1. Debate regarding the relation of death and old age 200
4.1.2.1.2. Eschatological imagery in 12:2 203
4.1.2.2. Conclusions regarding Qohelet’s eschatology 211
4.2. Death from the subjective living 212
4.3. Conclusions regarding what it is to be dead 219

5. Why Not Suicide? 222
5.1. The Tôb-Spruch form 223
5.1.1. Theories regarding the Tôb-Spruch form 224
5.1.2. General Tôb-Sprüche in Qohelet 225
5.2. Qohelet’s death-positive Tôb-Sprüche 227
5.2.1. Death is better because life is a misery (7:1) 227
5.2.2. Death is better, non-birth is best; witnessing oppression (4:1-3) 231
5.2.3. Better non-existence than non-enjoyment or lack of burial (6:1-6) 238
5.2.4. Conclusions regarding death-positive Tôb-Sprüche 244
5.3. Comparison of the death-positive Tôb-Sprüche and Hebrew Bible suicide 245
5.3.1. Accounts of suicide in the Hebrew Bible 246
5.3.2. Conclusions regarding Tôb-Sprüche and suicide 256
5.4. A contradiction: better life at any cost 259
5.4.1. The death-negative Tôb-Spruch (9:4) 259
5.4.2. Affirmations of life in Qohelet 261
5.5. The relation between the death-positive and life-positive Tôb-Sprüche 263
5.5.1. Irony in the Tôb-Sprüche 265
5.5.2. The Tôb-Sprüche and complex irony 268
5.6. Conclusions regarding suicide in Qohelet 270

6. The Pulse of Death 273
6.1. Wisdom and death (7:2a-b, 4) 275
6.2. Wisdom, death, and life (7:2d) 278
6.3. Characteristics of the wise life 284
6.3.1. Pain (1:18) 285
6.3.2. Pleasure (7:3) 287
6.3.3. ל wang 295
6.3.3.1. Theories regarding the meaning of ל wang in Qohelet 297
6.3.3.2. Passages linking ל wang and death 300
6.3.3.3. Turning toward death and the rise of ל wang 307
6.3.3.4. Conclusions regarding the relation of death and ל wang 311
6.4. Conclusions regarding death, ל wang, and wisdom 312

7. Conclusions 314

References 324
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## ABBREVIATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AnBib</td>
<td>Analecta biblica</td>
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<tr>
<td>ABR</td>
<td><em>Australian Biblical Review</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>ANETS</td>
<td>Ancient Near Eastern Texts and Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BETL</td>
<td>Bibliotheca ephemeridum theologicarum lovaniesium</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bib</td>
<td><em>Biblica</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>BibInt</td>
<td><em>Biblical Interpretation</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BLS</td>
<td>Bible and Literature Series</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BN</td>
<td><em>Biblische Notizen</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BSS</td>
<td>Biblical Seminar Series</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BZAW</td>
<td>Beihilfe zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</td>
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<tr>
<td>HB</td>
<td>Hebrew Bible</td>
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<tr>
<td>HUCA</td>
<td><em>Hebrew Union College Annual</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>Int</td>
<td><em>Interpretation</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>ITC</td>
<td>International Theological Commentary</td>
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<tr>
<td>JANES</td>
<td><em>Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>JBL</td>
<td><em>Journal of Biblical Literature</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JNES</td>
<td><em>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>JPS</td>
<td>Jewish Publication Society</td>
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<tr>
<td>JQR</td>
<td><em>Jewish Quarterly Review</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>JSOT</td>
<td><em>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>JSOTSup</td>
<td><em>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, Supplement Series</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>KJV</td>
<td>King James Version</td>
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<tr>
<td>LXX</td>
<td>Septuagint</td>
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<tr>
<td>MBPS</td>
<td>Mellin Biblical Press Series</td>
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<tr>
<td>MT</td>
<td>Masoretic Text</td>
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<tr>
<td>NAB</td>
<td>New American Bible</td>
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<tr>
<td>NEB</td>
<td>New English Bible</td>
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<tr>
<td>NICOT</td>
<td>The New International Commentary on the Old Testament</td>
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<td>NIV</td>
<td>New International Version</td>
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<tr>
<td>NJB</td>
<td>New Jerusalem Bible</td>
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<tr>
<td>NJPS</td>
<td>New Jewish Publication Society Translation</td>
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<tr>
<td>NRSV</td>
<td>New Revised Standard Version</td>
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<tr>
<td>RB</td>
<td><em>Revue Biblique</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>REB</td>
<td>Revised English Bible</td>
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<tr>
<td>SBLDS</td>
<td>Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series</td>
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<tr>
<td>SBLMS</td>
<td>Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SJT</td>
<td><em>Scottish Journal of Theology</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>Abbreviation</td>
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<tr>
<td>SSU</td>
<td>Studia Semitica Upsalensia</td>
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<tr>
<td>UF</td>
<td><em>Ugarit Forschungen</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VT</td>
<td><em>Vetus Testamentum</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>ZAW</td>
<td><em>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</em></td>
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1. Introduction

It seems that any study of Qohelet must these days contain somewhere within it a tongue-in-cheek statement either that ‘increased knowledge is increased sorrow’ (Qoh 1:18) or that ‘of the making of many books there is no end’ (Qoh 12:13). While both statements may be considered generally true of biblical studies, the former might be true especially of knowledge drawn from the book of Qohelet. Indeed, one can guarantee sorrow if one knows where to look.

This thesis courts misery in focusing on Qohelet’s thoughts about death. It could legitimately be claimed however that Qohelet presents a *memento mori* and *carpe diem*\(^1\) approach to death and life. It is a given that Qohelet may be read to say: thoughts on death as one’s final end will whet one’s appetite for life. Any darkness incurred by the *memento mori* can therefore be countered by making claim to a *carpe diem*. Of the numerous books and articles on death in Qohelet, and commentaries, books, and articles which refer in passing to death in Qohelet, many note these two interrelated positions. But studies which discuss death in Qohelet also present views other than *carpe diem* and *memento mori*: that death ‘cancels everything,’ for instance, or that death is a part of the created order, or that knowledge of death is the only certain knowledge. There is, therefore, more to death in Qohelet than *memento mori* and *carpe diem*.

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\(^1\) That is, ‘remember that you must die’ and ‘seize the day.’
This thesis aims to explore the issue of death in Qohelet, to go beyond studies which have been made on this theme and to draw out the details and implications of Qohelet’s death concepts. Moreover, this will be done with the understanding that the book of Qohelet is arguably a philosophical text. This thesis therefore asks, what philosophies of death are present in Qohelet? While this does not mean that Qohelet presents a systematic concept of death, it does mean that his thoughts about death often can be found to feed into a particular philosophical concern. Both previous studies of Qohelet’s thanatology and previous studies of Qohelet’s philosophy will be addressed below.

1.1. Literature survey

1.1.1. Death in Qohelet commentaries

Every commentary on Qohelet contains some information on the theme of death in that book. It is not possible to list all mention of this topic in the commentaries, and what follows is a brief survey of the portrayal of death in several of the more popular, as well as some of the more recent, commentaries written on Qohelet.²

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Robert Gordis’ commentary has been an important source for Qohelet scholars since it was published in 1951, but does not have a lot to say about death. Gordis states that happiness (יהי) is Qohelet’s goal, but the “counterpoint of melancholy is never absent.” Qohelet knows that life is transitory, and so calls for “the vigorous and full-blooded enjoyment of all it affords”. Gordis accepts that Chapters 12’s “Allegory of Old Age” presents in part the “decay of the bodily organs” as well as symbolising the approach of death. “Before the mystery of death,” writes Gordis about 12:7, “only the language of religion proves adequate.” Gordis therefore presents the common view of *memento mori* and *carpe diem*, but he also puts forth a pious reading wherein Qohelet, while sometimes questioning the claims of ‘conventional’ religion, is said to think of religion as the natural response to death.

James L. Crenshaw’s 1987 commentary is somewhat more death-laden. Crenshaw has famously written that “death cancels everything,” and death is central to Crenshaw’s reading of the book. Crenshaw proposes that Qohelet “equates divine judgment with death.” Death is arbitrary, and this is Qohelet’s main concern.

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4 Gordis, *Koheleth*, 123.  
7 Gordis, *Koheleth*, 339.  
8 Gordis, *Koheleth*, 349.  
The time of death is unknowable, just as is the knowledge of who will die,¹³ beyond, that is, the knowledge that everyone must die. Crenshaw also breaches the issue of death within life, claiming that Qohelet “realizes that death grips some people long before they actually die.”¹⁴ These already-dead individuals are those who cannot enjoy their possessions. Further, the knowledge of our mortality causes grief and suffering.¹⁵ Qohelet, he says, claims ignorance about what occurs after death.¹⁶ Even so, death, namely “the permanent sealing of injustice at death,” causes Qohelet to scorn life.¹⁷ But despite his scorn Qohelet is so attached to his identity that he refuses to suicide, and instead he “opts for life.”¹⁸ Qohelet advises that if one is able one should take pleasure in various aspects of life, but this is always tempered with his understanding that we will die.¹⁹ “Since death cancels every imagined gain, rendering life under the sun absurd, one should enjoy a woman, wine, and food before old age and death end even these fleeting pleasures.”²⁰ Thus Crenshaw presents a memento mori and carpe diem reading, but in his carpe diem we might easily see the remnants of death, and it is a carpe diem which collapses under the knowledge of mortality. Further, Crenshaw describes life under the sun as ‘absurd’ (בַּלַּי), and importantly causally links בַּלַּי with death.²¹

Michael V. Fox’s 1989 commentary speaks of death in passing. While the act of
death, dying, is absurd (לֹא), Fox notes that Qohelet does not use that word of the
time spent in death. One cannot know the time of one’s death, nor what happens
after death, even though one knows that one must die. Death levels the distinction
between humans and animals, just as the wise person and the fool are equal in
death. Death prevents adequate “recompense” for the injustices of life, and death
is meaningless as a punishment for death is universal, not just for the wicked.
Sometimes wickedness causes a person to die before their time, sometimes it does
not. Though both wicked and righteous dead are forgotten, it is only the bodies of
the righteous which the living forget while they honour the wicked. While death
frees a person from the tyranny of life, it is also the “ultimate existential anguish
and overwhelmingly powerful.” Observing death leads to “inane, irrational
behaviour,” but thinking on death leads to meditations on the benefits of life (9:4),
and the conclusion that any life is better than death. Thus, Fox writes that “we

22 Michael V. Fox, Qohelet and His Contradictions (JSOTSup 71; BLS 18; Sheffield: Almond,
1989).
23 Fox, Qohelet and His Contradictions, 43. Fox has published a more recent commentary, A Time to
Tear Down and A Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes (Grand Rapids, Michigan:
Eerdmans, 1999), but this commentary does not add anything of significance to the discussion about
death in Qohelet over and above his previous commentary.
24 Fox, Qohelet and His Contradictions, 102-103.
25 Fox, Qohelet and His Contradictions, 73.
26 Fox, Qohelet and His Contradictions, 184.
27 Fox, Qohelet and His Contradictions, 196-197.
28 Fox, Qohelet and His Contradictions, 131.
29 Fox, Qohelet and His Contradictions, 250-251.
30 Fox, Qohelet and His Contradictions, 248.
31 Fox, Qohelet and His Contradictions, 43.
32 Fox, Qohelet and His Contradictions, 258.
33 Fox, Qohelet and His Contradictions, 258.
should enjoy ourselves now, Qohelet emphasizes, because we can expect nothing better after death.”

C.L. Seow suggests that Qohelet presents death as a personal battle, drawing from imagery found in Canaanite mythology, specifically in the battle between Mot, the god of death, and Baal. Through this battle imagery (found in 8:8), Qohelet holds forth the view that all must battle with death, and that none may take an individual’s place in this battle. No one knows when death will come, nor can anyone stop it. Death comes to both righteous and wicked, and so is a ‘leveller’ of such distinctions. Seow notes the importance of a proper burial for Qohelet, and Qohelet’s unhappiness that the wicked receive such a burial while the bodies of the righteous “are abandoned in the city.” A wise person “faces the reality of death,” though one might still have more fun at a wake than at a wedding. As death entails the loss of all hope, possibilities, and action, Qohelet advises the reader to do whatever they can, including seeking enjoyment.

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34 Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions*, 43.
41 Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 245.
Tremper Longman notes that death is Qohelet’s main concern.\(^43\) It is the inescapability of death which for Qohelet renders wisdom “meaningless.”\(^44\) In fact, death renders “every status and achievement of this present life ‘meaningless.’”\(^45\) There is no difference between the fate of humans and of animals,\(^46\) or between that of the wise person or the fool.\(^47\) Death itself is a nothingness, with Qohelet possessing no afterlife concept,\(^48\) or at the least doubting that there is such a thing as life after death.\(^49\) Longman notes that for Qohelet both pleasure and death can be “anesthesia against the hard realities of life,”\(^50\) and while Qohelet “never goes so far as to advocate suicide,”\(^51\) he does write that in the case of oppression death is better than life.\(^52\) Finally, Longman also links death with Qohelet’s *carpe diem* message,\(^53\) but notes that “Qohelet’s enthusiasm” is “tempered by his awareness of death.”\(^54\)

1.1.2. Death in Qohelet in broader Hebrew Bible studies

The subject of death in Qohelet is sometimes mentioned in broader studies on various subjects within the Hebrew Bible.

\(^{45}\) Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 34.
\(^{46}\) Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 34. Though elsewhere Longman writes that “at best there is only a glimmer of hope, according to Qohelet, that our fate is any different than an animals” (Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 125).
\(^{47}\) Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 98.
\(^{50}\) Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 134.
\(^{52}\) Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 134.
\(^{54}\) Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 259.
In Martin-Achard’s 1956 study of the development of afterlife resurrection it is noted that Qohelet often differs from the broader Hebrew Bible conception of death.\(^5^5\) In making such “bitter and disillusioned assertions” as ‘the day of death is better than the day of birth’ (7:1), for example, Qohelet is at odds with the “true tradition of Israel” regarding death.\(^5^6\) However, Qohelet’s assertion that the ‘spirit’ (יָדָע) returns to God at death (12:7) conforms to the Yahwistic notion of mortality.

Martin-Achard cites R. Mehl: “At a funeral service this text is freely made use of as a means of consolation: it is nothing of the sort. On the contrary, it emphasises the reality of death, the nothingness that death connotes. . . . It is not only our physical frame that perished, but our whole life.”\(^5^7\) Also, Qohelet expresses a view of death which is more pessimistic than the older concept of death, in that in Qohelet’s ideas about death one does not live on in memory.\(^5^8\)

Peter Machinist argues that הָרְקָמ, fate, actually refers exclusively to death.\(^5^9\)

Machinist is able to conclude that Qohelet draws from a semantic tradition in which הָרְקָמ is “a type of occurrence befalling humans that is beyond their control and

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\(^{5^6}\) Martin-Achard, *From Death to Life*, 7. Rudolf Bultmann is of the same opinion, claiming, “Only at the very extremity of despair can the Israelite go to the length of extolling death, for even a living dog is better than a dead lion. (Eccles. ix.4)” (Rudolf Bultmann, *Life and Death* [Bible Key Words; London: Adam & Charles Black, 1965], 2).

\(^{5^7}\) R. Mehl cited in Martin-Achard, *From Death to Life*, 31.

\(^{5^8}\) Martin-Achard, *From Death to Life*, 41.

This fate/death is the final point in a pattern of activity, under the control of God, planned for every human and animal. Humans cannot ‘grasp’ their patterns, nor can we affect them. The only point in the pattern humans are able to know is the final point, death. Beyond this, people “are unable to figure it all out,” including what is to happen after death, “either physically or in terms of memory and influence: humans cannot know whether there is such survival or if there is, of what it consists, and so cannot rely on it.” All that is left for people, then, is to enjoy their portion. Machinist emphasises that Qohelet’s observations about fate/death are not organised systematically, “but when we consider them together, it is plain that they are a product of systematic, conscious, abstract reasoning on this issue. Qohelet starts with the one clear, final point in the pattern, death, and works backward as far as he can to its beginning, in life.” Death therefore becomes “the predetermined defining point of an abstract notion: miqreḥ as the pattern of time that each individual lives out . . . [T]he larger system of time in which miqreḥ is embedded [is] now brought forward as the direct object of reflection.”

Tellingly, R.N. Whybray is able to discuss Qohelet’s concepts of death in his book about the good life in the Hebrew Bible. Whybray writes that, while Qohelet admits there are people “for whom life appeared to have no positive value” – those who are desperately unhappy or whose life is a burden, who are “victims of

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60 Machinist, “Fate, miqreḥ, and Reason,” 170.
61 Machinist, “Fate, miqreḥ, and Reason,” 166.
63 Machinist, “Fate, miqreḥ, and Reason,” 167.
64 Machinist, “Fate, miqreḥ, and Reason,” 170.
constant brutal oppression,” or “temperamentally incapable of enjoying life” – they are “exceptional cases” wherein death or non-existence is preferable.66 Apart from these exceptional cases “life could and should be enjoyed” “even though or because the time would come when they would no longer be capable of doing so.”67

Whybray believes Qohelet is an afterlife agnostic, though in places, Whybray admits, Qohelet is clearly disbelieving of an afterlife.68 Human life is “little more than a moment in the perspective of God’s eternity,”69 and passes quickly.70 While certain actions can hasten death by bringing about God’s judgment,71 God has absolute control over the duration of human lives, has ordained a time for everything, including death.72 We cannot know73 or predict74 this time. Qohelet tells his readers to be always aware of their mortality, but these thoughts, says Whybray, shouldn’t prevent our enjoying our lives.75 For instance, the poem on aging and death in 12:1-7 is not a morbid dwelling on death but serves to encourage his young readers (11:9) to make the most of their youth and to enjoy life to the full by depicting the ‘time of trouble’ which will inevitably be their lot when they gradually lose their faculties and sink into decrepitude which will immediately precede the ‘days of darkness’ which will be many – that is, death.76

68 Whybray, The Good Life, 196.
69 Whybray, The Good Life, 194
70 Whybray, The Good Life, 195.
72 Whybray, The Good Life, 195.
73 Whybray, The Good Life, 195.
74 Whybray, The Good Life, 194.
75 Whybray, The Good Life, 195.
Qohelet uses the idea of a negation of everything worthwhile in Sheol “to give a particularly emphatic piece of advice to enjoy this life as much as possible.”77 This, indeed, is the ‘portion’ given one by God.78

Otto Kaiser addresses the themes of carpe diem and memento mori in Qohelet.79 In his paper on “Carpe diem und Memento mori in Dichtung und Denken der Alten, bei Kohelet und Ben Sira,” Qohelet, Kaiser writes, wanted to lead his students to a happy life.80 Qohelet asked himself what the profit of life is, and concluded that it is not possible for humans to achieve profit, for everything is transient (vergänglich; לְדוּת). In the face of this unpredictability and inability to achieve lasting profit, the only thing left for people is to take joy in their possessions – a gift from God – and to fear God.81 From 9:4-10 Kaiser concludes that, in the face of death, carpe diem is the “praktische Maxime.”82

Jack T. Sanders proposes that Qohelet is a response to a crisis of wisdom in the form of a crisis in theodicy.83 In response to this crisis the issue of immortality is raised.84 Sanders asks why death has become for Qohelet a tragedy, when for all

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77 Whybray, The Good Life, 196.
78 Whybray, The Good Life, 197.
previous Israelite tradition death was simply accepted as inevitable. Sanders suggests this could be because the concept of the immortality of the soul had arisen within ancient Israel, but that Qohelet did not feel able to accept the notion.

1.1.3. Studies on death in Qohelet

There are several articles and books written specifically on death in Qohelet. The following will address these writings, which describe death in the book overall, as well as in particular passages within the book (especially in, but not limited to, Qohelet 12).

James L. Crenshaw presents an analysis of death in Qohelet which stresses the text’s ambiguity toward life and death. Qohelet can speak of death with both with neutrality and with bitterness, but for the most part “death possesses a full measure of existential Angst.” Crenshaw states that Qohelet’s reflections on death cause him to deny the goodness of life. Crenshaw also writes that Qohelet’s “flirtation with death” arises from the injustice he sees in life, and death can be an escape from oppression. Therefore death in parts of the book is sanctioned under certain

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circumstances, such as oppression, but in other parts is not wholly welcomed.\textsuperscript{91}

However, the claim that the living have the advantage over the dead due to knowledge of their mortality (9:4) is, Crenshaw claims, made \textquoteleft\textquoteleft‘tongue-in-cheek,’\textquoteright\ and thus demands that one bestow upon it a certain ironical twist if (s)he wishes to recover Qohelet’s true intention.\textsuperscript{92}

Like Machinist above, Antoon Schoors accepts that in Qohelet the word \textit{hrqm}, fate, refers to death.\textsuperscript{93} Both the wise person and the fool suffer this fate, but their shared fate/death, Schoors argues, is \textquoteleft\textquoteleft‘a form of afterlife which was known by the ancient Israelites, viz. remembrance.’\textquoteright\textsuperscript{94} Schoors states that the dead person is \textquoteleft\textquoteleftonly a shadow, which leads a completely inactive existence in Sheol.\textquoteright\textsuperscript{95} That the same death comes for all people is \textquoteleft\textquoteleftone of the facts that bring Koheleth to his radical aporia’ of hating life.\textsuperscript{96} Humans and animals also are equal in death, as both the \textit{xwr} of humans and the \textit{xwr} of animals return to God, while their codes return to the ground,\textsuperscript{97} and in raising this issue the book presents a more negative picture of death than previously in Hebrew tradition.\textsuperscript{98} \textquoteleft\textquoteleftIn sum,’ Schoors writes, \textquoteleft\textquoteleftin Koheleth’s view, death renders the aporia of human life complete.’\textquoteright\textsuperscript{99}

\textsuperscript{91} Crenshaw, \textquoteleft\textquoteleft“The Shadow of Death in Qoheleth,”\textquoteright\ 578-579.
\textsuperscript{92} Crenshaw, \textquoteleft\textquoteleft“The Shadow of Death in Qoheleth,”\textquoteright\ 581.
\textsuperscript{94} Schoors, \textquoteleft\textquoteleft“Koheleth,”\textquoteright\ 295.
\textsuperscript{95} Schoors, \textquoteleft\textquoteleft“Koheleth,”\textquoteright\ 302-303.
\textsuperscript{96} Schoors, \textquoteleft\textquoteleft“Koheleth,”\textquoteright\ 298.
\textsuperscript{97} Schoors, \textquoteleft\textquoteleft“Koheleth,”\textquoteright\ 302.
\textsuperscript{98} Schoors, \textquoteleft\textquoteleft“Koheleth,”\textquoteright\ 303.
\textsuperscript{99} Schoors, \textquoteleft\textquoteleft“Koheleth,”\textquoteright\ 303.
Fox considers 12:1-8 a *memento mori*, the climax of the book, and the summary of the book’s theme, and the follow up to the *carpe diem* in 11:7-10. Fox suggests that Qohelet exhibits “an obsession with death.” The poem’s purpose is not to convey information but to create an attitude toward aging and, more importantly, death. Fox writes that the scene is one of communal mourning, and that the larger framework of 11:7-12:7 conveys the “finality, bitterness, and absurdity of mortality.” Further, he says,

> The imagery of the poem, whatever its symbolic or figurative meaning, creates an atmosphere of pain, contortion, and constriction. It draws us into a world of decay, abandonment, dreary silence, and speechless grief, and makes us associate this atmosphere with aging and death – whose pain is heightened by contrast with the rejuvenation of nature.

He notes that the 12:1-8 “does not represent the experience of dying and death but rather other people’s *response* to a death.” Fox importantly asks: who are they all mourning? The person whose death is being described in 12:1-8 is the ‘you’ to whom the book is directed. “The poem makes the reader see his death from another perspective, that of an outside observer,” and Qohelet uses such eschatological imagery because “every individual is a microcosm and every death is a catastrophe; it is, in fact, the end of the world . . . In one sense this is the extinction of an individual life; in another, the extinction of a universe.”

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101 Fox, “Aging and Death in Qoheleth 12,” 61.
102 Fox, “Aging and Death in Qoheleth 12,” 62.
104 Fox, “Aging and Death in Qoheleth 12,” 59.
105 Fox, “Aging and Death in Qoheleth 12,” 63.
106 Fox, “Aging and Death in Qoheleth 12,” 64.
107 Fox, “Aging and Death in Qoheleth 12,” 66.
Barry C. Davis presents six principles of life and death in Qohelet. In the first, all things must die, and death is the only certainty in life. In the second, death has an advantage over life in that it can offer an escape from the oppressions of life. Preferable even to death, however, is non-existence. Because of this, “the quest to find meaning in life by investigating life itself . . . becomes a hopeless and vain effort.” In the third, while death can’t be avoided, it is best not rushed into it by acting foolishly. In the fourth, studying death can instruct one on how to live well. “By advocating the study of death, Qohelet challenged his readers to face life in light of their mortality.” In the fifth, contra the second, life has the advantage over death in that, once dead, one can no longer obtain any reward. Finally, in the sixth principle, living only for what one may achieve or obtain within life (such as wealth or offspring) is “meaningless,” for all aspects of wealth are lost in death, and children might be so uncaring of their parents that the parent will not even receive a proper burial.

David L. Smith argues that both Qohelet and Job depart from the traditional view of death in that death is the same for the wise person and the fool, and that death might be “the preferred mode for all humankind.” Death for Qohelet is worthwhile.

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“because it brings rest.” However, given that death is nothingness, Qohelet begins to pursue life.” To Qohelet, death was “fascinating” as he could see no point in his life, and for the oppressed death could be an escape or a rest from their problems. Smith concludes though that the contemporaneous Hebrew preference of life over death influences Qohelet to the point that we must question whether in fact he actually does mean that death is to be preferred to life. To this end, Qohelet writes that life is preferable due to the presence of hope, as well as the knowledge of the living that they will die. Smith considers and abandons the idea the Qohelet held a belief in resurrection after death.

Archie C.C. Lee approaches Qohelet through the third century B.C.E. sage Zhuang Zi. Life for Qohelet is the only thing worth striving for, but life is shortened by the “repellent fact” of death. Neither immortality nor suicide is an option, and death is an equaliser. Aging and death are a “common fate and the destiny of life.” Qohelet does not consider that one can “overcome death by embracing it.” For Qohelet (contra Zhuang Zi), death is life’s opposite, “completely void of value and meaning.” “In this way,” Lee writes, “life remains transient and absurd with undesirable limitations and the enjoyment of life is cut short by a terrible death

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that constantly haunts humanity.”

In fact, despite the enjoyment one may experience in life, life is still only “barely endurable.”

Franz Kutschera writes that for Qohelet death is the definitive border of personal existence. Like Job, central to the book of Qohelet is the problem of theodicy, exemplified in 9:2-4, where Qohelet writes that all people must die just the same. Further, where Qohelet emphasises death (or Nichtigkeit, also), joy fades, but existence for Qohelet lies between an intense death-consciousness (Todesbewußtseins) and a zest for life (Lebensfreude). The consequence of death is carpe diem, and this idea that in the face of death we are called to find pleasure in life is new in the HB. Kutschera is able to conclude that “Das Buch verbreitet keinen Pessimismus oder düsteren Fatalismus, sondern endet mit einer Aufforderung zu tatkräftigem Handeln und zum Lebensgenüß (11,4ff).”

Seow also addresses the death imagery in Qohelet 12. Seow writes that scholars generally agree on its purpose as “an exhortation to enjoy life while there is still time.” Seow holds that vv. 2-7 “portrays the demise of human life in entirely
eschatological terms,” with all the images depicting the end of life.\textsuperscript{136} The poem therefore becomes a vision of death.\textsuperscript{137} Qohelet “has superimposed on the metaphors of old age another level of signification, drawing upon the imageries of cosmic doom to depict the end of human existence.”\textsuperscript{138} Qohelet draws the reader toward the knowledge of the inevitable death.\textsuperscript{139} Due to the coming time in which there will be no possibility of enjoyment, enjoyment becomes “both a gift of God and an imperative for here and now.”\textsuperscript{140}

Shannon Burkes has written the most comprehensive study of death in Qohelet so far.\textsuperscript{141} Burkes calls the inevitability of death “the lynch-pin in [Qohelet’s] despair.”\textsuperscript{142} Qohelet keeps coming back to death, and the whole book is framed by references to it – the “death in chapter twelve is the full expression of the \textit{hebel} that begins chapter one.”\textsuperscript{143} Burkes considers $\text{תנ}^2$ to be linked with the “overriding theme” of death,\textsuperscript{144} and the death theme in Qohelet is different to death elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, in that Qohelet denies the traditional notion of immortality through memory.\textsuperscript{145} Death is “the event that neutralizes memory, offspring, and choice” and “a frontier situation, a boundary area which becomes a place for

\textsuperscript{136} Seow, “Qoheleth’s Eschatological Poem,” 211
\textsuperscript{137} Seow, “Qoheleth’s Eschatological Poem,” 221.
\textsuperscript{138} Seow, “Qoheleth’s Eschatological Poem,” 223.
\textsuperscript{139} Seow, “Qoheleth’s Eschatological Poem,” 223.
\textsuperscript{140} Seow, “Qoheleth’s Eschatological Poem,” 234.
\textsuperscript{141} Shannon Burkes, \textit{Death in Qoheleth and the Egyptian Biographies of the Late Period} (SBLDS 170; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1999).
\textsuperscript{142} Burkes, \textit{Death in Qoheleth}, 35.
\textsuperscript{143} Burkes, \textit{Death in Qoheleth}, 59.
\textsuperscript{144} Burkes, \textit{Death in Qoheleth}, 45-48.
\textsuperscript{145} Burkes, \textit{Death in Qoheleth}, 74-75.
Qohelet “consistently expresses his dissatisfaction with the world and human existence within that world through the idea, imagery, and fact of death.” Despite his dissatisfaction, Qohelet does not advocate suicide, and the living are better off than the dead, even if their life is like a dog’s.

Death is a means of God’s judgment. Human efforts do not endure, the only eternal things being the earth (1:4) and death (12:5), and all of human life travels continually toward death. There is a time to die but humans do not understand it. It is better to know about one’s own mortality than to be ignorant of it and, Burkes writes, “perhaps he [the wise person] mourns his own upcoming death.”

Like other exegetes, Burkes maintains that Qohelet raises death to a cosmic level in 12:1-8. “By the end of the book,” Burkes writes,

the reader has been given a full account of what death is and what it means for life. It eradicates all distinctions of good and evil, wise and foolish, rich and poor, young and old, human and animal, and all others that can be imagined. The inequities of life are many, and they find their consummation in the final inequity of death. Death along with all other events has a ‘time,’ but whatever the nature and schedule of these times may be are known only to God. Humans are by nature incapable of ever understanding them. Death is the complete absence of all those things which characterize human existence, thought, knowledge, work, wisdom, and emotion. Even meager life is better than the void, which is why Qoheleth can say that someone who has never tasted existence is better off than those who have only to know that they will lose it again, but also never suggests suicide. The process of death on a personal level is one of dissolution. From the point of view of the one who is dying, it is the end of the world. Death is, in sum, ultimately

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146 Burkes, Death in Qoheleth, 76.
147 Burkes, Death in Qoheleth, 35.
148 Burkes, Death in Qoheleth, 70.
149 Burkes, Death in Qoheleth, 67-68
150 Burkes, Death in Qoheleth, 49.
151 Burkes, Death in Qoheleth, 50.
152 Burkes, Death in Qoheleth, 57.
153 Burkes, Death in Qoheleth, 63.
154 Burkes, Death in Qoheleth, 67.
155 Burkes, Death in Qoheleth, 58.
dehumanizing in every sense of the word: literally, because it undoes the components of existence, and metaphorically, because it makes humans no different from any other form of life.  

Mark K. George argues for death’s framing and founding reality in Qohelet.  

Death frames the book (1:4 and 12:7). George supposes that for Qohelet, all one can discern from the created order is that one will die. Death is therefore the foundation of Qohelet’s epistemology and ontology. Death is the primary reason why Qohelet calls wisdom. Not only do the wise person and the fool die the same death, so too do the human and animal. Again, death is the “great leveller.” Despite noting Qohelet’s description of the stillborn and the unborn as better off than the living, due to the fact that they do not have to witness the suffering which occurs in the world, George concludes that Qohelet’s “awareness and acceptance of the reality of death does not drive him to despair nor to consider life as not worth living.” One’s ‘portion’ is for George the life one is free to live once death is accepted. From this beginning, the acceptance of death, Qohelet advises one to seek enjoyment. 

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156 Burkes, Death in Qohelet, 71.  
158 George, “Death as the beginning of life,” 287.  
159 George, “Death as the beginning of life,” 281.  
160 George, “Death as the beginning of life,” 288.  
161 George, “Death as the beginning of life,” 287.  
163 George, “Death as the beginning of life,” 287.  
164 George, “Death as the beginning of life,” 288.  
165 George, “Death as the beginning of life,” 289.  
166 George, “Death as the beginning of life,” 290
enjoyment and to be responsible for his own portion (here, his life). Thus, once death is accepted “one can begin to live genuinely.”

Michael Carasik reads death in Qohelet through Nabokovian eyes. Carasik regards death as the central theme of both Qohelet and Nabokov. In Qohelet, death in unavoidable, and it is because of death that everything is lbh. With regard to Qohelet 12, Carasik argues that both Qohelet and Nabokov image the disintegration of the world at death. Noting that Qohelet’s voice fades soon after he writes in 12:7 that the dust returns to the ground and the breath returns to God who gave it, Carasik wonders if the death in the poem in Qohelet 12 is not Qohelet’s own death. “If, indeed, the epilogist was the author of all of Ecclesiastes, the Qohelet ‘continued to instruct the people’ by recounting his own death and transcending it in order to speak from a reality beyond the world about which he was so pessimistic.”

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167 George, “Death as the beginning of life,” 292.
168 George, “Death as the beginning of life,” 288. One may see here the language of existentialism. Qohelet has been compared with certain existential philosophies. One such article is Eric S. Christianson’s “Qoheleth and the Existential Legacy of the Holocaust,” Heythrop Journal 38/1 (1997): 35-50. Fox has also made comparison between Qohelet and Camus (though, granted, Camus never thought of himself as an existentialist), both in Qohelet and His Contradictions, 31-32, and A Time to Tear Down, 30-33. A comparison of Camus and Qohelet is also the subject of C.B. Peter, “In Defence of Existence: A Comparison between Ecclesiastes and Albert Camus,” Bangalore Theological Forum 12/1 (1980): 26-43. Peter writes that “Both have considered the question of suicide as a remedy to nihilism and have not found the prospect too attractive” (Peter, “In Defence of Existence,” 41). Gordis (Koheleth, 112-121) also addresses existentialism and Qohelet, as does Kenneth W. James, “Ecclesiastes: Precursor of Existentialists,” The Bible Today 22 (1984): 85-90.
169 Michael Carasik, “Transcending the Boundary of Death: Ecclesiastes Through a Nabokovian Lens,” BJ 14/5 (2006): 425-443. While Carasik’s reading of Qohelet pertains both to the book ‘proper’ (1:2-12:8) and to the epilogue (12:9-14), this thesis will not address the epilogue. See § 1.3.3. below.
170 Carasik, “Transcending the Boundary of Death,” 426.
171 Carasik, “Transcending the Boundary of Death,” 429.
172 Carasik, “Transcending the Boundary of Death,” 437.
“found death an existential absurdity,” and to avoid this conclusion “reached an understanding of our world . . . as the imaginative creation of a being from a higher-order reality.” This idea is expressed artistically “by allowing a higher-order reality to appear in their own works as the result of an apparent death in the lower-order reality of the world they had created with words.”

1.1.4. Summary of literature survey

In summary, we can see that while there are other statements about death in the book, the death reading most prevalent among death scholars and Qohelet scholars is *carpe diem* and *memento mori*, that is, Qohelet’s statements about the brevity of life and the (lack of) quality of death, are either designed to, or have the natural affect of, setting up life, especially an enjoyable life, as the ultimate good.

Many of the above note the importance of death in the book, its position both framing the book (1:2 and 12:7) as well as its almost pervasive presence in what lies between. Qohelet, it has been noted, is obsessed with death. Among the conclusions made by exegetes about death in his book are: death is ‘the great leveller’; it renders wisdom futile; the only certain knowledge is that one will die, a death which cannot be avoided or postponed; human life is temporary, while the earth and death are eternal; and that Qohelet describes death from various angles, from the angle of the

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175 Carasik, “Transcending the Boundary of Death,” 440.
‘outside observer’ (of our death and others’) as well as from that of a dead individual.

What more could there be to say about death in Qohelet?

1.2. Qohelet as a philosophical text

This dissertation addresses Qohelet’s thoughts on death as if they constitute a philosophy or a series of philosophies. But in what sense may we speak of the text as a philosophy?

It is often thought that philosophy began with the Greeks. While Qohelet is not a Greek text, it could be that the author was aware of Greek philosophical texts. If Qohelet was knowledgeable of Greek philosophy, could he have written the book as a Hebrew version of Greek philosophy? For this to be possible, the book must be


177 A date sometimes given for the ‘beginning of philosophy’ is May 25, 585 B.C.E., when Thales of Miletus predicted a solar eclipse, and thus ending a war, by way of mathematics and astronomy (Louis P. Pojman, Philosophy: The Pursuit of Wisdom [Belmont, California: Thomson Wadsworth, 2006], 29).
dated to the Hellenistic period, which would allow for Greek influence on the Israelite culture.

But there is another way that Qohelet could be a work of philosophy. It is possible that the Hebrew intellectual tradition grew its own version of philosophy, independent of Greek influence. In order to explore whether Qohelet is a text of philosophy organic to the Hebrew intellectual tradition it is necessary to explore concepts of philosophy. That is, we must ask what are the necessary conditions of philosophy, and are these present in the book of Qohelet?

This section will assess both of these ways of allowing Qohelet to be a philosophy or to constitute a series of philosophies. First I will address the possibility that Qohelet is a response to Greek philosophy. In order to do this I will assess two competing dates for the text – the Persian and the Hellenistic datings – and also assess the critical scholarly works which have been written comparing Qohelet with certain Greek philosophies. Secondly, I will address the possibility that Qohelet is a philosophy which developed within the Hebrew intellectual tradition. Here I will seek to develop a series of conditions necessary for philosophy, and to compare these conditions with the book of Qohelet. We will see that while neither of these possibilities is wholly without problem, there is enough evidence of philosophical thought behind the text, and enough of a history of philosophical treatment of the text, to warrant the treatment of this thesis, which assumes philosophicality.
1.2.1. Qohelet as a philosophy in response to Greek philosophy

It is easy enough to establish a date after which the book of Qohelet could not have been written. There have been two fragments of manuscripts of Qohelet found at Qumran, the earlier of which (4QOhe) is dated to around 175-150 B.C.E. If the Qumran community had a scroll of Qohelet, the book must have been written before that community moved to the Qumran area. This move, it has been proposed, took place at around 140 B.C.E. And so the latest date at which Qohelet could have been written is around 175 B.C.E.

The predominant dates for the composition of the book are either the Persian period or the Hellenistic age. Arguments for both are compelling, though neither dating ‘solves’ all the linguistic problems or peculiarities. I shall take Seow as representative of Persian period dating, and Gordis as representative of Hellenistic dating.

1.2.1.1. Hellenistic period (Gordis)

Gordis dates Qohelet to around 250 B.C.E.

This dating enables a comparison between Qohelet and Greek philosophy. There seem to be four strands of inquiry which feed into arguments for dating the text:

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historical allusions, the ideas represented in the book, linguistics, and extra-textual evidence. At least two of these, historical allusions and the type of thinking evidenced, are not truly acceptable methods for dating Qohelet.

Historical allusion is not an appropriate method for dating Qohelet for the simple reason that there are no historical allusions in Qohelet. Although the author in places presents himself as a sovereign (1:1, 12), it has long been accepted by most scholars that this is a ‘royal fiction.’ Two further passages have been cited as supposed historical allusions: 4:13-14 and 9:14-15. The poor but wise youth who rises from a gaol to become king in 4:13-14, paralleling in the same verses the demise of a foolish king, has been read as a veiled reference to a multitude of historical figures, none of which is convincing.\textsuperscript{181} The wise man who saves a city under siege (9:14-15) has also been read as a historical allusion, but again this is not likely.\textsuperscript{182} Historical allusions cannot therefore be brought in to discussions about the date of the book of Qohelet. However, Gordis assumes that, since there is no mention of the Antiochian persecutions or the Maccabean revolt, the book was not written during or after these times,\textsuperscript{183} and therefore the absence of this historical reference is used to exclude dates.

The ‘type of thinking’ evident in Qohelet has made up a major part of discussions about the date of the text. Many scholars have drawn lines between particular Greek philosophies and Qohelet’s thoughts, and these points of comparison are used to

\textsuperscript{181} See Gordis, \textit{Koheleth}, 67, for a summary of these historical figures.
\textsuperscript{182} See Gordis, \textit{Koheleth}, 68.
\textsuperscript{183} Gordis, \textit{Koheleth}, 65.
date the text. Using such a comparison to date the text though is problematic. In the first case, it is possible that the thoughts Qohelet exhibits, the thoughts which commentators have assumed are dependent on exposure to Greek philosophy, arise due to the tendency that people “of similar temperaments or backgrounds will naturally develop similar viewpoints under like conditions.” Further, for our purposes, to date the text from the ‘type of thinking’ it evidences would be circular. Since we are establishing a possible philosophic nature of the text through a possible Hellenistic dating, it would be circular to argue for a Hellenistic dating and provenance, and therefore a possible philosophic nature, on the basis that the text is possibly influenced by Greek philosophy.

Gordis dates the book through the intellectual and theological milieu. Gordis suggests that the “thoroughgoing” monotheism throughout the book as well as evidence that Qohelet was aware of the doctrine of judgment in the afterlife could mean the text was written roughly between the fifth and the second centuries

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184 Gordis, Koheleth, 57. This possibility is taken up below. Strictly speaking, Gordis makes that remark about the comparison between Qohelet and Egyptian thought. However, it can be read also as describing Gordis’ approach to the relationship between Greek thinking and Qohelet. Despite Gordis’ seeming scepticism about Greek influence, he does date Qohelet to the Hellenistic age, and he also elsewhere claims that, as such, Qohelet would have influenced by Greek thought (Gordis, Koheleth, 56). However, Gordis is struck by Qohelet’s “completely original and independent use of these ideas to express his own unique world-view” (Gordis, Koheleth, 56, emphasis his).

185 For this reason, I should exclude the ‘type of thought’ argument from the arguments for dating the text. This, along with the lack of historical references within the text, would make it necessary to date the text only from linguistic and extra-textual evidence. However, without the ‘comparative ideas’ element of Greek dating there is very little left by which one might date Qohelet to the Hellenistic age, and so I have allowed the comparison of ideas into the discussion of Hellenistic dating, but for the purpose of showing that Qohelet has often in past scholarship been considered philosophical (more on this below).
B.C.E.\textsuperscript{186} Despite some scepticism, Gordis also takes a proposed Greek influence into account when dating the book.\textsuperscript{187}

Gordis also dates Qohelet by way of language.\textsuperscript{188} The language represents an intermediate stage between Biblical Hebrew and Mishnaic Hebrew.\textsuperscript{189} Like Seow below, Gordis notes that there are many Aramaisms in the book. Contra Soew, however, who uses these to argue for a Persian period date, Gordis proposes that these Aramaisms\textsuperscript{190} “are only part of its linguistic affinities with Mishnaic Hebrew.”\textsuperscript{191} Gordis writes that Qohelet was familiar with Aramaic, and probably used it “\textit{freely in daily life},”\textsuperscript{192} but that the book itself is written in “the Hebrew of Second Temple Palestine, in a form which was beginning to approximate the Hebrew of the Mishnah.”\textsuperscript{193}

Finally, Gordis uses the apparent familiarity of the author of Ben Sira with the book of Qohelet to provide an end time at which the book could have been written. Gordis dates the Greek translation of Ben Sira at approximately 132 B.C.E., and the Hebrew original at about 190-180 B.C.E. He allows at least fifty years for the book of Qohelet to have become popular enough for Ben Sira to know it, and concludes that the latest possible date for the book would be the middle of the third century.

\textsuperscript{186} Gordis, \textit{Koheleth}, 63.
\textsuperscript{187} Gordis, \textit{Koheleth}, 63.
\textsuperscript{188} For a good summary of attempts to grapple with the language of the book see Francesco Bianchi, “The Language of Qohelet,” \textit{ZAW} 105 (1993): 210-223.
\textsuperscript{189} Gordis, \textit{Koheleth}, 65.
\textsuperscript{190} Or Hebrew parallels of Aramaic words (Gordis, \textit{Koheleth}, 61).
\textsuperscript{191} Gordis, \textit{Koheleth}, 61.
\textsuperscript{192} Gordis, \textit{Koheleth}, 61, italics his.
\textsuperscript{193} Gordis, \textit{Koheleth}, 62.
Further, it can’t be dated much earlier as enough time must be left for Greek ideas to ‘penetrate’ ancient Israel. Gordis therefore dates the book circa 250 B.C.E.  

1.2.1.1.1. Comparisons of Qohelet and Greek philosophies

Many studies have been written proposing Greek influence on Qohelet. These studies draw parallels between particular ideas which are evidenced in Qohelet, and similar ideas in Greek philosophy. In doing so, they suggest that Qohelet is a philosophical text, or contains elements of what might be called philosophy.

Thomas Tyler considered the book of Qohelet to be influenced both by Epicureanism and Stoicism. He wrote that the “antithetical” nature of the book “is especially marked in those two great thoughts of the philosophical part of the book – the Stoic, ALL IS VANITY; and the Epicurean, EAT, DRINK, AND ENJOY.”

Rainer Braun assesses the similarities between Qohelet and Greek ‘popular philosophy’ of around 250 B.C.E. He offers a summary of parallels between Qohelet and Greek lyrical texts, dramas and epic texts, and philosophical texts.

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194 Gordis, Koheleth, 67.
196 Tyler cited in Canedy, “Qoheleth,” 83.
197 Rainer Braun, Kohelet und die frühellenistische Popularphilosophie (BZAW 180; Berlin, New York: de Gruyter, 1973).
198 Braun, Kohelet und die frühellenistische Popularphilosophie, 146-149.
and argues that Qohelet was influenced by Greek philosophy and the early literary formations, particularly ‘antique’ pessimism and gnomic poetry. This, Braun claims, can be seen in Qohelet’s concepts of הָיוֹת, הַבֵּל, נֶפֶל, and also, for example, is such words as the verb בַּדָּר in 1:13 and 2:3, which he argues is an Empirical term. Braun writes that Qohelet’s language is peculiar in the HB, but has affinities with ancient pessimism, and Hellenistic gnomic literature and popular philosophy.

John G. Gammie argues that the book of Qohelet evidences particular Greek philosophical thought. He claims that in some aspects Qohelet seems to be in line with Stoic thinking, whereas in others Qohelet seems to purposely differ from the Stoic position. Qohelet seems to share the Epicurean view that one should pursue pleasure with moderation, and the sceptic view that there are strict limitations on what humans can know. Gammie compares the Stoic concept of fate with Qohelet’s notion of divine causation. Further, Stoic ethics sharply distinguishes the wise and fool, the good and bad, as does Qohelet, claims Gammie, and an important characteristic of the Stoic sage is ‘timely behaviour,’ which idea is also evident in Qohelet. In Stoicism there is an association between folly and madness,

201 Braun, *Kohelet und die frühellenistische Popularphilosophie*, 51.
206 Gammie, “Stoicism and Anti-Stoicism in Qoheleth,” 175.
much like the link between folly and חѓי in Qohelet, but this link, Gammie says, is not enough to make a claim of direct influence. With regard to death, both the Stoics and Qohelet believe that death is right in its time.

Oswald Loretz writes that Qohelet was in “Konfrontation mit der griechischen Philosophie der hellenistischen Zeit.” Loretz seeks to answer the question of whether philosophy can be found in poetry as well as in prose. Loretz looks at 1:1-11 and 3:1-15, and concludes that the poetic parts of these passages represent an earlier form of the text, to which a redactor added the prose passages, which represent a “neue Form der weisheitlich-philosophischen Argumentation im jüdischen Raum.” Any search for a “free river of wisdom-like philosophical speech” (freien Fluß weisheitlich-philosophischer Rede) however shows that the development of philosophical language is still in its beginnings, with the prose passages presenting “awkward attempts of philosophical reason” (ungelenken Versuche philosophischen Argumentierens).

Loretz also makes comparison between Qohelet’s concept of women and women in Greek philosophy. Here again Loretz claims that Qohelet was in “confrontation” (Auseinandersetzung) with Greek Hellenistic philosophy, “picking up” the impulse

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211 Loretz, “Anfänge jüdischer Philosophie,” 239.
214 Oswald Loretz, “‘Frau’ und griechisch-jüdische Philosophie im Buch Qohelet (Qoh 7,23-8,1 und 9,6-10),” UF 23 (1991): 246-264.
to undertake a personal search for wisdom from Hellenistic philosophy, but doing so in an individualistic way.215 Loretz concludes that while Qohelet (and the commentator Loretz finds in Qohelet) both strive for philosophical language, this attempt at philosophical “art-prose” (Kunstprosa) ultimately fails. However, in the attempt, Qohelet develops a prose which functions as a new literary language.216 Thus the difficult language one finds in the text is partly a result of the authors’ attempts to philosophise.

Anderson considers the philosophical elements present in the book of Qohelet to be “universally represented in literature much antedating classical Greece.”217 He questions whether Qohelet was a sceptic, a pessimist, or a cynic,218 where scepticism according to Anderson can be a philosophy, but pessimism cannot.219 Anderson concludes that while Qohelet is a pessimist,220 he is also “in the sphere of scepticism” in that he rejects the dogma of traditional wisdom and has a “questioning spirit.”221 Anderson writes that “Qoheleth may be viewed as a sceptic turned pessimist but not a cynic,” and argues that the genre of the book is pessimistic literature.222

215 Loretz, “‘Frau’ und griechisch-jüdische Philosophie,” 262.
216 Loretz, “‘Frau’ und griechisch-jüdische Philosophie,” 263.
218 Anderson, “Philosophical Considerations,” 292.
220 Anderson, “Philosophical Considerations,” 295.
221 Anderson, “Philosophical Considerations,” 296.
222 Anderson, “Philosophical Considerations,” 297.
Ludger Schwienhorst-Schönberger compares the ‘golden mean’ of Qoh 7:15-18 with Aristotle’s *Nichomachean Ethics.*²²³ While Qohelet does not simply transfer the Jewish ethical paradigm into the Greek ethical paradigm, he says, and while Qohelet ‘articulates’ within the Jewish tradition, the book borrows from both the Jewish and Greek worlds,²²⁴ in that the via media (itself a central point between wickedness and goodness²²⁵) is both called כְּוָ֖מוּב, which is akin to its use in Greek philosophy, andtablet.Properties; , which is akin to its use in Judaism.²²⁶

Alain Buhlman also claims that there is evidence of contact with Hellenistic culture in Qohelet’s ideas of nothingness, profit, destiny, and circularity,²²⁷ and Qohelet’s “inferior Hebrew” arises due to his attempt to introduce Greek ideas into Hebrew language.²²⁸

1.2.1.2. Persian period (Seow)

Seow argues for a Persian period date for the text, and does so predominantly on linguistic grounds.

²²⁴ Schwienhorst-Schönberger, “Via Media,” 199.
²²⁵ Schwienhorst-Schönberger, “Via Media,”185.
²²⁶ Schwienhorst-Schönberger, “Via Media,” compare diagrams pages 194, 197.
²²⁸ Buhlman, “The Difficulty of Thinking in Greek,” 101.
Seow claims that the dating of the text to the Hellenistic period does not rest on linguistic grounds, and is based instead on “superficial affinities between Ecclesiastes and certain Greek philosophical notions.”229 There are no clear Greek loanwords or constructions in the book,230 both of which would be expected if it were a Hellenistic period text. While Seow admits that there are no Graecisms in the contemporaneous Qumran scrolls and fragments either, he states that the conservative Qumran community “deliberately imitated standard Biblical Hebrew. The same cannot be said of Qohelet, which is not a book that tries to sound conservative.”231

There are, however, numerous Aramaisms, and according to Seow these suggest a Persian period date for the text. Though Seow notes that Aramaisms are not conclusive for dating, for “Aramaisms are attested sporadically in preexilic works, as well, particularly those texts coming from the north,”232 he uses the Aramaisms to date the text to the postexilic period as this is the time when Aramaic became “the vernacular in administration and commerce.”233 Seow notes several economic terms which occur in fifth and fourth century documents, and one particular term, לַשׁוֹן, he claims dates Qohelet no later than the Persian period.234 Seow states: “In sum, the high frequency of Aramaisms suggests a postexilic date, a fact confirmed by the cluster of common Hebrew and Aramaic terms all from the fifth and fourth

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229 Seow, Ecclesiastes, 16.
232 Seow, Ecclesiastes, 13.
233 Seow, Ecclesiastes, 13.
centuries. The technical usage of the root šlt, too, suggests a date no later than the Persian period.”235 Specifically, language considerations suggest a date between the second half of the fifth and the first half of the fourth centuries B.C.E.236 It is written in the vernacular “everyday language of the Persian period, with its large number of Aramaisms and whatever jargon and dialectical elements one may find in the marketplace.”237

Also, Seow states that the name Qohelet, which follows the vowel pattern gotelet, finds parallels in Persian period names: “In no other period in the Hebrew Bible do we have masculine names of this precise pattern.”238 Further, there are two widely recognised Persian loan words, מָרָדֶה (2:5) and מַגֶּד (8:11), which point to a Persian period date.239 All occurrence of Persian loan words and proper names in the Hebrew Bible “are found in texts postdating the second major wave of returnees in the second half of the fifth century.”240 The presence of מָרָדֶה and מַגֶּד therefore allow Seow to conclude that “the book should be dated no earlier than the second half of the fifth century.”241

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235 Seow, Ecclesiastes, 15.
236 Seow, Ecclesiastes, 21.
241 Seow, “Linguistic Evidence,” 650. Thus, while arguing mainly for a Persian Period date, Seow’s dating does overlap with the Hellenistic Period.
Other linguistic elements also mark Qohelet as a late text, for example the frequency of -ם, a feature of Northern Hebrew that came to be used more frequently in Late Biblical Hebrew. Qohelet’s use of יָנָּה rather than יָנָּה also indicates a post-exilic date, as does the use of יְהָ as the female demonstrative. This, says Seow, “is probably derived from some dialect or other, and it became common in written compositions only from the postexilic period on.” The negation of the infinitive with יָנָּה (3:14) is also representative of Late Biblical Hebrew, specifically texts dating to the fifth century at the earliest.

The use of internal vowel letters also points to an exilic or post-exilic date, Seow argues, as epigraphic evidence suggests internal vowel letters were rarely used before the sixth century. “Orthographic inconsistencies” noted by Seow include that, in the adjective of the qatal type, plene forms outnumber defective by 3:2. If the Masoretic Text “is a reliable witness to the book’s original orthography, Qohelet’s spelling convention is quite consistent with what one might expect in the exilic or postexilic period.” Seow claims that, if orthographic evidence can be

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248 Seow, “Linguistic Evidence,” 645. So the long i is marked in Qohelet with a yod: וֶלְתָּא (1:14); עַלְתָּא (10:6); נַלָּא (10:2).
used for dating, then Qohelet should be dated between the beginning of the sixth century and the end of the third century B.C.E.\textsuperscript{251}

1.2.1.3. Conclusions regarding dating

The language of the book is undoubtedly late. How late, however, it is not possible to know conclusively. It is possible that Qohelet wrote in the Hellensitic age. If Qohelet did write in the Hellensitic Age he was likely conversant with Greek philosophy. If the book is Hellenistic, then we may speak of it as a text of philosophy in that it was written in response to, or under the influence of, Greek philosophy.

However, without recourse to a comparison with Greek philosophic ideas Hellenistic dating becomes quite weak. Seow’s analysis of linguistic evidence, moreover, does present a convincing argument regarding dating the text to the Persian period. If the text is dated to the Persian period, while we could still draw parallels between Greek ideas and Qohelet’s ideas, we could not use those parallels as evidence of Greek influence on the author. Persian period dating would require any comparable ideas to be ‘accidental.’ These ideas would be the result of a natural occurrence within the Hebrew intellectual tradition. But would these naturally occurring points of comparison be enough to render the book of Qohelet a text of philosophy? To answer this question we will now turn to an analysis of definitions of philosophy, and how they might relate to the book of Qohelet.

\textsuperscript{251} Seow, “Linguistic Evidence,” 646.
1.2.2. Qohelet as philosophy as a natural development within the Hebrew intellectual tradition

It could be, as Gordis states, that similarities between Greek and Hebrew intellectual texts (and Egyptian and Hebrew intellectual texts) arise from like-minded individuals in different cultures. If this is so, and Qohelet as a Persian period production did not write in response to Greek philosophy, the way is opened to the ‘philosophic themes’ being a natural development in Hebrew thought. This is the second way in which Qohelet might be thought of as philosophy.

1.2.2.1. Scholarly debate on Qohelet’s status as philosophy

Some scholars deny that the book of Qohelet is philosophy. Frank Zimmerman, for example, writes that Qohelet “is not a philosopher, nor does he have a philosophical system.”\(^{252}\) Crenshaw, too, while noting that Qohelet is “deeply touched” by Hellenism,\(^{253}\) denies that Qohelet is philosophy, noting that “breaking away from traditional constraints of poetry does not constitute philosophy, though it may be an initial step in this direction.”\(^{254}\) While Qohelet is sometimes empirical, he is not always so, and his thinking is often impacted by “non-experiential data”\(^{255}\) and is “epistemologically less revolutionary than some critics have imagined.”\(^{256}\)

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\(^{252}\) Frank Zimmermann, *The Inner World of Qohelet* (New York: KTAV, 1973), xii.


\(^{254}\) Crenshaw, “Qoheleth’s Understanding of Intellect Inquiry,” 209.

\(^{255}\) Crenshaw, “Qoheleth’s Understanding of Intellect Inquiry,” 212.

\(^{256}\) Crenshaw, “Qoheleth’s Understanding of Intellect Inquiry,” 224.
Indeed, it has been claimed that any form of ancient thought outside of the Greek intellectual tradition cannot resemble philosophical thought. The first lines of the book *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man: An Essay on Speculative Thought in the Ancient Near East*,257 for instance, bodes ill for the question of philosophy in Qohelet.

If we look for ‘speculative thought’ in the documents of the ancients, we shall be forced to admit that there is very little indeed in our written records which deserves the name of ‘thought’ in the strict sense of the term. There are very few passages which show the discipline, the cogency of reasoning, which we associate with thinking.258

Speculative thought, they write, “transcends experience, but only because it attempts to explain, to unify, to order experience. It achieves this end by means of hypotheses” and “attempts to underpin the chaos of experience so that is may reveal the features of a structure – order, coherence, and meaning.”259 Intellectual knowledge, in contrast to mythopoesis, is “emotionally indifferent and articulate.”260 Frankfort and Frankfort concede “that the ancients recognized certain intellectual problems and asked for the ‘why’ and ‘how,’ the ‘where from’ and ‘where to,’” but stress that this is not speculative thought.261 Frankfort and Frankfort must concede however that “the Hebrews, no less than the Greeks, broke with the mode of speculation [that is, mythopoesis] which had prevailed up to their time.”262

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Qohelet, in particular, seems to confound the boundaries Frankfort and Frankfort attempt to establish. In the chapter given over to Hebrew thought in that book, William A. Irwin\textsuperscript{263} analyses Qohelet’s thought, and this analysis runs counter to Frankfort and Frankfort’s description of mythopoesis. Irwin describes the ancient Hebrew people as “without a peer in the power and scope of their critical intellectualism,”\textsuperscript{264} and the book of Qohelet stands out among their writings as the most sceptical.\textsuperscript{265} Irwin writes that Qohelet “sets up a philosophical system,”\textsuperscript{266} and that his conclusions are clearly “the outcome of vigorous, independent thinking.”\textsuperscript{267} His investigations were “prompted . . . by a serious philosophical purpose.”\textsuperscript{268} Irwin writes that in Qohelet’s conclusions, whether one agrees with them or not, we may find “philosophy in the full sense of the term.”\textsuperscript{269} Though Irwin notes the possibility that Qohelet had come in contact with Greek thought, and that his conclusions aren’t “in the tradition of Jewish orthodoxy,” he states that Qohelet’s “type of mind and his methods are intimately a part of the questioning mood that had been at home in Israel for many centuries.”\textsuperscript{270} It is unfortunate, though, that “the Hebrew thinkers, unlike the Greek, commonly left not so much a record of their processes of thought as of their conclusions.”\textsuperscript{271}

\textsuperscript{264} Irwin, “The Hebrews,” 234.
\textsuperscript{265} Irwin, “The Hebrews,” 241.
\textsuperscript{266} Irwin, “The Hebrews,” 241. My emphasis.
\textsuperscript{267} Irwin, “The Hebrews,” 241.
\textsuperscript{268} Irwin, “The Hebrews,” 241.
\textsuperscript{269} Irwin, “The Hebrews,” 241.
\textsuperscript{270} Irwin, “The Hebrews,” 242.
\textsuperscript{271} Irwin, “The Hebrews,” 243. This is an important point, and I will return to it below.
Irwin is not the only scholar to consider Qohelet to be philosophy without necessarily depending upon Greek influence. Duncan Black MacDonald also considers Qohelet to be a philosophical text. MacDonald endeavours “to show that the Hebrews had fundamental philosophical ideas and attitudes; that these were theirs from their beginnings; and that the more formal expression of these, reached in such later books as Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Ecclesiasticus, came by an orderly development from such beginnings.”272 MacDonald allows that the authors of these texts might have come into contact with Greek thought, but, he says, “on such an a priori argument, no more than that can be said.”273

MacDonald states that Qohelet presents all events as occurring in time, and “the existence of each event, or happening, involved the existence of the exact opposite of that event. If A, of necessity, is in the world, there must in the world be not-A. This, as Ecclesiastes uses it, is a purely philosophical conception and result.”274 MacDonald considers Qohelet’s pairing of opposed pairs “pure metaphysics.”275 Of Qohelet’s ‘relationship’ to God, MacDonald writes, it “was not in the least religious; it was at the most theological, a recognition of God’s existence as an absolutely controlling Will behind life.”276

274 MacDonald, The Hebrew Philosophical Genius, 88.
275 MacDonald, The Hebrew Philosophical Genius, 88.
276 MacDonald (The Hebrew Philosophical Genius, 89) also notes that old age and decrepitude are punishments for youth.
276 MacDonald, The Hebrew Philosophical Genius, 89.
Still others assert that the book of Qohelet is philosophical, and its author a philosopher. “Here,” writes Fredericks for example, “in this closest example of a disciplined philosophical enquiry in the Bible, in the deepest of intellectual investigations of reality, we find its all-inclusive conclusions expressed *poetically!*”\(^{277}\)

So, while it can never be known whether or to what extent Qohelet was influenced by Greek philosophy, it could be that Qohelet is a philosophical text in its own right. Even among those who deny Greek influence, there are those who believe Qohelet to be a philosophical book.\(^ {278}\) There is then a precedent for treating Qohelet as philosophy.

But what is meant when these scholars either deny or uphold the philosophical nature of the text? What do I mean when I write that Qohelet presents a philosophy or several philosophies of death? We will now turn to concepts of philosophy to ask, what precisely is required for philosophy to be present?

\(^{277}\) D. C. Fredericks, *Coping with Transience: Ecclesiastes on Brevity in Life* (BSS 18; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 12. His italics. Gordis, too, writes that the language in Qohelet shows an effort to reshape his language to something suitable for philosophical discourse (cited in Crenshaw, “Qoheleth’s Understanding of Intellectual Inquiry,” 209). This attempt is however unsuccessful according to Gordis. Further, Qohelet’s thought is not systematic: “This approach [that is, the search for Aristotelian influence], however, means the introduction of formal categories of thought, which are entirely foreign to the unpretentious reflections of Koheleth” (Gordis, *Koheleth*, 51).

\(^{278}\) Even if, at times, the attempt at philosophy is thought to be a failure.
1.2.2.2. Conditions necessary for philosophy

William Jordan provides a very helpful assessment of philosophy in the ancient world. 279 According to Jordan philosophy is made up of three components: the questions asked, the method of answering the questions, and the answers to the questions.

Jordan writes that philosophy begins by asking philosophical questions. However, as asking philosophical questions is a part of the ‘human condition’ and “philosophical questioning arises naturally in the context of everyday life,” 280 this is not in itself philosophy. In addition to philosophical questions, philosophy requires “a distinctly philosophical response to philosophical questions; these in turn arise from a natural desire we have as human beings to understand the world and to orient ourselves in relation to the world.” 281 While it is not just philosophers who aspire to answer philosophical questions, then, “only philosophers offer philosophical answers to these questions, in the sense that they are arrived at, communicated, or assessed by a philosophical method.” 282 What marks out a philosopher, Jordan writes, is not just the questions which are asked, but the nature of the response to those questions. There are a variety of philosophical methods among the ancient philosophers just as there are various ways to define philosophy: some see it “in terms of a set of questions that need answering; others characterize it

280 Jordan, Ancient Concepts of Philosophy, 8.
281 Jordan, Ancient Concepts of Philosophy, 12.
282 Jordan, Ancient Concepts of Philosophy, 173. A list of the various methods among ancient philosophers can be found on this page also.
in terms of philosophical method; while a third group may see philosophy in terms of a set of philosophical results, which may be shared by adherents of a philosophical school.”\textsuperscript{283} Further, there was a tendency among ancient philosophers that the philosopher should live “a highly distinctive and uniquely happy style of life.”\textsuperscript{284} For the ancient philosopher “it is not just the questions that we study, nor the methods we employ in studying them, nor the conclusions that we reach, that characterize philosophy and explain its value. Rather, the philosopher leads a particular, distinctive and valuable, lifestyle.”\textsuperscript{285} For ancient philosophers “the value of philosophy lies as much in a particular lifestyle and in the practice of philosophy as in the particular conclusions we reach through our skills in argument.”\textsuperscript{286}

We will now explore each of these conditions (the question; method; answers reached) of philosophy, and see if we might find evidence of each condition in Qohelet.

\textit{Questions}. The first way a philosophy can be present is if philosophical questions are asked.\textsuperscript{287} Qohelet undoubtedly asks philosophical questions, and we can see this not only in specific verses but also in that the text exists at all. The text in its entirety can be viewed as stemming from the philosophical question, what must one do to live well? This can be seen in particular passages in Qohelet. Some questions Qohelet asks are rhetorical. For example, Qohelet asks, ‘Who knows what is good

\begin{footnotes}
\item[287] Though, again, it is not sufficient for philosophy.
\end{footnotes}
for a person all the days of their life?' (6:12). In another verse Qohelet asks what the benefit (לְעָדוֹת) is of the deeds at which humans toil (3:9). Even the rhetorical questions are philosophical, in that they are designed to lead the reader toward the ‘lifestyle’ Jordan writes of as sometimes considered the ‘aim’ of philosophy. The purpose for asking the philosophical questions is to determine how one is to live in the world, and how one is best to live. Qohelet offers ‘practical’ advice – such as splitting one’s investments seven or eight ways (11:2) – just as he offers ‘deep’ advice, such as the call to the good life in 9:9, ‘See life (חֶהָל לַיְלָה) with the wife whom you love.’ But all this is present not just in Qohelet, but in all wisdom literature, whose aim is to lead the seeker of wisdom to life as the wisdom writers saw it. There must then be an element of philosophy other than asking philosophical questions (toward the end of living properly) for Qohelet to be philosophy.

Method. An appropriately philosophical method might also be required for philosophy. Qohelet does not seem to set out a method. We are simply told that he performs certain mental acts, that he, for instance, tested ‘all this’ in wisdom (7:23), but we are not told what those mental cogitations entail. But it is enough for some scholars that Qohelet writes even this little amount about his method. Irwin writes that the book is the outcome of vigorous, independent thinking. And the book shows unmistakably the nature of that thinking. Ecclesiastes tells us that he undertook certain experiments. He tried wisdom and folly; he investigated the seeming solace of wine; he gave himself to the pursuit of pleasure – but in all, he is at pains to assure us, his heart guided him in wisdom. Or, rendered in intelligible modern terms, he was prompted, not by the frivolity of the voluptuary, but by a serious philosophic purpose. He was conducting a scientific experiment upon himself, observing his own reactions and
earnestly seeking through these experiences to find the abiding value, if any, that life possesses. And further studies were based on observation of the steady flow of events past his place of quiet reflection. It is because of what he saw in the widest survey of life that he concluded, ‘Vanity of vanities; all is vanity.’ . . . Whatever may be thought of this conclusion, at least here is philosophy in the full sense of the term, though certainly not in its full scope as we have come to know it. But for the moment our interest is more in the philosopher’s methods than in either his results or the extent of his research. And what has been said leaves it abundantly clear that, admitting some uneveness in his application of the method, his thinking was of the sort that we have come to call empirical. He reasoned from observed facts.288

Thus, if we are to follow Irwin, Qohelet addresses his philosophical questions with a philosophical (empirical) method, displaying a “really scientific mood.”289 It was not a “pioneer scientific venture,” but “it is close to that in its application of an empirical method, however imperfect, to the problems of psychology and philosophy.”290

Answers. Philosophical questions, addressed with philosophical method, will produce philosophical answers. The ultimate philosophical answer offered by Qohelet is אֶלֶמֶן חֶסֶם. As noted in Irwin’s quote above, this is “philosophy in the full sense of the term.”291 Indeed, we can take his entire book as the answer to philosophical questions, using philosophic method.

So Qohelet asks philosophical questions, and offers philosophical answers, and goes about answering the questions with an arguably philosophical method, and all of this is tied to the ancient philosophical goal of how to live. Does this then mean the book of Qohelet is a philosophical text? Qohelet, arguably, meets all three

categories (as well as the purpose of the intellectual adventure) and so it seems, in light of this categorical understanding of what philosophy might have been in the ancient world, that we are not too overly adventurous in claiming Qohelet as a text which, at the very least, contains traces of philosophy.

According to the conditions of ancient philosophy offered by Jordan, even if one or two of these categories is absent from the text, within the context of ancient philosophy, the book might still be considered philosophical, for while Jordan describes these three distinct set of criteria, he does note that not all philosophical groups of the time considered each of these conditions to be necessary for philosophy. Even if, as some claim contra Irwin, Qohelet’s method is not to be found within the pages of his book, we must ask whether such an absence would cast its philosophicality into doubt. We must ask, are two categories sufficient for philosophy? For the purpose of this thesis, the two categories which are definitely present, the questions asked and the outcome, will be considered sufficient for philosophy. In addition to this it should be noted that the condition of method, though some claim it is not explicitly outlined in the book, is nevertheless implied in such statements as, ‘I tested this in wisdom’ (7:23), ‘I turned to see’ (2:12), ‘I said in my heart’ (2:15), and ‘I saw’ (4:4). In conclusion, we may read the book of Qohelet as a text of philosophy, or a text in which philosophy or philosophies are

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292 I am aware of the problem of using definitions developed from Greek philosophy to assess the philosophicality of Hebrew texts. However, the common-sense nature of this model, with its very basic categories which could arguably be applied to any number of ANE cultures, make it a reasonable model to apply to Hebrew texts.  
293 Zimmermann, *The Inner World of Qohelet*, xii; Crenshaw, “Qoheleth’s Understanding of Intellectual Inquiry,” 212, 224.
present, both on the basis of past treatments of the book, and on the basis of these conditions of philosophy.

1.3. The thanatological method

In the previous section a philosophical treatment of Qohelet was defended, while in the literature survey in the first section of this introduction it was seen that most commentators accept that death is one of the major themes of the book. This thesis is situated at the meeting point of the text’s philosophicality and its thanatology. It marries these two concerns and asks the following questions: is there a philosophy of death in Qohelet? Is there a series of philosophies of death in Qohelet? If there is/are, what are the particular aspects of death which find voice in the book?

Certain texts will be chosen which clearly offer some insight into Qohelet’s thoughts about death (more on this below). I will for the most part begin each chapter with a text which is about death at the surface level. These texts clearly tell us something about Qohelet’s views of death, and the intention is to explore the accounts of death described in these passages.

However, the nature of the book of Qohelet must dictate the method to some extent. In expounding the method of his study of the narrative style of the Priestly writer, Sean E. McEvenue wrote the following:

294 With the exception of Chapter Three, “The Knowledge of Limits and the Limits of Knowledge,” which begins with 3:11 – a passage which might not be about death at a surface level, but is clearly about death once one explores the concept of מְלַאכֶה.
In fact, in approaching the priestly document, we felt that no holds were barred, and it was the text itself which fixed our method. The fact is that method is nothing more than a description and systematisation of acts of understanding. When one begins to examine a new object, one may determine a general approach, but clearly it is self-contradictory to hope to predetermine the acts of understanding which will follow! It is, of course, helpful to have seen various methods used successfully on other texts. But ultimately the researcher must simply stare at his text, or fumble with it, until acts of understanding begin to take place. After this he may discuss his method, in so far as this may be necessary to clarify or justify his conclusions. Beyond this the literary critic should not go, as he can only make a fool of himself, (unless he is a philosopher as well).\footnote{\footnoteref{mcven}}

Although McEvenue is writing of the priestly document, his views are equally applicable to Qohelet. The method set out below arose from attempts to understand the text.\footnote{\footnoteref{smallclaim}}

The following will explore the rhetoric of the text, and the method to which this rhetoric has led.

1.3.1. Qohelet’s rhetoric of ambiguity and its impact on method

Rhetorically, Qohelet is undoubtedly one of the most difficult books in the Bible. Attempts to engage with the text bring to mind an experience I had, many years ago, at a high school dance. I and my friend were responsible for the lighting at this dance, and at one point in the evening my friend turned off all lights except one, which he shone at the mirror ball spinning in the centre of the hall. The light refracted off the angled surface of the mirror ball and cast countless spots of light

\footnote{\footnoteref{mcven}} Sean E. McEvenue, \textit{The Narrative Style of the Priestly Writer} (AnBib 50; Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1971), 11.\footnote{\footnoteref{smallclaim}} And despite some small claim to philosophy, I fear in the following methodology, and its application to the text, I will make a fool of myself nevertheless.
upon the walls and floor of the hall. The crowd screamed and began to stampede, chasing the light spots as they spun around the hall.

This is an apt, though imperfect, analogy for how the book of Qohelet and its readers interrelate. We might see the book in its entirety as the mirrored ball spinning in the centre of the hall, the ball’s angled surface the various themes or passages or verses within the book, the light shone upon it our own gaze as we attempt to understand it, the spots of light as the seemingly endless ‘right’ readings of the text, and the stampeding, circling crowd as the confusion (and hysteria) which naturally arises from the attempt.

Studies of Qohelet have begun to focus more on the mirrored ball and its multivariate surface than on the refracted light and, in the process, the need for certainty and its consequent hysteria has leached out of the studies. The text still induces confusion, but this confusion is often now considered a natural outcome of the rhetoric of the text. Rather than arguing that Qohelet is trying to convince us of one correct view, there is a tendency now to claim that the author intends the reader to experience this very confusion, the lack of certainty, the building up and the falling down, to which the text’s lexical and structural difficulties inexorably lead. This is Qohelet’s rhetoric of ambiguity.

Carol Newsom is one such scholar who views the ambiguity of the text as intentional. Newsom sees the ambiguity not as a “problem to be solved” but “as
another means of communicating the book’s message.”  

Gary D. Salyer writes that several “intricate reading problems” culminate in a “rhetoric of ambiguity,” by which he means “a literary design which frustrates the reader in such a way that the ‘whole truth’ is never disclosed in a satisfactory way. The reader is left suspended in a state of literary limbo regarding the text’s final meaning.”  

Salyer follows Fowler in using the term ‘strategies of indirection’ to describe Qohelet’s rhetoric. These strategies include incongruity, opacity, metaphor, irony, paradox, metonymy, and synecdoche. “It is the process of being confused, and eventually becoming defamiliarized to reality that ultimately sticks with the reader. Whatever final Gestalt one makes of them is secondary to this effect.”  

Salyer suggests, I believe quite rightly, that “Qoheleth’s text is not about giving answers that can be precisely stated. It is about recreating in the reader the same sense of profound ambiguity that Qoheleth . . . experienced of the world.”  

Qohelet’s language is designed to create a lack of certainty, and the lack of consensus about the ‘meaning’ of the text throughout the history of exegesis of Qohelet stands testament to its rhetoric of ambiguity. This ambiguity is constructed primarily in two ways: through grammar or syntactic problems, and through the structure of the text.

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299 Salyer, Vain Rhetoric, 128.
300 Salyer, Vain Rhetoric, 128.
301 Salyer, Vain Rhetoric, 131.
302 Salyer, Vain Rhetoric, 131.
1.3.1.1. Structural ambiguity and contradictions

Ambiguity is present at a structural level. While the book of Qohelet has no recognisable outline (*Aufriss*) and no one single determinable topic, it is more than a loose collection of sentences.\(^{303}\) However, there are gaps between textual units\(^{304}\) which “create an abruptness between the individual units that make the book seem like a loose collection of sayings or, to be more fair, the haphazard reflections or musings of an aging sage.”\(^{305}\) Kathleen Farmer writes that Qohelet is structured like a wind chime or mobile, in that “various pieces are suspended on threads or wires and balanced in such a way that each part depends on another for its equilibrium.”\(^{306}\) So too J.A. Loader, who writes that “separate pericopes are compositionally related to each other.”\(^{307}\) The reader then is constantly shifting between textual units.

Any exegete must deal not only with textual units, but also with the relation between the textual units, as no one unit, or phrase within a unit, can be read in isolation from all other units within the text. Thus meaning is conferred not just


\(^{304}\) That is, there are shifts in subject matter, as well as shifts in opinion about particular subject matters, which make the text appear as if it is a collection of otherwise unrelated proverbs, or a collection of literary units. The placement of these passages or units within the larger literary framework leaves spaces between the passage and units where the shifts from subject to subject, or from literary unit to literary unit, appear not to have been smoothed over. Further, there are some contradictions within the text, and these contradictions contribute to the ‘gaps’ which the reader must make sense of. The contradictions are very important to any study of Qohelet’s structural ambiguity.

\(^{305}\) Salyer, *Vain Rhetoric*, p. 146. Fox (*A Time to Tear Down*, 149-150) compares the structure of the book of Qohelet with the work of Wittgenstein.


within literary units, but in the spaces between those units. This has had a great influence on the method used in this study. The method I have adopted assumes that, though one might enter the text at any given point, due to this structural dis/unity, that entry point will lead to – must lead to – other passages in other units within the text.

Qohelet’s contradictions have been a source of consternation from earliest times, and continue to trouble exegetes.308 One clear example of irreconcilable points of view can be seen in 9:4, ‘Better a live dog than a dead lion,’ and 6:3, which describes a rich person’s inability to enjoy their wealth, and also the lack of a proper burial, and concludes (to paraphrase) that ‘even a stillbirth is better off than they are.’309 A contradiction can be seen here between life always being preferable to death, and death sometimes being preferable to life. It is contradictions such as this one which lead some scholars to conclude that the book of Qohelet is a collection of sayings, or a collection of literary units, which are only “compositionally related to each other.”310

While I do not doubt the validity of various history of tradition explanations for the contradictions evident in the text, or other methods of explaining and sometimes eliminating the contradictions, I am for the most part dealing with the final form of

308 See Fox, Qohelet and His Contradictions, 19-28, for a summary of approaches to the contradictions throughout the history of interpretation of the book.
309 These and other so-called Tôb-Sprüche are the subject of Chapter Five, “Why Not Suicide?”
310 Loader, Polar Structures, 9.
the text and so my own approach is to accept the contradictions and to leave them lie side by side, both given equal standing. I follow Fox in this, not just in the claim that detailed study of Qohelet’s vocabulary results in the discovery that some of the contradictions are not quite so great as they first appear, but also in that

I try to read Qohelet without ‘solving’ the problems raised by the contradictions in his perceptions of toil, wisdom, and justice. I am not sure I entirely succeed, because there is a tremendous interpretive pressure to raise the valleys and lower the hills, to make the way straight and level before the reader. But a reading faithful to this book, at least, should try to describe the territory with all its bumps and clefts, for they are not mere flaws, but the essence of the landscape.

To Fox’s mind, “Qohelet’s contradictions state the problems rather than solving them, and the interpreter likewise must leave many of the observations in tension.” Due to the presence of contradictions in the text, contradictions which moreover are to be treated equally, the text retains a structural ambiguity. Statements which might be contradictory are placed in relation to each other within the literary composition of the text. A reader therefore must move between contradictions, just as the reader must move between literary units. And, again, entering the text at one point will, due in large part to this structural ambiguity, lead to countless other points within the text.

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311 I have, however, excluded the ‘epilogue’ from this study. See § 1.3.3. below.
312 The “severity of some of the contradictions can be reduced by closer definition of the terms” (Fox, Qohelet and His Contradictions, 11). See the discussion on my approach to Qohelet’s semantics below.
313 Fox, Qohelet and His Contradictions, 28.
314 Fox, Qohelet and His Contradictions, 11.
1.3.1.2. Grammatical and syntactical ambiguity

The ambiguity which is present at a structural level is also present at the grammatical or lexical level. It is at this level that readers often first encounter Qohelet’s rhetoric of ambiguity,\(^\text{315}\) for Qohelet’s language is a strange one. It is neither Classical nor Mishnaic Hebrew, but might be something in between. Or, it might be a Hebrew dialect, perhaps from the north of Israel.\(^\text{316}\) It has also been suggested that the book is a translation of another language entirely, and to compound the difficulty, translated by someone who did not fully understand Hebrew.\(^\text{317}\)

Beyond the multiple *hapax legomena* found in the book,\(^\text{318}\) Qohelet favours a small number of words, and this choice vocabulary is used in inventive ways, with old worlds receiving new twists on their meaning, and wide-ranging semantic fields. Oswald Loretz has calculated that Qohelet uses 28 of his words to make up 21.2 %

\(^{315}\) Salyer, *Vain Rhetoric*, 137.


\(^{317}\) Burkitt for example claims that the text is a translation from Aramaic (cited in Mitchell J. Dahood, “Canaanite-Phoenician Influence in Qoheleth,” *Bib* 33 [1952]: 30-52, 191-221 [31]). Dahood does not go quite so far, arguing that while Qohelet wrote in Hebrew, his language took on the peculiarities of his Phoenician city-state milieu (Mitchell J. Dahood, “The Phoenician Background of Qoheleth,” *Bib* 47 [1966]: 264-282 [264-265]). Gordis however disagrees with Dahood’s theory, claiming that “a Phoenician provenance or even Phoenician influence for the book is completely unjustified” (Robert Gordis, “Was Koheleth a Phoenician? Some Observations on Methods in Research,” *JBL* 74 [1955]: 103-114 [108]).

\(^{318}\) The book of Qohelet contains numerous *hapax legomena*. A list of hapax, as well as “Words and Forms in the Book of Koheleth belonging to a more recent Period of the Language,” can be found in Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes* (trans. M.G. Easton; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 190-196.
of the total text.\textsuperscript{319} Schoors addresses the four most commonly used words in Qohelet: מַלְאָכָה (49 times); הֵדַע (49 times); בֶּן וּלְוֵי (47 times); and הָרָא (52 times).\textsuperscript{320} He considers the prevalence of מַלְאָכָה evidence of the universality of the book, and the frequency of הֵדַע is also “accounted for by the philosophical genre of the book, since philosophy is about ‘being.’”\textsuperscript{321} That Qohelet often uses הֵדַע to mean ‘to happen’ shows that he is a “real philosopher,” though a philosopher more interested in human life than in “an ontology of an unalterable metaphysical world.”\textsuperscript{322} The meaning of the oft-used בֶּן וּלְוֵי is not fixed, Schoors writes, but, depending on the object and the context, can mean observation, examination, realisation, or conclusion.\textsuperscript{323} Finally, the meaning common to הָרָא throughout Biblical Hebrew of the “suitability or usefulness of a thing or person,” with an emphasis on the “functional aspect,” is not often used in Qohelet,\textsuperscript{324} which rather uses הָרָא with a variety of meanings ranging from marking something which has lasting value to an evaluative meaning, for example in the Tôb-Sprüche,\textsuperscript{325} to a substantive.\textsuperscript{326}

\textsuperscript{319} Oswald Loretz, \textit{Qohelet und die Alte Orient: Untersuchungen zu Stil und theologischer Thematik des Buches Qohelet} (Freiberg: Herder, 1964), 179.
\textsuperscript{321} Schoors, “Words Typical of Qohelet,” 17 and 21.
\textsuperscript{322} Schoors, “Words Typical of Qohelet,” 21.
\textsuperscript{323} Schoors, “Words Typical of Qohelet,” 32.
\textsuperscript{324} Schoors, “Words Typical of Qohelet,” 33.
\textsuperscript{325} Schoors, “Words Typical of Qohelet,” 33.
\textsuperscript{326} Schoors, “Words Typical of Qohelet,” 35.
Thus, not only do some of Qohelet’s favoured words contribute to the sense of the book as a philosophy, Qohelet also uses common words in new ways, and some of these words experience shifts of meaning from context to context. Sometimes, one word might hold a primary meaning throughout an entire passage, but within that passage the word might carry divergent underlying meanings. This literary phenomenon, known as antanaclasis, is used by Qohelet with regard to סָפַר in 7:23-29, for example.327 These elements of Qohelet’s literary style – development of new semantic fields, and semantic fields which must encompass divergent meanings – contribute to the rhetoric of ambiguity in the text.

What does all this mean for the method of this thesis?

1.3.2. Conclusions regarding method

McEvenue writes, “method is nothing more than a description and systematisation of acts of understanding.”328 The death-specific passages I set out below will serve as entry points into a larger set of passages which will emerge somewhat organically in a response to my attempts to understand the death-specific passages. But as my entry points into the text are death explicit, all other points of contact within the text take on a tinge of the deathly entry passages. It is for this reason I have called this method thanatological, as the method entails, in a sense, reading the book of Qohelet through the veil of death.

327 See Chapter Three, “The Knowledge of Limits and the Limits of Knowledge.”
In summary, Qohelet’s strange syntax, his multiple *hapax*, and his use of old words with new twists in meaning, the wide-ranging semantic fields, and the structure of the text, and the contradictions, require that the exegete read the text in a particular way. Each key word must be read in light of its uses elsewhere in the text. Due to the fact that Qohelet might use a word in a new way, it is not enough to understand what a word means in other Hebrew Bible texts. And one can only understand what the word might mean in its context in a particular verse if one addresses all the other uses of the word within the book. A semantic field may therefore be developed which accounts not only for the new way Qohelet might use the word, but also for all the different ways Qohelet might use the word within the text. The semantic field developed does not necessarily assume continuity. To deal authentically with this text, the boundaries of the field must be rubbery enough to encompass paradox.

Further, it is near to impossible to separate one theme from any other theme. The lack of discernible structure or of escalating plot, and the quick changes from one topic to another, allow the reader to slip between themes, to be passed easily from one theme to another, and to pull out any one theme often requires one to pull out any number of textually connected themes. Thus the interconnection of the text is present at both the micro (grammatical, syntactical) level and the macro (structural and thematic) level.
As stated, I have chosen specific passages to discuss Qohelet’s conceptions of death. However, as the text’s rhetoric enables the reader to shift easily between passages, to make connections between one theme and other themes, one verse and another verse, the chosen, death-specific passages naturally lead to other passages and other themes. My method in seeking to explore the intersection of Qohelet’s philosophicality and thanatology, therefore, entails first choosing particular texts which are explicitly about death, but then, in line with the rhetoric of the book, allowing the search for understanding to take me from that first death-explicit verse to any other related verse within the text, and due to the entry point being death-explicit, that death is carried over into all the passages subsequently treated.

1.3.3. Textual considerations

The book’s ‘epilogue,’ that is, 12:9-14, is usually considered a later addition to the text, for several reasons: v. 9 begins with ‘additionally’ ( Heb “タメニ”); Qohelet is referred to in the third person; the material “appears to look back at the book and reflect on the work of Qohelet.”329 For these reasons I will be excluding the epilogue from my treatment of the text.330 Beyond this exclusion, however, this thesis assumes one author, who will be called Qohelet.331

329 Seow, Ecclesiastes, 391.
All numbering follows the MT.

1.4. Summary of chapters

Both the rhetoric of the primary text itself and my own methodology obviously cause problems for structuring an argument as well as for structuring the thesis as a whole. If every thing I write about is informed by and infers everything else, if no one passage or theme can properly be taken in isolation from other passages or themes, then one cannot legitimately build fences around a particular text and exclude others in order to create an argument, and to create chapters, firstly without great difficulty, and secondly without undermining the very nature of the primary text.

The structure of this thesis, and also of each chapter, is an attempt to honour the rhetorical ambiguity of the primary text, which ambiguity I have also attempted to


It should be noted here however that parts of the text are sometimes thought to have been taken up into the book from other traditions or cultures, or to be directly dependent upon the texts of other cultures. Studies which compare Qohelet with Greek philosophical texts were explored above (§ 1.2.1.1.1.). It has also been suggested that the text is dependent upon Egyptian ‘heretic’ Harper Songs (Stefan Fischer, “Qohelet and ‘Heretic’ Harpers’ Songs,” JSOT 98 [2002]: 105-121). Fischer argues that Qohelet’s ‘calls for joy,’ found in seven texts (2:24-26, 3:12-13, 22, 5:17-19; 8:15; 9:7-10; 11:7-12:7), are influenced by these Egyptian songs (Fischer, “Qohelet and ‘Heretic’ Harpers’ Songs,” 106). Parallels have also been drawn between Qohelet and the Epic of Gilgamesh, particularly with regard to Gilgamesh 3.4.5-8 which seems to parallel Qohelet’s motifs of being ‘under the sun’ and ‘chasing wind,’ and on the basis of the alewife Siduri’s advice to Gilgamesh, which is thought to parallel Qoh 9:7-9 (Bruce William Jones, “From Gilgamesh to Qoheleth,” in The Bible in the Light of Cuneiform Literature: Scripture in Context III [ed. William W. Hallo, Bruce W. Jones, and Gerald L. Mattingly; ANETS 8; Lewiston: Edwin Mellin Press, 1990], 349-379 [361, 366-367]).
factor into my methodology. The structure of the thesis is not linear, in that the chapters can be read in any order.

Chapter Two, “Nature and the Death Aesthetic,” takes as its entry point the Catalogue of Times (3:2-8), specifically those verses in the Catalogue which refer to death (vv. 2, 4, 8). Here the place of the Catalogue within Qohelet’s descriptions of the natural world is discussed, and consequently, the place of death within the natural world. This idea of a ‘natural’ death is then linked up with the important term, נט, time, and in doing so we explore concepts of appropriateness, and also beauty.

Chapter Three, “The Knowledge of Limits and the Limits of Knowledge,” takes 3:11 as its entry point. Though 3:11 does not seem to be explicitly concerned with death as are the other entry passages, a word study of מבט shows that 3:11 is in fact concerned with death. The knowledge of our mortality is given us by God, but this specific knowledge in countered by a general lack of understanding.

9:4-10 is the entry point for Chapter Four, “What it is to be Dead.” In this chapter Qohelet’s view of death as the annihilation of the self is explored, as well as the implications this concept of death would have for a morbid solipsist. The description of what it is to be dead from 9:4-10 is connected with the reversal of creation described in the poem on aging and death in Qohelet 12 thereby showing that death results not just in the death of the self, but also in the death of the whole
world. Thus the experience of death is that there is no subjective experience of
death at all.

Chapter Five, “Why Not Suicide?” addresses the series of death-related Tôb-Sprüche,
or ‘Better Proverbs,’ found in Qoh 4:1-3; 6:1-6; 7:1; 9:4, most of which suggest that
death or non-existence is sometimes preferable to life. This chapter asks, does
‘sometimes preferable’ translate to ‘should be sought out’? This chapter also places
the death-positive Tôb-Sprüche in contrast with the single death-negative/life-
positive Tôb-Spruch (9:4), in which Qohelet writes that a life, even a lowly life, is to
be preferred to death. Complex irony will then be used to reconstruct Qohelet’s
‘frame of mind’ with regard to suicide.

Chapter Six, “The Pulse of Death” both builds upon and underpins chapters two to
five. This chapter explores Qohelet’s particular brand of wisdom, using 7:1-4 as its
entry point, wherein are described the actions of Qohelet’s type of wise person.
Here Qohelet describes a wise person as dwelling on death. The subject matter of
the preceding chapters can therefore be seen as elements of Qohelet’s wisdom. This
discussion leads to a treatment of לְבַשָׁן as symptomatic of wisdom, as well as both
the positive and negative effects of Qohelet’s death-based wisdom.
2. Nature and the Death Aesthetic

The Catalogue of Times is undoubtedly one of the best known passages in the book of Qohelet and it is apt that we begin our exploration of Qohelet’s philosophies of death with this famous passage.

The Catalogue of Times is strictly speaking to be found in 3:2-8, a collection of fourteen pairs of events often described as antithetical, but the larger passage in which the Catalogue is contained comprises three parts: the ‘title’ (3:1), the list of events (the Catalogue proper; 3:2-8), and the commentary (3:9-15). Most probably, 3:1 is an introduction to 3:2-8, followed by Qohelet’s commentary in 3:9-15, which either acts as a ‘key’ to the Catalogue\(^1\) or refutes it.\(^2\)

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\(^{1}\) Gordis claims that the key to the meaning Qohelet attaches to vv. 1-8 is found in vv. 9-15, which represent the conclusions to which he comes (Gordis, *Koheleth*, 228-229). Longman notes that the poem’s beauty “obscures its bleak message,” and that it must be read in light of its immediate
In this chapter the Catalogue will be used as the entry point into a discussion of Qohelet’s conception of the place of death in the natural world, as well as the relation between death and beauty. This chapter is therefore in three major parts. In the first part we will assess the various types of death described in the list of events in 3:2-8; in the second part we will analyse the relation between those types of death and their time (יָבֵא); and in the third part we will address the relation between the times of Qohelet’s natural deaths and his understanding of beauty (יָבֵא).

2.1. Types of death in the Catalogue of Times

This section will explore the various types of death listed in the Catalogue. The Catalogue of Times describes several types of death: ‘natural’ death (3:2), ‘slaying’ or murder (3:3), and death in war (3:8). Beyond this, the relation of the items to each other suggest that death is not just present where it is stated explicitly, but is also present in a less explicit manner in various other Catalogue items (3:4, 5, 6, 7).

context, namely 3:9-15 (Longman, Ecclesiastes, 111). Crenshaw also views 3:9-15 as the interpretative key to the Catalogue (Crenshaw, Ecclesiastes, 93).

2 Blenkinsopp (“Ecclesiastes 3:1-15: Another Interpretation,” JSOT 66 [1995]: 55-64 [58]), argues that Qohelet has given a long quote (3:2-8) a title (3:1), and a commentary (3:9-15) refuting the content of the quote. As suggested by Blenkinsopp’s structuring of 3:1-15, there is some thought that 3:2-8 was lifted by the author from another setting. Blenkinsopp (“Ecclesiastes 3:1-15,” 58) thinks it is a long quote of traditional wisdom, or of the Stoic philosophers contemporaneous with Qohelet.
2.1.1. Introduction to the Catalogue

The Catalogue of Times is so called because it notes that there is a time (תָּמִיָּה) for each of the 28 activities listed (v. 1). They are arranged in 14 antithetical pairs, with two of these pairings constituting a verse. There are less obvious relationships between the items listed within each verse. While the pairings on each line are antithetical, the relationship between the items of the first pair and the second pair in some verses seems to have a poetic synonymity. For example, the tearing up of plants in v. 2d seems to correspond to dying in v. 2b, while planting in v. 2c seems to correspond to being born in v. 2a. This will be discussed as it arises below.

The list as a whole is framed with birth and death (v. 2a, b), and war and peace (v. 8c, d), which lends the Catalogue a “ringed pattern, a closed structure.” Apart from this frame, the items do not seem to conform to any discernable pattern, overall. However, this closed structure, and especially the topping of the list by birth and death, suggest that the items in the Catalogue can be taken to symbolically represent the entirety of human existence. The description of the items in 3:1 also suggests the items represent the whole of human existence. 3:1 employs the particle לְךָ.

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3 3:1 is studied in detail below, as well as Qohelet’s concept of time and the relation of that time to the events said to occur in it.
4 The sof passuq was not original to the text, but added at the same time as the vowel pointings, in the sixth or seventh centuries C.E. Division of verses as such is questionable. However, as this thesis utilises the MT, the Catalogue will be read in light of these later textual pointings, and each verse therefore will conform to the separations marked by the sof passuq.
5 Crenshaw, Ecclesiastes, 93.
6 Seow, Ecclesiastes, 171.
7 The fourteen pairs are the double of seven, a number connoting entirety (Elsa Tamez, “Ecclesiastes: A Reading from the Periphery,” Interpretation 55/3 [2001]: 250-259 [257]).
everything, and under the sun, both of which, when one presumes a relationship between 3:1 and the list of items from 3:2-8, denote a symbolic completion to the items in the list.

2.1.2. References to death in the Catalogue

2.1.2.1. ‘Natural’ death, or any death at all (3:2)

As stated, the Catalogue’s first pairing is לָלֶמֶךָ, be born, give birth, and לֶמֶךָ, die (3:2a). The type of death described in this verse is ambiguous. Though it might be that it is what might be called a ‘natural’ death, a death at an old age, the lack of clarifying information allows one to read the death as any type of death, at any age.

All but five of the Catalogue’s activities are infinitive construct in form.8 There is some debate over how the infinitives should be understood. Seow, for instance, reads the ה as ‘for,’ and renders the infinitives as gerunds, and so translates ‘for birthing… for dying,’9 while Blenkinsopp reads an active Qal infinitive, and translates לָלֶמֶךָ ‘to give birth.’10 These active translations of the infinitives open this pair to the question of what is within human control, and what is not, and can, in extrapolation, open the way to suicide.11

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8 Vv. 4c, d, 5b, 8c, d are not infinitive in form.
9 Seow, Ecclesiastes, 160.
11 The possibility that Qohelet might sanction suicide is the topic of Chapter Five, “Why Not Suicide?”
Both Seow and Blenkinsopp state that the first item on the list, דָּלִי, is to be read actively, as in someone giving birth to a child. Blenkinsopp takes this further and claims that the expression דָּלִי is the only one of the Catalogue’s 28 events not under human control. A human can control the time to plant and to harvest, to wage war and, if one agrees with Blenkinsopp, one can control the time to breed (to give birth). With all the items weighted toward human control, Blenkinsopp argues, death too should be read actively, that is, one should be able to choose to enact one’s own death. Rudman, following Blenkinsopp, claims that the passage “demands an interpretation of דָּלִי (‘to die’) in which people chose to die, and so may be explained as an exhortation to suicide in line with contemporary Stoic thought.”

Though it might be that Qohelet subtly endorses suicide, it seems strange to assume that the act of giving birth was in Qohelet’s time within human control. In modern times we might read this as within human control, as we have the ability to induce birth, but gestation was in Qohelet’s time a mysterious event. In 11:5 he speaks of something that cannot be understood – the quickening of the child in the womb. Though this is not, granted, the act of giving birth itself, we might assume that the mystery of the growth of a child is carried over into the time that it would be born. Also, in the wider Hebrew Bible tradition it was God alone who opened and closed wombs, and who guaranteed or denied conception (Gen 18:10, 14;

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14 See Chapter Five, “Why Not Suicide?”
29:31; 30:2; 1 Sam 1:5, 6). For these reasons it seems rather odd to claim as do Rudman and Blenkinsopp that giving birth was an act within human control. As such it would seem that reading לַלְלָה as the only item not within human control, which reading allows one to infer that it should be in human control, is not in line with the concept of birth in the Hebrew Bible. That said, however, it is not necessary to read לַלְלָה as describing the act of giving birth. It could, indeed more likely does, denote being born.

Fox’s translation of this first infinitive is along these lines, and is more probable. Fox has determined that the pairing of לַלְלָה with the gerundial ‘for dying’ means that the Qal infinitive here carries the intransitive sense, ‘being born.’

Fox’s reading correctly identifies the birth event in 3:2 as that one which begins a person’s life, in polarity with the death which ends that person’s life. Illman wonders why לַלְלָה is not paired with the more frequent הָיָה, but it is clear that it is not life and death for which there is a time, but being born (beginning life) and dying (ending life). Qohelet has already stated in 3:1 that there is a time for everything ‘under the heavens,’ a term which denotes being in the world. Thus the

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15 Fox, Qohelet and His Contradictions, 192.
17 #m#h occurs 29 times in Qohelet (1:3, 9, 14; 2:11, 17, 18, 19, 20, 22; 3:16; 4:1, 3, 7, 15; 5:12, 17; 6:1, 12; 8:9, 15 [x2], 17; 9:3, 6, 9 [x2], 11, 13; 10:5), and nowhere else in the HB. #m#h and its synonym מִיָּה (1:13; 2:3; 3:1; it occurs another 16 times in the HB) inarguably denote life and living. There is little debate that מִיָּה and מִיָּה connote life in the world. #m#h is “Qoheleth’s favourite term for this-worldly existence” (Ogden, Qoheleth, 30). See also Seow, Ecclesiastes, 104-106. J. Gerald Janzen (“Qohelet on Life ‘Under the Sun,’” CBQ 70 [2008]: 465-483 [470]), claims that the phrase ‘under the sun’ might be used in Qohelet with “connotations of human existence as lived out under the delegated rule of the sun; and
living, יִשְׂרָאֵל, is inferred through ‘under the heavens’ in 3:1, just as it is inferred through the events in the Catalogue. Birth and death then are synecdochic, with Qohelet inferring the whole by presenting only parts of the whole. All the items of the Catalogue therefore fall within the very beginning of a life, birth, and the very end of that life, death.

But what type of death is inferred in this verse? All that is clearly mentioned is the end of a life. There is no specification about whether it is death from old age, or whether it is any other of a multitude of deaths.

If it does denote death from old age – the ‘natural’ end of a life – that death would occur at around seventy or eighty years of age. Ps 90:10 gives seventy years as the age at which one should die, or eighty years ‘if in strength’ (יהוה יומך). If we assume that the items do not duplicate events or types of events, the place of violent death in other parts of the Catalogue (3:4, 8) suggests that the death in 3:2 is something other than those deaths, something ‘natural’ in the sense that it is not a death induced by violence or in war.

However, without this assumption that, because violent death is represented elsewhere, the death in 3:2 must be a natural death in old age, it could be that the death in 3:2 is any death at all. Without specification that this is death of old age, all the information we unquestionably possess about it is that it represents the end of a

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further, given Qohelet’s specific circumstances, where Jewish existence under foreign rule is at odds with eschatological expectation, that such delegated rule has the character of oppression.”
life. A life may end in many different ways, and it is possible that any of these methods of death are present in v. 2b. Even a stillbirth is a birth followed by death, technically, for it comes into לְבָנִי and goes into darkness (6:4), and לְבָנִי is used only of what occurs within the world, never of the Totenwelt.\(^{18}\) The violent death of v. 3 (see below) is also contained within theTotenwelt, just as is death by starvation, disease, donkey accident – death by any means, 3:2 infers, has a time.\(^{19}\) The death in 3:2 is therefore ambiguous: it could be ‘natural’ death, or it could be any type of death at all.

The explicit death of 3:2b could be implied in the paired items, planting (מַלְאַלְמָה) and uprooting (חֲטִיב), in 3:2cd. Though the literal meanings of planting and uprooting are entirely appropriate within the Catalogue’s list of human events, representing the agricultural work which consumed so much time and which underpinned survival, they can also be read as metaphors for birth and death. The root חֲטִיב is used of the destruction of animals and cities. Joshua ‘hamstrings’ (חֲטִיב) horses in Josh 11:9, and David ‘hamstrings’ chariot horses in 2 Sam 8:4. In Zeph 2:4 it is said that Ekron will be ‘uprooted’ (חַטִּיב), that is, its people will be cast out. In Gen 49:6, Jacob says of Simeon and Levi that ‘when angry they slay (חִמָּה) men, and when

\(^{18}\) See Chapter Six, “The Pulse of Death,” 299. While suicide, too, could be covered by the death in 3:2, such an argument cannot be made on the grounds of death being the only event not under human control, as has been seen above.

\(^{19}\) Precisely what is meant by this, that is, by the relation of the event with its time, is discussed in detail in § 2.2. of this chapter.
pleased they maim (nothrow) oxen. Further, planting can symbolise the establishment of a stable community and uprooting an ending and scattering of a community. Through the prophet Nathan God describes how the people of Israel will be ‘planted firm’ (ผลิตภัณฑ) in a place of their own (2 Sam 7:10); God appoints Jeremiah as the divine spokesperson in Jer 1:10, ‘to uproot (ностью) and pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant (нести).’ Of the three possible meanings of the verb ‘to uproot, eradicate, bring to an end,’ it is the last meaning, ‘bring to an end’ which Seow claims is the intended meaning in this 3:2.

This reading of as ‘bringing to an end’ does seem to be supported by a particular pattern which may be observed within some of the Catalogue’s verses. As mentioned above, though the items between 3:2 and 3:8 do not progress in any order, some of the verses do seem to exhibit a certain internal arrangement. The first item in the first line (a), and the first item in the second line (c), seem to be related, just as the second item in the first line (b) seems to be echoed in the second item of the second line (d). Here in v. 2, for instance, death (b) and plucking up a plant (d) correspond. We might conclude therefore that plucking up a plant is a type of death (certainly an ending of the life of the plant). Conversely, planting (c) is a type of birth (a). Planting something is akin to beginning its life. When one puts a seed in the ground, one creates a potential life that (should the seed be good) will

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20 Seow, Ecclesiastes, 160.
21 Seow, Ecclesiastes, 160.
eventuate into a life. So, too, when one plucks that plant from the ground, one in
effect ends that life. By imaging death’s place in the life-cycle of a crop or plant,
Qohelet subtly reminds us that death is a part of nature.\(^{22}\)

2.1.2.2. Killing (3:3)

In 3:3 we see that violent death is one of the types of death to be found in the
Catalogue. 3:3 states that there is a time to kill, בָּשָׂם, countered by a time to heal, חָפָז. Thus
the Catalogue again refers to death, but this time it is not ‘one’s own’ death, but
death inflicted by one person on another.\(^{23}\) It has been thought that killing is not a
“natural antithesis” to healing, and has been rendered ‘wound’ instead,\(^{24}\) but the
verb בָּשָׂם is very clearly a reference to violent death. Though in many of its 172
usages, בָּשָׂם is translated ‘slay,’ other possible verbal meanings include ‘destroy,
kill, murder.’\(^{25}\) Though the root can include ideas of the killing of animals, this is
not common. בָּשָׂם is never used of killing sacrificial animals and “very seldom” of
the killing of animals for food.\(^{26}\) בָּשָׂם is more often used of the ideas of murder or

\(^{22}\) Or as much a part of nature as human agricultural practices.
\(^{23}\) “Presumably, the killing refers to actions by human beings directed at other persons” (Crenshaw,
_Ecclesiastes_, 93).
\(^{24}\) See Barton, _A Critical and Exegetical Commentary_, 104.
\(^{25}\) Harold G. Stigers, “בָּשָׂם,” _TWOT_ 1:222-223 (222).
\(^{26}\) Stigers, _TWOT_ 1: 222.
judicial execution or “violent killing in war or intrigue.”

Cain slays (הָרָעָה) his brother Abel (אֵבָל) in Gen. 4:8, while in 2 Sam. 4:11-12 David executes (הָרָעָה) the murderers (תֹּרָה) of Ishboschet. Even God may slay, as in the slaying of the first-born in Ex. 13:15. Thus the Catalogue here again refers to death, this time not ‘one’s own’ death, but a violent death inflicted by one person on another.

2.1.2.3. Death in war (3:8)

The infliction of violent death on another is also implied in v. 8c, מלחמה, a time for war. מלחמה, war or battle, is important in Hebrew Bible theology, occurring over 300 times. It “refers to physical violence usually on the corporate level as two groups (such as nations) collide with the force of arms.” Such a clash would undoubtedly involve deaths. Thus the מלחמה in v. 8c must infer that there is a time for the type of death one finds in war, that is, violent death.

2.1.2.4. Destruction and mourning (3:4, 5, 6, 7)

Some other passages in the Catalogue are possibly tainted with death also.

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27 Stigers, *TWOT* 1: 222.
3:6 can be read as somewhat death-touched. The verb מֵתוּ (db) in v. 6b, meaning here ‘to be lost’ as it is paired with בָּאָב, seek, is related to Abaddon (אָבָדָון), the ‘place of destruction.’

The verb in question, מַהְתַּת, is commonly used to mean ‘to die’ and in the Piel and Hiphil can be used transitively to mean ‘to kill’ or ‘break down.’

In v. 4, there is a time for weeping (חָלְשָׁתא, twkb) and for wailing (תָּשָׁלָת, dps). dps refers to mourning, lament, or wail, and very often this root describes “mourning rites at someone’s death (e.g. Gen 23:2; 50:10; I Sam 25:1; 28:3; II Sam 1:12; 3:31; 11:26; I Kgs 13:29f.; cf. Eccl 12:5).” While weeping, twkb, can be a sign of joy, its proximity to wailing, and its contrast to laughing, suggest that the weeping here is associated with sorrow.

A corresponding mournfulness might be found in vv. 5, 7. It is sometimes thought that the gathering of stones in v. 5 alludes to the practice of piling stones atop a grave. Likewise, the ripping/tearing of v. 7a is thought to allude to the practice of tearing one’s clothes in a sign of mourning.

With regard to v. 5, however, given the correspondence of items within the verses, it might be that the items of the second stich of v. 5 lend some meaning to the items

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30 מַהְתַּת (db) is used six times in the HB (Prov. 15:11; 27:20; Ps 88:12; Job 26:6; 28:22; 31:12).
31 R. Laird Harris, “db,” TWOT 1:3-4 (3).
33 Plumptre and Delitzsch, cited in Barton, Ecclesiastes, 100.
34 Gordis, Koheleth, 230.
of the first stich of v. 5. Thus gathering stones and casting stones could be read in light of embracing and refraining from embracing. A sexual meaning to the items in the first stich is possible. The Midrash Qohelet Rabbah understands this verse sexually. Gordis too reads gathering stones as symbolic of abstinence, and casting stones of “sexual congress.” More correctly, the stones in this context would refer to childbirth; as in Ex 1:16, one of the references offered by Gordis to support his reading, the stone is used in the context of a birthing, and is thus a ‘birthstone.’ Again in Jer 2:27, the stone is used in the context of birthing. But there are other stones mentioned in the HB. A millstone (ḇek ṭ ṭopol), for example, is dropped on Abimelech’s head in Judg 9:53. While the stone in that passage is an instrument of death, in other passages the millstone is used simply for grinding. So, while a sexual meaning to the stones in this line is possible, it is not the only possibility, and could just as easily refer to some sort of death related rite or a mode of killing, or to neither of these possibilities.

Gordis notes that the tearing of garments in v. 7a could refer to the Jewish mourning practice of tearing one’s garments, while the corresponding sewing could refer to the practice of sewing up the tear after the period of mourning. Reuben rends his clothes in Gen 37:29 when he sees Joseph is gone, either dead or sold to slavers; David and his courtiers rend their clothes in 2 Sam 13:31 when they hear that Absalom has killed Amnon and all the princes; and the friends tear their robes

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in Job 2:12. This tearing is an act of mourning, the origin of which we cannot know. Saul Olyan suggests that tearing of the clothes “may suggest the physical separation of the dead from the living or perhaps the pain of loss suffered by the mourner.”38 It could be, even, that the act of tearing a garment stems from an older practice of bearing one’s breasts in grief.39

The following silence (v. 7b) might also, Gordis says, refer to the period of mourning. He offers Lev 10:3 as evidence of this, wherein Aaron remains silent after God has killed his sons for offering ‘alien fire’ (נְנָשָׁיָה), and after which Moses claims that this shows God to be holy and glorious. It seems unclear to me whether Aaron remains silent because he is mourning, or whether he remains silent because he does not agree with Moses’ interpretation of events. After tearing their robes in Job 2:12, the friends remain silent, seeing Job is suffering greatly (Job 2:13), and here the silence does seem to be more clearly connected with grief, or at the least respect for another’s grief. Therefore it could be that the silence in v. 7 refers to a silence in mourning.

2.1.3. Conclusions regarding types of death in the Catalogue

It does seem that death has a solid presence within the items of the Catalogue. It presents explicitly as the death which ends a life in v. 2, which death could be natural, or could be any type of death at all, as well as in the violent death through

killing in v. 3. Death is implicit in its association with the war in v. 8 and perhaps also as the trappings of mourning throughout various other passages in the Catalogue, such as tearing garments, remaining silent, and gathering stones. Death is sewn throughout the Catalogue, seeping into activities which it might seem have nothing to do with death, such as planting and harvesting, but which, in alignment with the death around it, take on a little of the death-ness.

But what does Qohelet mean by there being a ‘time’ for everything (3:1), and what relationship do the events of the Catalogue have with their ‘time’? Does this mean that there is a time preordained for each and every possible event? Or does it mean that there are times in which these events should occur? These questions will be addressed in the next section.

2.2. Deaths as events in nature

In the previous section we discovered that there are various types of death listed in the Catalogue: arguably, any type of death which ends a life in 3:2, violent death in 3:3, and death associated with war in 3:8. Each of these deaths, the Catalogue tells us, has a ‘time.’ But what is meant by that?

In this section we will seek to describe the relation of the list of events with their time, and with the title (3:1), through the repetition of נַהֲרָא, and the relation of נַהֲרָא to נַהֲרָא within 3:1. We will see that the נַהֲרָא of the Catalogue does not represent a
predetermined time, but rather a time which is appropriate for the event to occur.

Further, the pairing of הָעָרָת and לֵשׁ in 3:1 lends a sense of seasonality, or cyclicality, to the events. This cyclicality is reminiscent of that of Qohelet 1, in which several natural elements are imaged as cyclical. By comparison, it will be seen, the events of the Catalogue are also imaged as natural, and consequently the deaths within the Catalogue are natural also.

2.2.1. Time in the Catalogue

Commentators hold the most divergent views about the intent of the Catalogue based in large part upon how they interpret the concept of time in the Catalogue and in its ‘title’ in 3:1, as well as the ‘commentary’ which follows the Catalogue, particularly 3:15. There are two basic views about the intent of 3:1-15, and both hinge upon the reading of הָעָרָת: either it describes ideal times for certain activities, or it describes the deterministic nature of the human world.40

40 Rudman, *Determinism in the Book of Ecclesiastes*, 83. Gordis’ summary of four approaches can be seen to conform to this overarching classification: Humans “must do everything in its proper time” or “live in accordance with nature”; human “activities are limited to certain times and seasons,” in which nothing is done that hasn’t been done before; “Life is monotonous and all human acts are repetitious”; “All human activity is useless, since everything is predetermined by God” (Gordis, *Koheleth*, 228). Many commentators accept a form of determinism. Crenshaw (*Ecclesiastes*, 93) claims that one cannot profit from observing time for God determines everything. Seow’s (*Ecclesiastes*, 169) focus is on the human response to God’s activities. He claims that “the poem is not about human determination of events or even human discernment of times and seasons”, but rather it is “about God’s activity and the appropriate human response to it.” Seow seems to be saying here that the focus of the Catalogue is not human activity, but divine activity. “Indeed,” he writes, “the activity of God overwhelms and overshadows the activities of humanity in this chapter.” Blenkinsopp considers that the Catalogue presents “a form of determinism in which God predisposes events to happen, while leaving humanity free to make the choice of how they respond to those events” (cited in Rudman, *Determinism in the Book of Ecclesiastes*, 84-85). There have however been a small number of commentators who reject the notion of determinism. Yehiel Hillel Altschuler, author of the *Metzudah David* in the 18th century, emphasised “free will as being the crucial factor in the way that existence works” (Dominic Rudman, “Determinism and Anti-
This subsection will explore the concept of time in Qohelet with particular focus on time and appropriateness. It will be seen that Qohelet’s Catalogue infers that there is an appropriate time for each of these deaths, but that the events need not occur at the appropriate time. We will first look at two of the temporal terms to be found in the Catalogue’s superscription, נֵצֶר and יָמִן, with a particular focus on נֵצֶר. It will be seen that נֵצֶר takes on an elements of cyclicality through its association with יָמִן, season, and, further, that this cyclicality echoes that of Qohelet 1, which contains a poem on the cycles of the natural world. The connection of these two passages suggests that the items listed in the Catalogue, and their times, are put forth as natural occurrences. Thus, it would seem, the deaths present in the Catalogue, including violent death and death in war, are presented as natural events.

2.2.2. נֵצֶר and יָמִן in 3:1

We now turn to the Catalogue’s so-called ‘title’ (3:1).

לָלֶכֶת נֵצֶר וְלֹא לָלֶכֶת חַפִּים חַפִּים:

Determinism in the Book of Koheleth,” JBQ 30/2 [2002]: 97-106 [103]). Also Podechard cited in Rudman, “Determinism and Anti-Determinism,” 97, 105. Edwin M. Good (Irony in the Old Testament [Bible and Literature Series; Sheffield: Almond Press, 1981], 175-176) writes, “The famous passage in 3:1-8 is usually taken as the schematic account of the divine determinism, but I do not think that those verses mean that every event has been given its time beforehand. Rather, I interpret it to mean that there are times appropriate to all kinds of actions, and no kind of action may be excluded a priori as inappropriate.” While I am aware of the debate about time and determinism in Qohelet, I will not be engaging with this debate. My own approach to time in Qohelet, and in the Catalogue specifically, focuses on the arguably inherent appropriateness of time. While something can be both appropriate and determined, something appropriate need not also be determined. Many of the uses of נֵצֶר, time, we will address below conform to this latter sense, in which appropriateness is not synonymous with determinism.
This short verse offers us great insight into Qohelet’s concept of time, and the place of the following events within time and the world.\textsuperscript{41}

There are three terms which carry a temporal loading in 3:1: נְזָן, נַמֵּה, and הָנַתְנָים, and two, נַמֵּה and נְזָן, will be discussed here.\textsuperscript{42} נְזָן is paralleled with נַמֵּה in 3:1. Though both are temporal referents they are not in themselves synonymous. However, it will be shown that the relation of the two asynonymous words is intentional, and lends a seasonality to the list of events it tops.

2.2.2.1. נְזָן

The origin of the noun נְזָן is debated,\textsuperscript{43} but it inarguably designates some aspect of time. The Akkadian simanu, Seow claims, is “a virtually certain cognate of Hebrew 짐, [and] refers to agricultural seasons, the timing of cosmological phenomena, as well as to periods in human life.”\textsuperscript{44} Fox claims that נְזָן can denote a unique or periodic time which is appointed, but that it does not “seem to mean a propitious or right time, nor does it ever clearly designate time as a configuration of

\textsuperscript{41} It also presents the challenging notion that the items described in the following verses are pleasurable. This last element will be taken up below.

\textsuperscript{42} See footnote 17 above for references to נַמֵּה וּנְזָן.

\textsuperscript{43} The general consensus however seems to be that נְזָן is an Aramaic loan word. Whitley considers נְזָן an Aramaic loan word from Akkadian (Whitley, Koheleth, 30; also Seow, Ecclesiastes, 159). In verbal form it is found in Ezra 10:14 (where it is paired with נַמֵּה); Neh 10:35 (where it is paired with נַמֵּה); 13:31 (where it is paired with נַמֵּה); Dan 2:9. As a noun it is used in Neh 2:6; Ezra 5:3; Esth 9:27, 31; Dan 2:16, 21; 3:7, 8; 4:33; 6:11, 14; 7:12, 22, 25 (Wigram, The Englishman’s Hebrew and Chaldee Concordance of the Old Testament [London: Samuel Bagster & Sons, 1843; repr. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1987], 388).

\textsuperscript{44} Seow, Ecclesiastes, 159.
circumstances. Seow states that \( \text{Nmz} \) is only ever used of a predetermined or appointed time. Both Harris et al and BDB define the noun \( \text{Nmz} \) as ‘appointed time, time,’ but the word can also be translated ‘date’ or ‘season.’

Both the NRSV and NJPS, for instance, translate \( \text{Nmz} \) ‘date’ in Neh 2:6. Nehemiah uses this word to describe a particular time in which he will return to King Artaxerxes. However, given that Nehemiah plans to travel to Jerusalem to rebuild it, and he likely could not predict how long either the outward or returning leg of his journey would take, nor how long the rebuilding effort itself would take, it is unlikely that he could offer a precise date such as June 20. Rather, it is more likely that he offered a longer period of time during which he thought he might return. ‘Date’ is therefore a misleading translation, for it suggests a precision which is likely not meant by \( \text{Nmz} \). It is more likely that Nehemiah would offer a time of year, perhaps even a season, at which he thought he might return.

The JPS translates \( \text{Nmz} \) ‘proper time’ in Esth 9:27, 31 and the NRSV ‘appointed time’ in Esth 9:27 and ‘appointed season’ in Esth 9:31. In both these usages, \( \text{Nmz} \) acts to mark a time which recurs from year to year and at which Purim should be observed. These usages have a precision which is lacking in that of Neh 2:6, but it

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45 Fox, A Time to Tear Down, 200-201.
46 Seow, Ecclesiastes, 159.
47 Herbert Wolf, “\( \text{Nmz} \),” TWOT 1: 245; BDB, “\( \text{Nmz} \),” 1: 273.
48 The three instances of \( \text{Nmz} \) addressed here (Neh 2:6; Esth 9:27, 31) are taken from Seow’s discussion of \( \text{Nmz} \) (Ecclesiastes, 159).
seems that it is the element of recurrence and not that of precision which is at the forefront of the meaning of נְמָצֶה in these two passages in Esther. Thus in these three passages, Neh 2:6 and Esth 9:27, 31, נְמָצֶה carries a sense of seasonal recurrence or return. They also, however, have to a greater or lesser degree a sense of particularity, a sense of that season having been chosen or designated the proper time for a particular activity.

It seems therefore that נְמָצֶה denotes a particular time, and can denote an appointed time. This sense is also likely present in its use here in Qoh 3:1. Thus נְמָצֶה in 3:1 probably carries a sense of the recurrence of a particular event or occurrence.

2.2.2.2. נְמָצֶה

נְמָצֶה occurs more frequently than does נְמָצֶה, 296 times in the HB, 40 of those in Qohelet, 29 times alone in 3:1-8 and 11 elsewhere. It is important to understand, given Qohelet’s heavy reliance on this term, what in particular is meant by it. We will now therefore engage in an extensive word study of נְמָצֶה, moving first through its use in the HB, and then specifically though its use in Qohelet.

49 See John Jarick, A Comprehensive Bilingual Concordance of the Hebrew and Greek Texts of Ecclesiastes (Septuagint and Cognate Studies 36; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993), 257-258, for a list of these occurrences in Qohelet. Qohelet 3 contains a total of 31 of the 40 occurrences.
Nearly all cases of הָעָרָה in the HB can be translated with ‘time.’ It is commonly used in a phrase like בָּהַעָרָה, ‘at that time,’ ‘giving the temporal setting of an incident in relation to others.’ It can also describe “conditions prevailing over a period” such as the statement that ‘it is an evil time’ (for example in Amos 5:13 or Pss 9:10; 37:39). It can mean ‘at every time’ or ‘always’ (when it is written in the phrase בָּהַעָרָה). Further, it can denote a proper time for something or a time appointed for it. It is this last understanding of הָעָרָה as denoting a proper time or a time appointed for something which seems to be the most common understanding of the word.

מַעֲרָה is used of particular points in time for example in Exod 9:18 and Josh 11:6, where it denotes a particular time of the next day. It is used of the period when Nehemiah’s enemies were writing and registering their complaints (Neh 6:1), and of the occasion of childbearing (Mic 5:2), and of the extended period during which

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54 Coppes defines מַעֲרָה as ‘time, space of time, appointed time, proper time’ with a basic meaning which “relates to time conceived as an opportunity or season” (Leonard J. Coppes, “‘ēt,” *TWOT* 1:680-681 [681]). Kronholm proposes a basic meaning for מַעֲרָה of ‘(a definite point in) time of/for [something],’ though he stresses that in a number of passages nothing is said explicitly concerning any determination of the point in time or its relationship to something specific (T. Kronholm, “מַעֲרָה ’ēt, מַעֲרָה ‘(attâ,” *TDOT* 11:434-451 [438]).
the tabernacle was at Gibeon (1 Chr 21:29).\textsuperscript{55} It can be used of “the usual, regular events” such as rain (Ezra 10:13), harvest (Jer 50:16), seasons of the year like spring, the time of pregnancy (Gen 18:10, 14), the migratory time of birds (Jer 8:7), and mating season (Gen 31:10).\textsuperscript{56}

Due to the proposed dating of the book of Qohelet to the Persian period, more weight should perhaps be given to post-exilic uses of הָעַר. Some post-exilic texts which use this word are Ezra 8:34; 10:13, 14; Neh 4:16; 6:1; 9:27, 28; 10:35; 13:21, 31; Esth 1:13; 4:14 (x2); 5:13; 8:9.

הָעַר marks the occurrence of a particular event in Ezra 8:34 (בָּאָר הָעַר). It seems to denote the qualities of a duration of time in Ezra 10:13, where it is attached to the qualifying ‘rainy’ (יָדַעְתָּ הָעַר), and so might be translated a ‘rainy season.’ In the following verse, 10:14, הָעַר is paired with יָדַעְתָּ הָעַר (וַיִּמְרֶה הָעַר), and appears here to describe the appropriate time at which a particular event should occur.

Again in Neh 4:16 הָעַר denotes a particular time (בָּאָר הָעַר), while in 6:1 it marks the duration of an absence of an event or qualifying description (וַיִּמְרֶה הָעַר). In Neh 9:27 it marks a duration which is further qualified by a description of the emotion of that duration (בָּאָר הָעַר), and in Neh 9:28 the plural marks repetitive moments of salvation (רָבָּה הָעַר). Again in Neh 10:35 and רָבָּה הָעַר are paired,

\textsuperscript{55} Coppes, \textit{TWOT} 1:681.
\textsuperscript{56} Coppes, \textit{TWOT} 1:681.
and here the time is an action which is to occur annually (לְתַחֲתִים מַהוֹּמָה שָׁנָה). In Neh 13:21 מַהוֹּמָה is used of a duration, which duration is qualified by absence of an action, and in 13:31 again מַהוֹּמָה and מַלְאָך are paired (מַהוֹּמָה מַהוֹּמָה מַלְאָך), and again they denote the seasonally proper time at which a particular action should take place. An understanding of ‘appropriate times’ seems to be legitimate in Esth 1:13, while in 4:14 עָרָב seems more to connote the current, specific duration of unspecified length (בֵּן עָרָב). In Esth 5:13, it denotes a recurrent event (בֵּן עָרָב), and again in 8:9 it seems to mark a specific event (בֵּן עָרָב), with the duration this time being only a day. Thus we can see in post-exilic usages a wide ranging semantic field, including appropriateness, recurrence, and duration, and the absence and presence of events.

Apart from the 29 occurrence of מַהוֹּמָה in the Catalogue (3:1-8), מַהוֹּמָה occurs 11 other times in Qohelet (3:11, 17; 7:17; 8:5, 6, 9; 9:8, 11, 12 [x2]; 10:17). We will now address each of these briefly to try to come to an understanding of how it is Qohelet uses the word, focusing on the element of appropriateness. There is an issue of whether something is appropriate whenever it happens ‘in its time.’ While in some verses time seems to denote an inherent appropriateness (7:17; 3:17; 8:5, 6; 10:17; 3:11), in others it does not (8:9; 9:8, 11, 12[x2]).

Verses in which time does not seem to incorporate a sense of appropriateness are 8:9; 9:8, 11, 12(x2). In these verses, מַהוֹּמָה seems simply to denote a specific duration.
In 8:9, that duration, according to Crenshaw, is ‘at all times’, reading the idiom נֶוחַ as ‘while’.\(^\text{57}\) In 9:8, נֶוחַ is again used of ‘all time’ (הַכְּלִילָה נֶוחַ). Again in 9:11 time doesn’t seem to denote appropriateness. Time, paired with chance (סְתָנָה), rather seems to denote a random occurrence of something which does not allow the swift, strong, wise, intelligent or learned to attain their goals. If we take time separately, not with chance, we can read a little death in the passage. Of course death would put an irreversible end to the endeavours of all these people, and given time, it will come about. Perhaps the verbal הָרְקוֹן, related to הָרְקָם, fate or death for Qohelet, hints at this. But chance is something at work in addition to fate, something else which puts an end to the endeavours of those people. Its use with נֶוחַ could mean that is represents a meeting of time with event, the ‘configuration of circumstances’ in Fox’s language. Such a configuration would arise and eradicate the chance of success. And this configuration would be random.

The first occurrence of נֶוחַ in 9:12 undoubtedly refers to death. A person cannot know their own time.\(^\text{58}\) There is a perceived fatalism about this verse which has encouraged deterministic readings. It seems to present the view that there is a particular time at which one will die, and this has been read as meaning that this particular time has been chosen in advance. But this last element steps beyond what the verse offers. It is a truism that there is a time at which one will die. It is also true that we do not know what this time is. It is not necessary to propose that the time of


\(^{58}\) כֵּן נֶוחַ לאֹצַדֵּם הָאֲדָמָה וָאוֹרֵחַ
death is chosen. The sense of time as death is repeated in the second instance of that word in 9:12. Like fish in a net, and birds in a snare, so does the time of misfortune or calamity (דָּיִן רַעֲשָׁה) drop upon people (פַּן). This ‘time of misfortune’ can be nothing other than death, for why else are fish caught and birds snared? This death comes suddenly (זַחְזָה). In both of these cases there is no sense of the time as appropriate, nor is it necessary to read them as denoting a determinism to the death event.

The other occurrences of תַּנִּית do however contain a sense of appropriateness (7:17; 3:17; 8:5, 6; 10:17; 3:11).

7:17. Times are not determined in Qohelet. 7:17 shows conclusively that Qohelet must not conceive of תַּנִּית deterministically, and also that תַּנִּית should be understood as inherently appropriate. In 7:17 Qohelet advises that the reader be not too righteous nor too wicked, for ‘why should you die before your time?’ (לָא תֵּאָכֵל תְּנִית). If, as has been claimed, תַּנִּית represents a time which has been chosen by God for the occurrence of a particular event, there could be no such thing as dying before one’s time. The time of one’s death would be the time chosen by God for one’s death. Predetermined as that death would be, whenever one dies would be the predetermined time of one’s death. In a predetermined system, one cannot therefore die at any other time than the time chosen for one’s death. One must necessarily die at one’s time. That Qohelet in 7:17 infers that one can die at some
time other than one’s own time shows that the time of one’s death is not
determined.

There is only one sense in which the הפש of the verse can be taken. If, as is inferred,
one’s actions can affect when one dies, and since, as is stated, there is a time for
one’s death, it can only be concluded that there is a time at which one should die,
but at which time one doesn’t necessarily die. Thus the appropriateness of the time
is contained with the word. There is an appropriate time for one’s death, a time at
which one should die, but this appropriateness does not become deterministic.

3:17. In 3:17 we read that there is a time for every הפש. Whether this word should
be translated ‘pleasure’ or ‘matter’ will be taken up below. What seems clear
however is that הפש here denotes an appropriate time.

8:5, 6. Again in 8:5 we might read הפש as denoting an appropriateness. ‘The wise
heart knows time and judgment’ Qohelet writes. The wise person knows that
judgment will come in the form of old age and death. Time in this verse then is

59 It’s pairing with ‘every happening there’ (כֵּלָה הַחָלְלוֹת מַעֲשֵׂה) certainly suggests that the practical
מששא should lend meaning to הפש.
60 Ogden, for instance, translates הפש here ‘appropriate time’ (Ogden, Qohelet, 59). Qohelet also
notes that both the wicked and the righteous will be judged (שׁמיע) by God. In light of 11:9, it might
be that the judgment here refers not to some allocation of judgment during life, but rather refers to
the judgment all people incur for their having ever been young. That is, the judgment God brings to
bear on both the wicked and the righteous is old age and death. This verse would then be similar to
7:17 in that it describes a time for every death. But again, this time is not necessarily predetermined,
only certain. Both Hertzberg and Loretz consider the judgment to be related to death (cited in
Murphy, Ecclesiastes, 36).
61 כֵּלָה הַחָלְלוֹת מַעֲשֵׂה.
again linked to death. But it need not be limited to it. We can see here that the wise person knows appropriate times. Both of these terms are carried over into 8:6, where Qohelet writes again that there is a time and judgment for every גזע. Every thing which occurs has a time in which it is appropriate for it to occur, and everything which occurs will be judged, the judgment taking the form of old age and death.

10:17. In this verse הָעֵק clearly connotes appropriateness. The land whose chiefs eat in the morning is a land of woe (אכ), and it is only when they eat for strength (לָבוֹר) and not for drunkenness (תַּחְדָּר) that the people of a land are called happy (חָרֲבָר). There is no qualifier connected with the noun הָעֵק, and the positive loading of the verse is suggested only by the opening word, חָרֲבָר, and a presumed juxtaposition with the preceding verse describing the inappropriate feasting time of the chiefs, in the morning. It is only when the princes eat with restraint that they are said to eat ‘in time’ (בָּעֵק). Thus הָעֵק in this verse can only be read to mean, ‘appropriate time.’

3:11. In 3:11 Qohelet writes that God has made everything beautiful in its time (חֲפִיר). The issue with this passage is whether or not חֲפִיר should be here translated appropriate or beautiful is taken up below.
beautiful elsewhere, but sometimes translated ‘appropriate’ in this verse, should in fact be translated appropriate here. A detailed analysis of הָנִּים is conducted below.

It is enough here to say that nowhere else does הָנִּים mean appropriate, and so הָנִּים in 3:11 will be taken to mean beautiful. When this word is read back into the passage it can be seen that Qohelet means either everything is beautiful whenever it happens, or everything is beautiful when it happens at its appropriate time. It seems unlikely that Qohelet would declare everything beautiful whenever it happens. A more likely scenario is that this verse means everything is beautiful when it occurs in its appropriate time. Thus הָנִּים in 3:11 also carries a connotation of appropriateness.

2.2.2.3. Conclusions regarding הָנִּים and בְּגֻשׁי in 3:1

In summary, הָנִּים outside of its use in the Catalogue is often used by Qohelet in his concern about death (3:17; 7:17; 8:5, 6; 9:11, 12). It can be used to mark a time at which something might or will happen (9:11, 12), but it also in some of its usages contains within in a sense of appropriateness (3:11, 17; 7:17; 8:5, 6; 10:17). It is my contention that הָנִּים in the Catalogue, and in the title in 3:1, represents this last sense.

This is supported by the use of בְּגֻשׁי and הָנִּים in parallelism in 3:1. Does בְּגֻשׁי lend meaning to הָנִּים in 3:1 or do they both, in this case, mean the same thing? Qohelet’s paralleling of the temporal units בְּגֻשׁי and הָנִּים in 3:1 offers an insight into his use of


In the Catalogue. It appears to be the case that נָמַץ and תִּנְחָה are not synonyms, for while both terms can denote an appropriate time, נָמַץ carries an extra sense of seasonal appropriateness. Thus the sense of appropriateness of נָמַץ supports reading תִּנְחָה as ‘appropriate time.’ However, the terms are used in parallel, and so not only resonate with regard to appropriateness, but also נָמַץ lends to תִּנְחָה, or draws out of תִּנְחָה, a recurrence or seasonality.

As the introduction to the Catalogue, 3:1 provides an insight into the meaning of תִּנְחָה in the Catalogue. Though it does not cancel the basic meaning of תִּנְחָה, that word is leant a further nuance. תִּנְחָה retains its meaning of ‘time,’ but the reader is reminded that this time has a certain seasonality about it. That is, the parallel terms נָמַץ and תִּנְחָה in v. 1 inform the sense the reader attributes to the multiple uses of תִּנְחָה in the following verses (vv. 2-8). So the seasonality of תִּנְחָה, its sense of repetitiveness and appropriateness, informs the basic meaning of תִּנְחָה. Perhaps we may conclude from this that the appropriate time for the events listed in the Catalogue happen not just once, but repeatedly. Though the Catalogue does not intend that we read this as a strictly timed exercise, it does mean that, like the seasons, these events come round and round again. This reading is supported by examining Qoh 1:2-11, a poem on the natural world, to which we will now turn.
2.2.3. Time and seasonality in 1:2-11

The return of the appropriate times in the Catalogue has its echo in another long poem in Qohelet, 1:2-11. This poem illustrates the cycles of such natural elements as the sun, the rivers, and people, and, it will be seen, opens the way to see the Catalogue as the presentation of the human component of these natural cycles. The repetition of the events in the Catalogue, by virtue of their similarity with the repetition of the natural events in Qoh 1:2-11, are shown to be natural also. The deaths in the Catalogue, therefore, whether violent, peaceful, or somewhere in between, are a part of Qohelet’s natural world.

1:2-11, particularly 1:3-11, offer a series of natural images in which the natural images are cyclical, or repetitive, or continuous. Carasik argues that, from the first, Qohelet elicits a pattern of twists and turns. In 1:2 Qohelet states, הַלַיְלָה הָיָה, all is לָיְלָה. The syntax found in that phrase gives an effect of repetition. This repetition heralds the circular movement of the natural events described in the following verses (vv. 4-7, 9, 11).

Not only do the images depict circular, repetitive and endless motion, the syntax of these verses is also circular and repetitive. The sun’s race to complete its circuit is

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65 Wong Tin-sheung (“Qohelet 1:3-11,” 45) concludes that Qoh 1:3-11 is not prose, but rather poetry, due to the presence of poetic features in that passage, and particularly the fact that parallelism is “the main structural feature” of that passage.
graphically described in 1:5: the sun rises (חָנַחָה) and ‘sets’ (רָאָה), and pants after (שְׁאִילָה) its place, and rises (חָנַחָה) there. The wind too is circuitous (1:6), going (תָּלָל) to the south then turning (הָעַבָּד) to the north, and it is explicitly said to be turning and going (שְׁמַעְרֵי חוֹלֵל חָוָלָל) on its circuit. The streams do not flow in a circular fashion, but they are said to go (תָּלָל) to the sea, which itself never fills (1:7), and so the flow of the streams to the sea is imaged as repetitive and endless. Moreover, there is nothing new under the sun (1:9), for what has happened (שָׁאִל) will happen (שָׁאִל), and what has been done (נָשָׁל) will be done (נָשָׁל). That is, events and actions which are in the past will come about again. This circularity encompasses both the natural world (happenings) and the human world (actions).

Heading this description of nature’s endless circularity is the comings and goings of generations in 1:4. Qohelet writes that a כל גן goes, and a כל גן comes, but the earth (כְּלָל) remains forever. The noun כל גן is sometimes translated ‘generation,’ and most likely refers to the human lifespan. In this verse then Qohelet seems to hold

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67 This word usually means ‘come’ or ‘enter.’ One might see here a remnant of a cosmology in which the sun is thought to ‘enter’ the underworld at night, similar to Egyptian cosmology wherein the sun god Re travels through the underworld each night (E.A. Wallis Budge, The Gods of the Egyptians: Studies in Egyptian Mythology [New York: Dover Publications, 1969], 1:170; see the Evening Text in Jan Assman, Egyptian Solar Religion in the New Kingdom: Re, Amun and the Crisis of Polytheism [Studies in Egyptology; trans. by Anthony Alcock; London, New York: Kegan Paul International, 1995], 20-21).
68 So NJPS; NIV.
69 R.N. Whybray, “Ecclesiastes 1.5-7 and the Wonders of Nature,” JSOT 41 (1988): 105-112 (106). Whybray however argues that כל גן does not refer to people, and is rather a temporal term which means ‘duration, age, period.’
the ephemeral nature of human life over against the eternal world (וּדָעַת), but he also here places the cycles of humans among those of the natural world. Qohelet uses the verb שֵׁבֶר only twice in 1:4-11, once in 1:4 of the generation, and the second in 1:5 of the sun, thereby connecting 1:4 and 1:5. The rising and going of the sun in 1:5 echoes this circularity – just as the sun dies each evening and rises again in the morning, so do human generations leave and arrive, nothing changing, every new generation the same as the last, just as every new day is the same as the last.

Going (כִּנֶּה) in 1:4 is a euphemism for dying, just as coming (שָׁבֵר) is a euphemism for being born. We might draw a parallel between this verse and the first of the items listed in the Catalogue of Times, being born and dying (3:2). Both verses refer to the birth and death of people, with 1:4 placing these events in the larger natural world, and 3:2 placing the same events within the context of the human world, or the human life. We could take 3:2 as a link between the events of a human life and the events of nature. Just as the human cycles of birth and death are a part of the cycles of nature, then, so too are the human events described in the Catalogue part of the cycles of nature. The generations of humans are included among such

70 Ogden however disagrees: “The contrast in 1:4 is not between the natural order as permanent and mankind as transient, as generations moving across a permanent world; it is between the ebb and flow of nature, its perennial and cyclic movement on the one hand, and on the other, a world-order which remains fixed and immutable” (Graham S. Ogden, “The Interpretation of שֵׁבֶר in Ecclesiastes 1:4”, JSOT 34 [1986]: 91-92 [92]). R.N. Whybray (“Ecclesiastes 1.5-7 and the Wonders of Nature,” JSOT 41 [1988]: 105-112 [106] also argues that שֵׁבֶר does not refer to people, and is rather a temporal term which means ‘duration, age, period.’ Michael V. Fox (“Qohelet 1.4,” JSOT 40 [1988]: 109) agrees with Ogden, and claims that שֵׁבֶר “here does not mean the physical earth, but humanity as a whole – ‘le monde’ rather than ‘la terre.’”

71 Ogden, “The Interpretation of שֵׁבֶר in Ecclesiastes 1:4,” 91.
natural objects as the sun, the wind, streams and the sea. Clearly, then, humans are a part of the natural world. Their overarching cycle of birth and death (1:4; 3:2) is aligned with the cycles of the rest of the nature imaged in Qohelet 1. The incorporated cycles between birth and death are shown to be natural in the Catalogue of Times. The repetition of events in the Catalogue, by virtue of its similarity to the repetition of nature in Qohelet 1, is shown to be natural, also. These are the rhythms of the human life, which are echoes of the rhythms of nature.

2.2.4. Conclusions regarding time and seasonality of death

The events listed in the Catalogue of Times represent the entirety of human experience. The Catalogue represents the typical human experience within the world. That experience, we have seen, includes any death at the end of a life, or it might in this verse be a ‘natural’ death (3:2), and death inflicted on a person by another: murder, execution (3:3), or battlefield slaying (3:8). Further, the acts and emotions of mourning are included in the Catalogue and are, therefore, also considered to be natural events woven through the natural tapestry. From birth to death and all that is in between, there is no thing a person can do or experience which is not a part of the ‘natural order.’ Our particular concern, however, is with death and death related activities.

Through the above discussion we can understand that births and deaths repeat endlessly, and that a person must die in the same way as the sun must go down. 3:2
explicitly states what occurs when a generation comes, and a generation goes (1:4): someone is born, and someone dies. Death is therefore shown to be a part of nature. It is as Whybray states, that the purpose of vv. 5-7 is in part “to set the human situation in a wider context by the use of these three analogies drawn from natural phenomena: the behaviour of the sun, the wind and the rivers.”72

2.3. Time, death, and beauty

It has been seen that there are several types of death contained within the Catalogue, that such events are possibly recurrent, and that each of these deaths has its place in the natural world. It has also been seen, in the above analysis of הוע, that there is an appropriate time for death to occur, and that death, even violent death, is a natural occurrence, as natural as flowing rivers and turning seasons and the rising and setting sun.

In this section we will turn to the final part of this analysis, the relation between these naturally occurring death events and Qohelet’s concept of beauty. There are two passages in particular which are pertinent to this analysis: 3:1 and 3:11. These two passages in particular show that Qohelet considers appropriate occurrence of an event to be a thing of beauty (יָּפֶה). In addition, the use of the word יָּפֶה in 3:1 might suggest that appropriate events can be described as ‘pleasurable.’

72 Whybray, “Ecclesiastes 1.5-7,” 105.
2.3.1. Appropriateness and beauty

In both 3:1 and 3:11 Qohelet seems to suggest that events which occur when they should conform to a sense of beauty.

2.3.1.1. Qoh 3:11

In 3:11, Qohelet writes, ‘He [God] has made everything \(\text{hpy}\) in its time.’ The ‘everything’ (\(\text{lkh}\)) in this passage could refer to all that is listed in the Catalogue,\(^73\) but it could be cast even wider than that to include not just human affairs but also events of the wider natural world. Some commentators do not accept that \(\text{hpy}\) in this line means beautiful, and argue instead that it means appropriate.\(^74\) Thus, they say, the line should be read, ‘God has made everything appropriate in its time.’ This could mean either that everything which happens – whenever it happens – is appropriate, or it could mean simply that everything is appropriate when it happens when it should (at its appropriate time).

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\(^73\) Michael V. Fox, *Ecclesiastes* (JPS Bible Commentary; Philadelphia: JPS, 2004), 23.

\(^74\) The JPS, for instance, translates this passage, ‘He brings everything to pass precisely at its time.’ The NRSV translates similarly, ‘He has made everything suitable for its time.’ Longman writes that \(\text{hpy}\) means ‘beautiful’ when applied to something physical, as in Gen 39:6 where it refers to the Joseph’s physical beauty, “but when referring to actions and states like those listed in vv. 1-8 the English term *appropriate* conveys the sense more clearly” (Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 112, his italics). Michel (Qohelet, 137) seems not to be able to choose between beauty and practicality, translating “Alles hat er schön (angemessen?) gemacht zu seiner Stunde.” Crenshaw bridges the divide, understanding this verse to mean “an action performed at the right time is appropriate, hence lovely to behold” (Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 97).
However, as has been seen above, מָצַך can by itself carry a sense of ‘proper,’ ‘right,’ or ‘appropriate’ time. In 10:17, for instance, Qohelet writes of princes who feast for strength and not for drunkenness. This is literally ‘in/at time’ (מָצַך). מָצַך therefore seems to carry within it a sense of appropriateness or rightness; the appropriateness of מָצַך is inbuilt. This would make redundant the use of מָצַך in 3:11 as ‘appropriate.’ Why would Qohelet write ‘everything is appropriate in its (appropriate) time’? If everything comes to pass exactly/precisely at its time as is claimed by some exegetes, no event could ever occur at any time other than its own. That is, everything which occurred would have to occur at its (appropriate) time. Qohelet’s statement in 7:17, where it is inferred that it is possible to die before one’s time, would be an impossible one.

In 3:11 therefore it is unlikely that מָצַך should be translated or understood as ‘appropriate,’ and the word should instead be rendered ‘beautiful.’ With such an understanding, 3:11 more likely means, ‘Everything is beautiful in its (appropriate) time.’ Qohelet seems to be saying that all the events listed in the Catalogue, and by implication all the events by which a human life is made up, are beautiful when they occur when they ‘should.’
2.3.1.2. יִשְׁפּוֹן in 3:1

A similar sentiment is present in 3:1, but here there is no mention of הָיֹם. Instead, Qohelet writes that there is an הָיֹם for every יִשְׁפּוֹן under the heavens. We will now return to 3:1, and in particular, to the word יִשְׁפּוֹן. It will be seen that while יִשְׁפּוֹן can mean ‘matter’ it can also mean ‘pleasure.’ Thus the use of יִשְׁפּוֹן in 3:1 is infused with ambiguity, the sense of יִשְׁפּוֹן sliding between practicality and pleasure.

For everything there is a יָסִלָה, the Catalogue begins in 3:1, and an הָיֹם for every יִשְׁפּוֹן under the heavens. יִשְׁפּוֹן usually means ‘pleasure’ or ‘delight,’ but here in 3:1 it is more commonly, indeed almost uniformly, taken to mean ‘matter’ or ‘thing.’ Rudman, for instance, takes יִשְׁפּוֹן in 3:1 as ‘business’ or ‘purpose’ and considers, following Blenkinsoppp, that this same meaning is echoed in its other usages in 3:1, 17; 5:3, 7; 8:3, 6; 12:1, 10. He does note, however, that four of these “citations occur in a different context of desire or pleasure.” Staples writes that יִשְׁפּוֹן usually means ‘delight, pleasure,’ but in Qohelet, he claims, its meaning is ‘cause, business, affair,’ with such a meaning foreshadowing the later Mishnaic meaning, ‘thing.’

75 Rudman, Determinism in the Book of Ecclesiastes, 85.
76 W. Staples, “The meaning of hepes in Ecclesiastes,” JNES 24 (1965): 110-112 (110). And so, says Staples (“The meaning of hepes,” 110), one can see a progression from desire to desirable thing to thing, but this progression is logical only in a theistic society. God wishes, and that wish becomes a thing, in a manner like to the way ‘word’ and ‘thing’ are merged in יִשְׁפּוֹן. Staples therefore opens יִשְׁפּוֹן to the possibility that it is God’s desire. This would fit in the Catalogue, which seems to be about God’s making all things in their time, and our inability to change anything. And so far from the book as a whole being devoid of God, in this section at least it is highly theistic. A wise person,
Longman translates כְּפֵּס as ‘activity,’ and posits the theory that the two meanings, ‘matter, activity’ and ‘pleasure,’ could show “a semantic development from one meaning to the next.”

Several verses have been offered as proof that כְּפֵּס does not denote pleasure but rather denotes various practical matters. Staples claims that two verses in Proverbs, 3:5 and 8:11, exhibit a sense of כְּפֵּס between ‘pleasure’ and ‘affair,’ in that כְּפֵּס is used of a ‘desirable thing.’ Rudman claims that Prov 31:13; Isa 58:3, 13 employ כְּפֵּס with a meaning other than ‘pleasure,’ with a meaning of ‘business,’ ‘matter,’ or ‘thing.’ We will now turn to these three passages, Prov 31:13; Isa 58:3, 13. It will be seen that, while כְּפֵּס in these verses could possibly connote a ‘thing,’ it could just as easily retain the more common meaning of pleasure or delight. Having studied each of the כְּפֵּס verses in Qohelet, I will then return to כְּפֵּס in 3:1. The translation of כְּפֵּס in 3:1, it will be seen, should take into account a possible meaning of pleasure or delight. Such a reading could then be used to elucidate Qohelet’s aesthetic.

Qohelet says, accepts that all things are as God has made them, all matters are God’s desires, and if one sinks into the rhythms which result from God’s desires, and God’s pursuit of past things (כְּפֵּס; 3:15), one will be not only be wise but affected by an appreciation of the deep beauty of the world’s cycles, vicious though they might be.

77 Longman, Ecclesiastes, 113.
78 Staples, “The meaning of hepes,” 110.
79 Rudman, Determinism in the Book of Ecclesiastes, 41.
2.3.1.2.1. Contested uses of מְבָחַר

_Prov 31:13_. Rudman claims the מְבָחַר of Prov 31:13 as evidence of matter/thing outside of Qohelet. He seems to be one of the only commentators to do so. McKane debates “the precise significance of the phrase ‘with the pleasure of her hands.’” He writes also that “such translations as ‘with her willing hands’ (Köhler), ‘with merry hands’ (Gemser), ‘with inspired hands’ are legitimate.” Nevertheless, McKane writes, מְבָחַר “refers to the pleasure which the woman derives from her unfettered artistic freedom as the possessor of a pair of skilful hands rather than to the hands themselves.” So too Clifford, who writes that the phrase is “literally, ‘at the pleasure of her hands,’ which attributes to her hands the joy she takes in creating something useful and beautiful.” In Waltke, the Valiant Wife ‘works with her glad hands.’ Whether the pleasure belongs to the hands or to the woman is for our purposes immaterial; what matters is that the מְבָחַר does not mean, as Rudman claims, business or matter. Though she is partaking in an activity, the מְבָחַר does not designate the activity itself, but a particular quality of the activity.

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80 Rudman, Determinism in the Book of Ecclesiastes, 41.
81 Rudman however does not offer a translation (Rudman, Determinism in the Book of Ecclesiastes, 41).
83 McKane, Proverbs, 667.
84 McKane, Proverbs, 667.
Isa 58:3. In this passage God, through Isaiah, describes the people calling to him.

Blenkinsopp translates,

‘Why should we fast,’ they say, ‘when you take no notice? Why should we afflict ourselves when you do not acknowledge it?’

‘Look, on your fast days you pursue your own interests, you oppress all your workers.’

Blenkinsopp here translates הֶעֱרִיךְ ‘interests.’ It can be seen that הֶעֱרִיךְ need not be translated ‘interests’ or the like to gain a proper understanding of the verse.

Blenkinsopp does in fact note that both the LXX (ta thelēmata) and Vulgate (voltunas vestra) take הֶעֱרִיךְ here to mean pleasure, and such a reading of הֶעֱרִיךְ in Isa 58:3 is entirely plausible.

Isa 58:13 (x2). This verse is sometimes given a commercial loading, assumed to express the wrong of doing business on the Sabbath rather than ‘keeping’ the Sabbath. It could be, though, that the Sabbath activities which are looked down on in this verse stem beyond those of the business realm. Blenkinsopp translates,

If you refrain from travel on the Shabbat
From engaging in business on my holy day;
If you call the Sabbath a delight,
This holy day of YHVH is most esteemed –
If you honor it, not follow your inclinations,
or pursuing your own affairs
or engaging in idle talk.

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88 He also translates הֶעֱרִיךְ along these lines in Isa 58:13, below.


90 Blenkinsopp, Isaiah 56-66, 175.

91 Blenkinsopp, Isaiah 56-66, 174-175. My italics.
It could be that, rather than describing business dealings, this verse plays on types of pleasure. It might be that the first instance of יִרְאוּ, pleasure, delight, is being played against צָעִי, delight. The second instance of יִרְאוּ also need not be translated affairs or the like. All that surrounds it is an edict not to ‘go your own way’ (מלשון דבר), nor to ‘speak a word’ (דְּבָר). The verse then just as easily lends itself to a less commercial reading. Rather than pursuing one’s own interests/pleasures, we might understand, one should on the Sabbath be pursuing the divine delights within it. This possibility has a lovely playfulness about it – turn from your pleasures to mine.

Amongst all the HB, then, Qohelet stands out as the only book in which יִרְאוּ means anything other than pleasure, desire, or delight. The following section will address each instance of יִרְאוּ in Qohelet. It will be seen that some instances of יִרְאוּ in Qohelet conform to the traditional meaning of pleasure or delight, while others seem to conform to the later Mishnaic meaning of matter, and others still could be one or the other, or both.

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Qohelet uses the noun כּוֹפֵן seven times (3:1, 17; 5:3, 7; 8:6; 12:1, 10). In some of these passages, Qohelet uses כּוֹפֵן to mean ‘pleasure’ or the like (5:3; 12:1). In one passage, כּוֹפֵן clearly means item or matter (5:7). Then, in yet other passages, it is not clear whether כּוֹפֵן means matter or pleasure (3:1, 17; 8:6; 12:10). In these passages, it could as easily mean one or the other, or both.

כּוֹפֵן as ‘matter’

5:7. כּוֹפֵן in this verse clearly means ‘matter’ or a similar thing. Qohelet writes that, should one see oppression of the poor, or suppression of right and justice, it is not to be wondered at. This oppression and suppression is a ‘matter of fact.’ It would be very difficult to read pleasure into כּוֹפֵן in this verse.

Verses in which כּוֹפֵן definitely means pleasure

5:3. Though it has been argued that this verse refers to fools who “have no business (negotium; sc. which requires a vow)” it is clear that כּוֹפֵן in this verse means pleasure, describing rather that God takes no pleasure in fools. Most commentators

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95 The verb כּוֹפֵן is found in 8:3.
96 Staples, “The meaning of hepes,” 111-112.
follow this line. Krüger for instance translates, ‘fools do not please him’;97 Fox translates ‘fools do not please him’;98 and Barton translates ‘There is no delight in fools.’99 Crenshaw writes that when “Qohelet says that there is no delight in fools, he means that God takes no pleasure in them.”100

12:1. Again this verse undoubtedly uses הָעֵדָה as ‘pleasure.’ While, again, it has been claimed that הָעֵדָה in this verse should be rendered along a practical line, in this case as ‘work,’ thus the line being translated, “I have no work to do in these days,”101 such a claim is absurd. It disregards the following poem on aging and death which is full of evils (and therefore lacking in pleasure). Although one can’t in one’s old age pursue the workaday endeavours of one’s younger years, perhaps even for the reason of the aged decrepitude depicted in Qohelet 12, it is not the meaning of הָעֵדָה in 12:1. הָעֵדָה carries its usual meaning of ‘delight, pleasure.’ Such a rendering can imply the inability of the aged to find pleasure in work, but it also does not limit the focus to an economic issue.

Verses which might go either way

3:17. In this verse Qohelet again links time (יֵשְׁכ) and הָעֵדָה. Staples translates הָעֵדָה ‘incident,’ and says “It seems obvious from this that God is the active agent in
history, and that ‘righteous’ and ‘wicked’ are simply human labels, with no validity before God; at any rate each is seemly in its own time.”

Staples claims that elsewhere in the HB when יִהֵס and מָשָׁתָא are juxtaposed “their close association explains God’s role as a historical force.” In light of this it seems likely that Qoh 8:2-4 is another reference to God’s activity in history. “The divine will becomes fact.”

It is thus, says Staples, no accident that יִהֵס is used to mean ‘a thing, an event’ in Qohelet. However, judgment in Qohelet often refers to death. When Qohelet writes that there is a judgment for both righteous and wicked, therefore, he is in fact stating that both righteous and wicked shall die (see 11:9-10). Further, though it might be that מָשָׁתָא and יִהֵס are in parallel, such a relationship does not render the primary meaning of the words void.

We might consider 11:9 to elucidate the judgment of 3:17. There, a young person is told to rejoice, to follow in the path of their heart and the sight of their eyes, but to know that God will judge them for all of these (הלֹהַלֶּה). It is not hard to see the connection between 11:9 and 3:17. Just as the youth will grow old and die in 11:9, and all youthful pleasures will lead to that judgment, so too are the righteous and wicked alike judged in 3:17, in that both will die, and so whatever they do in their lives – מָשָׁתָא or יִהֵס – will lead to that judgment. It could very well be that the יִהֵס of 3:17 is not synonymous with מָשָׁתָא, though they are paralleled, and that

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102 Staples, “The meaning of hepes,” 111.
103 Staples, “The meaning of hepes,” 111.
104 Staples, “The meaning of hepes,” 111.
the possible meaning of \( \gamma\nu\eta \) here could be ‘pleasure’ or ‘pleasurable thing.’ And so in 3:17 Qohelet could be stating that every pleasurable thing a person does, just as every thing at all (in this way \( \gamma\nu\eta \) is a subcategory of \( \lambda\nu\eta\nu\eta\nu\nu \)) a person does, leads inexorably to death.

8:6. As in 3:17 above, it could be that this verse denotes judgment (\( \lambda\nu\eta\nu\nu\nu \)) as much for pleasures as for matters. The judgment here, as above, refers to old age and death. Once again, if we draw a comparison between this verse and 11:9, it can be seen that any activity whatsoever, whether it be good, bad, pleasurable, or otherwise, always leads one to judgment. Thus in 8:6, \( \gamma\nu\eta \) could mean either thing or matter, or pleasure.

12:10. Though this verse is strictly speaking outside the scope of this thesis, since it is found in the book’s ‘epilogue,’ assessment of \( \gamma\nu\eta \) in this verse shows that \( \gamma\nu\eta \) can mean either matter or thing, or pleasure. Here, it is stated that ‘Qohelet sought to find \( \gamma\nu\eta\nu\nu\nu\nu \)’ which can and has been rendered ‘pleasant sayings’\(^{105}\) as well as ‘useful sayings.’\(^{106}\)

\(^{105}\) So NRSV.
\(^{106}\) So JPS.
2.3.1.2.3. The use of יִשְׁלַך in 3:1

In 3:1, it is possible to read יִשְׁלַך as pertaining only to ‘matters’. We could read it, as it has been read consistently over the years, ‘To everything there is a time, and a season for every matter under the heavens.’ In only one verse in Qohelet does יִשְׁלַך unquestionably mean ‘matter’ or ‘thing’ (5:7), and so it is possible that יִשְׁלַך in 3:1 means ‘matter.’ In light of Qohelet’s use of יִשְׁלַך elsewhere, however, it is possible that יִשְׁלַך in 3:1 might also carry a sense of pleasure.

2.3.2. Conclusions regarding time, death, and beauty

To sum up, this section addressed two words in particular, הַפָּה and יִשְׁלַך, and two passages in particular, 3:1 and 3:11. These two passages showed that Qohelet considers appropriate occurrence of an event to be a thing of beauty (יִשְׁלַך), and his use of the word יִשְׁלַך in 3:1 might suggest that appropriate events can be described as ‘pleasurable.’ Qohelet seems to be saying that all the events listed in the Catalogue, and by implication all the events by which a human life is made up, are beautiful when they occur when they ‘should.’

It is hard to imagine events such as war and death being described as delights or pleasures, but if we are to allow for a certain nuance in Qohelet’s use of the word יִשְׁלַך, such an understanding of all the items in the Catalogue is possible. But if
Cpx does indeed carry a nuance of pleasure or delight, in what sense can the events of the Catalogue be pleasurable or delightful? This question will be addressed by drawing together all the elements of this chapter in § 2.4.

2.4. Conclusions regarding nature and the death aesthetic

There are two paths which lead to a sense of death as delightful. The first involves a ‘morbidity’ in which the person describing the death genuinely finds it pleasurable. The second is linked with the above discussion of time, events and appropriateness.

The first path to delightful death requires that a person take pleasure in the sometimes unpleasant facts of life. Events are repeated, there is nothing new under the sun, and what is under the sun is violent and full of death. Even so, Qohelet would suggest in this path to pleasure, the cycles of nature, and the cycles of the human life, are deeply pleasurable. That the events of life are also often a source of pain is of course true. But Qohelet’s approach to the world allows for both of these responses: life (properly lived) is painful, and such pain is a part of the pleasure of life under the sun.

The second path to delightful death is somewhat more intricate. Below is a summary of all the steps required to reach this end.

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107 See § 6.3.1.
1. There are several types of death in the Catalogue. As discussed above, the Catalogue presents several types of death. In 3:2, it seems that the death is a natural death at the end of a life, but as there is not additional information about this type of death, the reader is left to wonder whether this death is any type of death which ends a life. That is, though we might assume that it is the death at the old age of three score and ten (Ps 90:10) we cannot know if this is what is intended. It could be that any death at all has a time. There are however deaths in the Catalogue which are typed, notably violent death (3:3), and death in war (3:8).

2. The events of the Catalogue are described as occurring cyclically. The relationship in 3:1 of תַּעַל and נִמְצָא suggests that time in the Catalogue carries a sense of seasonality, that is, of recurrence or repetition.

3. The events in the Catalogue are imaged as natural by way of comparison with Qohelet 1. Qohelet 1 contains a poem on the cycles on nature. Within the poem is found the overarching human cycle of birth and death (1:4). This links the natural cycles to the Catalogue by way of 3:2, ‘a time for being born and a time for dying.’ In addition to this, the cyclicality of תַּעַל and נִמְצָא, and therefore the cyclicality of all the events, ties in with the cyclicality of nature in Qohelet 1. All the events in the Catalogue, therefore, are imaged as natural events.

4. Death is therefore part of the natural world. Some of the events in the Catalogue are death events. As such, these death events are imaged as natural. This goes
beyond the ‘natural’ death of old age we would expect to be a part of the natural cycles. According to Qohelet’s Catalogue, even violent death is natural.

5. **The times of these death events in the Catalogue are appropriate times.** As well as in the Catalogue taking on some of the seasonality of , it also seems to contain an inherent appropriateness. Each of the items in the Catalogue therefore are said to have an appropriate time in which to occur.

6. **Everything is beautiful when it occurs in its appropriate time.** Qohelet writes that everything is beautiful in its time (3:11). The word is undoubtedly an aesthetic term in this verse. This does not mean that everything is beautiful whenever it happens. Rather, everything is beautiful, according to Qohelet, when it happens in its appropriate time.

7. **Death therefore is beautiful when it occurs in its appropriate time.** This is an original aesthetic in the HB. As death is a part of the ‘everything’ of which Qohelet writes, it is beautiful when it occurs when it should. This is, as mentioned above, inclusive of violent death.

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8. *Death is a delight.* With death being beautiful when it occurs when it should, it is but a small step to considering it a delight. Thus the reading of יָמ֑וֹ as pleasure or delight in 3:1 is not out of place.

However, that every event has an appropriate time doesn’t mean it will occur in its appropriate time, and further, how can we know when something is occurring appropriately? Without being able to know what will happen in the future, or what the outcomes of actions will be (11:6), how can any person make informed decisions about their actions? This issue of knowledge or lack of knowledge leads us to the topic of the next chapter, the knowledge of death.
3. The Knowledge of Limits and the Limits of Knowledge

In the previous chapter we saw that time (תָּמִיה) in Qohelet is linked with death, and that the natural world, including human events, are described as happening in time. We saw that these natural events, when they occur in their (appropriate) time, are said to be beautiful, and that death therefore, when occurring in its appropriate time, can be beautiful also. In this chapter also we will address Qohelet’s concept of time, but in this case it is ‘eternity’ (מלת) which will be addressed, and its relation to knowledge of mortality. Qoh 3:11, particularly 3:11b-d, has been chosen as the entry point into this analysis, as it describes God’s gift of the knowledge of our mortality, as well as the limitations of that knowledge, in that it does not lead to understanding.

3:11 is one of Qohelet’s most abstruse passages.

Although this verse is, for the most part, syntactically undemanding, difficulties arise when trying to comprehend both the appropriate translation of some of the terms and the ideas those terms represent. The second clause of the verse, Namen, and the connective מֵאֶלְלוֹ, are especially difficult in
this regard. Within the second clause is the troublesome מָלַל ה, the appropriate translation of which is often debated, variously interpreted, and of undoubted importance to the overall understanding of the passage and the verse as a whole.

This second clause and, in particular, the מָלַל ה at its heart, is the focus of the first section. Section one contains a detailed analysis of מָלַל ה in Qohelet, in which we will see that Qohelet often employs the temporal מָלַל ה to designate times in which we are absent – either in death or before birth – or in which we have no ability to affect what happens in the world. מָלַל then often marks periods of time in which a person does not exist. Following this we will then insert our understanding of מָלַל back into the context in the second clause of 3:11.

This will show that Qohelet describes in this passage the knowledge of our own mortality as a gift from God, which gift should result in our acting upon that knowledge.

The second line of the verse is the focus of part two of this chapter. In this verse, Qohelet can be seen to play off our lack of understanding (בָּנֶא) against the knowledge of our mortality. This section will focus on the very difficult double negative מָלַל, as well as explore Qohelet’s use of the verb מָלַל, and the temporal designator, מָתָא ה. It will be seen that the second line of 3:11 stands in contrast with the first, both in terms of the times they describe as well as the above-mentioned contrast between knowledge and understanding.
In this section we will address 3:11b. First we will foray into Qohelet’s use of the word הָלְכוֹ, establishing a semantic field for the word before inserting it back into 3:11b. This section will also explore the idiomatic expression, מְגַלֵּבָהּ לְלַבּוֹ, ‘give to their heart,’ and show that this phrase describes direct divine revelation of knowledge, and knowledge moreover upon which people are supposed to act. The section will conclude with the understanding that 3:11b describes God’s revelation of the certain knowledge that we will die.

3.1.1. הָלְכוֹ

This word, it will be seen, is intimately linked with Qohelet’s thoughts about death, marking periods of time in which a person does not exist. There are several theories as to the appropriate meaning of the noun הָלְכוֹ in 3:11, and several methods of obtaining meanings from this root. In this word study we will address these theories, discussing first the use of הָלְכוֹ elsewhere in the HB, then the various commentators’ theories of its use in 3:11. Finally, we will address each use of the term in Qoh 1:1-12:8 in order to develop a semantic field for the word.
3.1.1.1 מָלָא in the Hebrew Bible

מָלָא is generally taken to be a temporal term designating ‘eternity’ in HB thought. Barth, Driver, and Robinson derive מָלָא from an Akkadian root which signifies something spatially or temporally remote, either in the future or in the past. Orelli suggests that מָלָא means ‘to hide’ and this designates a “time whose borders are not perceptible or nonexistent.” מָלָא is used of remote times, as in Gen 6:4 (מָלָא), where we are told of the Nephalim mating with human women, and in Josh 24:2 where it (מָלָא) is used of the time of the ancestors. It can denote the length of existence of a thing, such as in Hab 3:6, where the mountains and hills are מָלָא, and it can also describe the future, such as in Ps 89:37-38, where the line of David is said to continue, like the sun and the moon, מָלָא. God too is מָלָא (מָלָא; Gen 21:33).

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Some commentators do not translate הָלַעַת as eternity in Qoh 3:11 and arrive at different translations in a variety of ways.

Some attribute a Postbiblical meaning to הָלַעַת and thus argue that הָלַעַת means ‘world.’ In later Hebrew texts, such as Pirke Avot (4:7), הָלַעַת takes the meaning, ‘world,’ and it also appears in Ben Sira 3:18 with this meaning. This sense of הָלַעַת is not strictly speaking Biblical, however, but is Mishnaic, and nowhere in Biblical Hebrew does הָלַעַת mean ‘world.’ However, such commentators as Gordis, for example, claim it is preferable to render מֶלֶךְ here as ‘the world,’ or ‘love of the world,’ while Krober translates Welt, and conceives of it as the coherence of the dynamic process of the events of life.

Some commentators emend the vowel pointings or rearrange the letters of הָלַעַת, resulting in various meanings including toil, darkness and ignorance.

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6 So Gordis, Koheleth, 232; also Whitley and Krober, cited in Whitley, Koheleth, 32.
7 Gordis, Koheleth, 231; Whitley, Koheleth, 32.
8 Wigram, “ivals,” in The Englishman’s Hebrew and Chaldee Concordance of the Old Testament, 908, lists one usage of מֶלֶךְ as ‘world’ (Ps 73:12). Psalm 73:12 is translated there as, ‘the ungodly, who prosper in the world,’ but the NRSV translates this passage, ‘Such are the wicked; always at ease, they increase in riches’ (emphasis added). Ernst Jenni, “Das Wort ‘וֹלָם im Alten Testament,” ZAW 65 (1953): 1-35 (25), notes that the use of מֶלֶךְ in the sense of ‘Welt’ does not occur until two to three hundred years after the date of composition of the book of Qohelet.
9 Gordis, Koheleth, 232.
10 Cited in Whitley, Koheleth, 32.
Ginsberg and Fox rearrange the letters from מלח to תול, toil.\textsuperscript{11} Cheyne proposes rearranging מלח to מלח, ‘the task.’\textsuperscript{12} Both MacDonald and Kamenzky rearrange the letters to read מלח, ‘the striving.’\textsuperscript{13} A vowel emendation creates the word של, a \textit{hapax legomena} which corresponds to the Arabic noun "ilam, ‘knowledge,’\textsuperscript{14} and the verb "alima, ‘know, learn,’ thus ‘knowledge.’\textsuperscript{15}

It is also possible to derive from מלח a meaning of ‘hide’ or ‘hidden’ and from there to assume a meaning of ‘darkness, obfuscation, enigma, ignorance.’\textsuperscript{16} The verbal form of מלח has a meaning of darkness or hiddenness in a number of biblical texts,\textsuperscript{17} and של is frequently used in the Talmud to signify ‘that which is concealed’ or ‘secret.’ Rashi thought מלח referred to the hidden wisdom of the world, and the Targum concludes its analysis of 3:11 with a statement that God

\textsuperscript{11} Fox, \textit{A Time to Tear Down}, 211; Seow, \textit{Ecclesiastes}, 163. This was suggested by D.B. MacDonald in 1899. The best evidence, Fox claims, is 8:17, which “echoes 3:11 in wording and ideas” (Fox, \textit{A Time to Tear Down}, 211).
\textsuperscript{12} Cited in Alan H. McNeile, \textit{An Introduction to Ecclesiastes} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1904), 62.
\textsuperscript{13} Cited in Whitley, \textit{Koheleth}, 32.
\textsuperscript{14} Whitley, \textit{Koheleth}, 32; McNeile, \textit{An Introduction to Ecclesiastes}, 62; Seow, \textit{Ecclesiastes}, 163.
\textsuperscript{15} Gordis, \textit{Koheleth}, 231; Seow, \textit{Ecclesiastes}, 163.
\textsuperscript{17} Pss 10:1; 26:4; 55:2; 90:8; Lev 4:13; 5:2, 3, 4; 20:4; Num 5:13; 2 Chron 9:2; Job 6:16; 28:21; 42:3; 1 Kgs 10:3; 2 Kgs 4:27; Qoh 12:14; Nah 3:11; Ezek 22:26; 1 Sam 12:3; Isa 1:15; 58:7; Lam 3:56; Prov 28:27; Deut 22:1, 3, 4. In Qoh 12:14 it is used of ‘the hidden’ (שלא) which God will judge. In Job 28:21 it is applied to wisdom being ‘hidden’ (שלא) from humanity, and again in Job 42:3 of God ‘hiding (or darkening) counsel’ (שלא) (Whitley, \textit{Koheleth}, 32-33).
‘hid’ (‘הָנָּךְ) from the Israelites the day of death.\(^1\) Bickell proposes ‘that which is hidden,’\(^2\) while Barton derives from the root ‘conceal, dark,’ and hence ‘ignorance’.\(^3\) Crenshaw considers הָלַל to designate the unknown.\(^4\) Graetz accepts Rashi’s interpretation and renders מְלָל ‘ignorance.’\(^5\) Gordis proposes a basic meaning of ‘hide’, hence ‘ignorance’ but connects it in 3:11 with ignorance of the day of death.\(^6\)

There are Ugaritic and Phoenician parallels which support rendering מְלָל as denoting something hidden or dark.\(^7\) The Ugaritic ġlm means ‘darkness,’\(^8\) ṭglm ‘and it grew dark.’\(^9\)

The Ahiram Inscription might also shed light on מְלָל in Qoh 3:11. The sepulchral inscription of Ahiram of Byblos was found in 1923, and is generally dated to the early 10th century BCE.\(^10\) It states, in part,

A sarcophagus made by [It]toba’l, the son of Ahiram, king of Byblos, for Ahiram, his father, מְלָל שָֽׁאֵל.\(^11\)

\(^{18}\) Whitley, Koheleth, 32.
\(^{19}\) Cited in McNeile, An Introduction to Ecclesiastes, 62.
\(^{20}\) Barton, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary, 105.
\(^{21}\) Crenshaw, Ecclesiastes, 91.
\(^{22}\) Cited in Gordis, Koheleth, 231.
\(^{23}\) Gordis, Koheleth, 231.
\(^{25}\) Whitley, Koheleth, 33.
\(^{26}\) ġlm also has the meaning of ‘overwhelm’: Keret I i 19, ġlm ym (‘the sea overwhelmed’) (Whitley, Koheleth, 33).
The inscription contains the phrase יָהַּה, בְּבֵיתוֹ שָׁהֲךָ, or ‘I laid him in darkness,’ thereby rendering the phrase, ‘I laid him in darkness,’ or ‘his dark place.’ They then use this apparent parallel to support a reading of ‘darkness’ for יָהַּה in 3:11. Seow, however, claims the parallel is not appropriate, as יָהַּה in the Phoenician inscription does not mean ‘darkness’ but ‘eternity.’ Just as the Egyptian nhḥ ‘eternity’ can mean ‘necropolis’ or ‘grave,’ he states, so too is this Phoenician יָהַּה metonymous with ‘grave.’ It is clear from the inscription that יָהַּה signifies death or the place of death. Qohelet himself uses יָהַּה in this way in 12:5. The יָהַּה, the place to which all people go, obviously designates the place of death.

Though these various renderings of יָהַּה in 3:11 are possible, most commentators take יָהַּה in 3:11 as ‘eternity.’ Qohelet’s use of יָהַּה therefore seems to reflect its usage elsewhere in the HB. The noun יָהַּה is found seven times in Qohelet, and in each case may be understood as ‘eternity’ or, similarly, ‘forever,’ both terms denoting an excessively extended period. But it is not enough to say that יָהַּה may

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29 Whitley, Koheleth, 33.
31 Crenshaw, Ecclesiastes, 97-98; Whitley, Koheleth, 33.
32 Seow, Ecclesiastes, 163. Clearly, to Seow’s mind, eternity is linked with death. This important point will be picked up below.
33 Seow, Ecclesiastes, 163; cf. Whitley, Koheleth, 31-32 for a summary of those who hold this view.
34 Apart from our present concern, יָהַּה is found in 1:4; 12:5; 1:10; 2:16; 3:14; 9:6. A Niphal of יָהַּה is found in 12:14, but this verse is not addressed below for two reasons: it is verbal, not nominal; and it is contained in the so-called epilogue which is generally considered to be a later addition to the text.
be translated this way; it is necessary to explain the idea behind the translation.

How does Qohelet conceive of מִלְחָמָה?

Though there is some debate as to whether Qohelet’s eternity is temporal or otherwise,35 most commentators consider Qohelet’s eternity a temporal one.

Whitley summarises the positions of some commentators:

Jenni has again argued that מִלְחָמָה is to be explained as the extensive duration of time (Zeitdauer), and this is broadly the view of Galling (Dauer) and Hengel (Zeitablauf). Suggesting that Koheleth wished to emphasise the continuous nature of time, Ellermeier renders by ‘incessancy’ (Unauflhörlichkeit), and Barucq similarly interprets the term as denoting an indefinite duration of time, embracing past, present and future. Strobel translates ‘Ewigkeitssinn’ and conceives of it as the actions of men which in divine providence can endure beyond the present.36

The NRSV skips right over the initial translation of eternity to what they understand eternity to be – past and future. Assuming the root meaning of מִלְחָמָה is ‘hidden’ or ‘unknown,’ Barton extrapolates that מִלְחָמָה is the unknown of time, hence ‘of old,’ ‘forever,’ ‘eternity.’37 Grimm, followed by Nowack and Wildeboer, suggests that eternity is for Qohelet aeternitatis, unlimited time, which is said to be innumerable מַעֲלָה stretching into the past and future.38 Rudman, too, understands eternity to be an “eternity of times,”39 while McNiele describes it as “the sum-total of the

35 By ‘otherwise’ I refer to an atemporal eternity, an eternity which does not consist of time or times.
36 Whitley, Koheleth, 32.
37 Barton, Ecclesiastes, 105.
38 Cited in McNeile, An Introduction to Ecclesiastes, 62.
39 Rudman, Determinism in the Book of Ecclesiastes, 91, his italics. Rudman, in linking v. 11 to the Catalogue, concludes: מַעֲלָה is the whole of which each individual מִלְחָמָה (‘time’) is a part: thus Qoheleth envisions God programming humanity with all the actions which they will perform in their lives.” Since this is the מַעֲלָה that controls human action, “the action of placing it in the human mind thereby ensures that ‘hankind may not find out the work of God from beginning to end’” (Rudman, Determinism in the Book of Ecclesiastes, 91).
An eternity created of numerous, even innumerable אינסופית, is not outside or beyond time, for it consists of time itself. Such a temporal understanding of Qohelet’s eternity is supported by an analysis of the use of נקום within the book.

But, it will be seen, Qohelet’s eternity is a bit of a paradox, for while it requires temporality to give it meaning, eternity seems in some verses to be the time outside time. Whatever the case, and the question of the a/temporality of eternity will not be resolved here, it is clear that, as the following discussion will show, for Qohelet eternity is linked tightly with non-existence and death.

We will now turn to a detailed examination of נקום where it is found in verses other than 3:11 in Qohelet (1:4; 12:5; 1:10; 2:16; 3:14; 9:6).

1:4. In this verse נקום clearly describes the length of time the world exists over against the length of a human life. נקום here, at the head of a section on the circularity of the natural world, gives the reader an image of earthly longevity. The coming and going of generations refers to the births and deaths of people. What might we infer about the meaning of ‘eternity’ in this case? All that we can inarguably conclude about the ‘eternity’ of the earth in this usage is that the earth exists before and during, and remains after the lives which make up a generation. The lack of indication about what particular generation this verse describes, compounded by the absence of a definite article, allows us to read here the poetic

\[40\] McNeile, *An Introduction to Ecclesiastes*, 62.
\[41\] See § 2.2.3.
use of a singular generation to refer to all generations. Qohelet’s concept of eternity as it is expressed in 1:4 may therefore be understood as describing the earth existing before the birth of each and every generation and continuing to exist after the death of each and every generation. But the period in which the דורות וселם exists is not separable from נלום וселם. It is subsumed within it. Though נלום וселם surrounds the generation, marking the limits of the generation, the generation is also a part of the נלום of the world. While נלום יתו consists in the generations, it is that space beyond the generation which defines נלום וселם. The smaller unit is needed for the existence of נלום וселם, but it is that part which is not tied to its smaller units – the part beyond or hanging over the edge of the generation – in which נלום וселם comes into being. In 1:4, therefore, נלום וселם is a ‘space’ beyond the time in which humans exist, and is defined by the absence of life.

12:5. In 12:5 the בית וселם to which all go is undoubtedly related to death. Whether it refers to the grave or Sheol is unclear. The בית וселם seems to compound several ‘spaces’: the place of interment, and death itself. The Sarcophagus of Ahiram, discussed above, contains much the same description. The use of the correlate נלום וселם on the Sarcophagus of Ahiram points to a touch of death about נלום וселם. Seow, in challenging the interpretations of נלום וселם as darkness or related meanings such as ignorance, argues that the correlate to נלום וселם should be understood
not as darkness but as eternity.  

I am inclined to accept Seow’s criticism on this point, but only up to a point. The יִלָּלָה house into which Ahiram is placed is a house of death, and death is a darkness which lasts for eternity. It could be that these exegetes against which Seow argues, and indeed Seow himself, are taking too unilinear a stance on יִלָּלָה. It might be helpful to accept a definition of יִלָּלָה which can allow for layers of meaning within the word. In both the Ahiram inscription and 12:5, יִלָּלָה describes the state of death. Though the word does not mean death itself, the home to which all people must go, linked as it is with mourners milling about in the streets, leaves little doubt that eternity is here a euphemism for death. So it is also in the Ahiram inscription. In 12:5, therefore, we may safely think of יִלָּלָה as consisting in death. Here, however, as distinct from 1:4 above, יִלָּלָה is a spatial, as well as a temporal, referent.

1:10. In 1:10 Qohelet uses the plural absolute, יִלָּלָמה, when describing the time in which we were not here. Qohelet laments that there is nothing new, stating that ‘It has already been, in the יִלָּלָמה before us.’ Though the phrase ‘before us’ (מלפני) draws on a term more commonly used of that which occurs in the presence of something, here this phrase denotes something which does not occur in our presence, but instead occurred in “‘the ages that were before us’” in the sense

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44 Seow, Ecclesiastes, 163.
45 הבור היה יִלָּלָמה. אנא, רָאָה יהוה מִלְפָּנֵינוּ.
46 So Gordis, Koheleth, 208.
of before we came into being. Thus in this usage יָמִים יָמִים designates the time before we come into existence.

It appears that Qohelet can speak not only of an יָמִים, but also of an יָמִים, and that יָמִים is therefore multipliable – that יָמִים is made up, for instance, of one יָמִים plus one יָמִים. The plural absolute is found in other places in the HB (Pss 77:6; 145:13; and Isa 26:4; 45:17; Dan 9:24), and is sometimes treated as a superlative or intensive plural, and sometimes treated no differently than the singular יָמִים. Rust writes of the ‘kingdom of יָמִים,’ that is, the ‘kingdom of indefinite periods of time’ in Ps 145:13, and considers the יָמִים there to be “an intensifying plural of majesty, employed to heighten effect and to remind the hearer that God’s eternity is not even as the ‘olam that may be predicated of created things.” Could it be that the plural absolute in Qoh 1:10 is meant to be read as the plural of majesty? There doesn’t seem to be anything majestic in Qoh 1:10. The plural absolute is used here to convey the great weariness experienced by Qohelet. Any majesty inherent in the term would likely therefore be ironic. If eternity is multipliable, it is not so in the mathematical sense, for יָמִים remains even here of an indefinite length: what measurement can be given to the time ‘before us’ other than that given? But it does seem that the pluralised יָמִים serves here to heighten the

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47 As in Rust, “Time and Eternity in Biblical Thought,” 343.
48 Seow, Ecclesiastes, 110-111. Seow further claims that יָמִים is sometimes treated as a singular in Late Biblical Hebrew (Isa 26:4; 45:17; Dan 9:24).
49 יָמִים מְרָה יָמִים
drama of nothing being new, and there can be little doubt that the ולפיה refer to times in which the ‘us’ of the verse does not exist.

2:16.\(^{51}\) Again in 2:16, ולפיה marks a time of death. Qohelet’s lament that there will be no remembrance of wise or fool in 2:16 is linked with his perception that the same fate befalls both the wise and the fool in 2:14. This one fate, מַכְרֵה אָדָם, is undoubtedly death, a fate which is reiterated in the final line of 2:16, ‘How can the wise die like fools?’ Two terms designate the time after death in 2:16, וּלְפַתְאִים and ולפיה. The coming days in which all will be forgotten, ולפיה, are synonymous with ולפיה, the time in which there will be no remembrance for wise or fool, and both of these temporal indicators refer to the one fate, death. ولפיה, it would seem, consists in a multitude of days, and both ולפיה and these ولפיה begin at the time of death.

3:14.\(^{52}\) In 3:14 Qohelet states, ‘I know that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it.’ It is important to remember that this verse precedes verse 15’s complicated description of the cycles of events and God’s actions in recycling the events of the Catalogue. We might link 3:14 to

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\(^{51}\) מַכְרֵה אָדָם

\(^{52}\) וּלְפַתְאִים

the sentiments of 3:15. The ‘bigger picture’ therefore is of God’s role in the state in which Qohelet finds himself. Qohelet knows that not only throughout his own lifetime, but also beyond it, God ensures that the various parts of the Catalogue as well as the ‘bigger’ parts of an entire lifetime, from beginning to end, will be repeated. We can compare this with 1:4, where we are offered an image of times passing and times being recycled, of generations leaving and generations coming, but beyond that we can see the rock of the world, always existing just that bit longer than the generation currently making a home upon it. From the human perspective eternity consists of the part in which we have no part beyond our single life, and no part in the existence of the world beyond our life. The second part of 3:14, ‘nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it,’ offers a comment on Qohelet’s observation about the part humans play in the eternal world and the eternal parts. Humans, he declaims, cannot affect any change in God’s deeds, neither the existence of the world itself nor the turning of the times and seasons. Humans have no ability to affect the patterns of the world, for they are one of its patterns (תַּנְחֵן תַּנְחֵן; 1:4). Eternity in 3:14 therefore correlates to the use of the term elsewhere in Qohelet: it hints at those parts of God’s world in which humans have no part.
In the passage of 9:5-6 Qohelet describes not only the ignorance of the dead, but more, the inability of the dead to experience emotion or to participate in the world in any way. We know that Qohelet employs the term ‘under the sun’ to encompass all that happens in the world, so when Qohelet writes that the dead do not have a part in anything that happens under the sun, he means that the dead have no place in the world. The period of time to which these inabilities are allocated is מֵעָלֶה לְעַד. Lest one think that מֵעָלֶה לְעַד be a short period, Qohelet has preceded מֵעָלֶה לְעַד with שעון, used either as a substantive to indicate a continuation of the period of time in which the state occurs, or as an adverb and indicator of the accusative, which would make מֵעָלֶה לְעַד here mean ‘eternally,’ and designate the adverb the direct object of some implicit verb. However, as there is a l attached to מֵעָלֶה לְעַד, and the section of text concerned lacks explicit statement of a verb to which any object might be directly linked, it is unlikely that the latter is true. It is more likely that שעון is intended to poetically lengthen the eternity one spends in death.

54 See Chapter Four, “What it is to be Dead,” for an analysis of the relationship between the dead and the world.

55 Like the plural absolute in 1:10, the שעון in 9:6 serves to extend something which might be considered endless. It might be, as in 1:10, that Qohelet shows מֵעָלֶה לְעַד to be multipliable and extendible, but it is more likely that Qohelet is simply extending for effect something not strictly extendible. The l attached to מֵעָלֶה לְעַד in this case would serve to intensify מֵעָלֶה לְעַד. How long were the ages before us? Eternities. How long will we be dead? Not just forever, but forever and ever. It makes easier sense to think that Qohelet is in 1:10 and in 9:6 employing hyperbole than to think otherwise. That said, שעון also appears extendible in 2:16, wherein שעון is synonymous with תּוֹם. All that is required to lengthen שעון in that case is to add another day. But this also is unconvincing, for the length of the שעון is unknown, and it is likely that that term is used as an imprecise marker designating an equally imprecise, though undoubtedly lengthy, period. The question of whether Oliveira is multipliable, extendable, or not must therefore remain unanswered. Though there is some textual evidence for multipliability and extendability, this is in no way proof of those characteristics.
3.1.1.3. Conclusions regarding ῖλῶ in Qohelet

In summary, it seems clear that Qohelet’s eternity is closely linked with death or non-existence. ῖλῶ is the survival of the world over against that of the generations (1:4). It can incorporate the time a person is in the world, but it seems more clearly to signify that period of time which the earth remains but a people or a person do not, and ῖλῶ can also define that period of time before one’s existence (1:10). The ῖλῶ, the eternal home, also describes a period of time after one’s life, a place to which all people go in death (12:5). It is at once the place of death and death itself. ῖλῶ is contrasted with what it means to have a portion of anything ‘under the sun’ (9:6). That is, ῖλῶ is placed in contrast with life. In 2:16 ῖλῶ once again signifies a time after life. In 3:14 ῖλῶ denotes those things in which Qohelet has no part. Humans, Qohelet thinks, have no part in the ῖλῶ by which ῖλῶ is made up (beyond the single ῖλῶ in which they exist).

Qohelet’s use of ῖλῶ is telling. Almost every instance of ῖλῶ in Qohelet describes a period of time either before life or after life. ῖλῶ begins and ends at the boundaries of life, and therefore defines the boundaries of life. While it incorporates human existence, it seems to come into being in those periods of time which fall outside of one’s life, those times when one does not exist. ῖλῶ, aligned as it is with
death and the time before one came into being, is primarily defined in Qohelet by the absence of self.

It is possible to incorporate some of the other theories regarding the meaning of יָמִים without undermining the concept of eternity arrived at through this study.

Within יָמִים can be found eternity, ignorance and darkness. Although I hold that eternity is יָמִים’ s primary meaning, it might also be related to darkness (not least due to its extra-biblical correlates) and to ignorance. It is interesting that eternity, darkness, and ignorance should be so related, for Qoh 9:10 states that ‘there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going.’ It is possible then that יָמִים, death-laden as it is, alludes also to the characteristics of death, such as darkness and ignorance.

3.1.2. יָמִים

And so we have arrived at an understanding of יָמִים as a temporal marker, a term denoting primarily an indefinite period of time or collection of times in which an individual does not exist. But what role does this word play within the context of 3:11b, יָמִים אַחַר אֶחֱלָכוֹת יָמִים יָמִים? In this section we will seek to answer this question. It will be seen that יָמִים is a gift from God. Further, the phrase ‘give to

57 The analysis of that text and others which describe the state of being dead in Chapter Four, “What it is to be Dead,” show that death is imaged as a state of darkness and ignorance.
their/our heart,’ marks מלח בלב us with the knowledge of ‘time’ outside our own life, and therefore of our own mortality.

is situated in 3:11b, which declares that מלח is a gift from God to ‘our’ heart. The universality of the giving () is inferred in the suffixed possessive pronoun ב, either an alteration of the 1st common plural pronoun ו, ‘our,’ or the 3rd common plural, ‘their.’ The act of the giving comes from God, inferred by the 3rd masculine singular verbs in 3:11, and also by the presence of מלחה in 3:11d. Thus it is God who gives מלח, and the gift is given to everyone. But the place to which the gift is given is a more complicated matter. It is ‘to our/their heart’ () that God gives מלח, and it is this small noun, ב, that infers so much about the nature of the gift.

Wolff considers ב “the most important word in the vocabulary of Old Testament anthropology.” It is often assumed that ב is an anatomically specific term representing the heart but this is unlikely. In 2 Sam. 18:14, for instance, Joab stabs Absalom three times in the ב without being able to kill Absalom, who must be

58 Or, if the final ב is to be read ‘their,’ then the gift is to everyone except Qohelet.
finished off by ten of Joab’s armour bearers. In physiological terms, then, הֵרָג is probably best described as the chest area.\textsuperscript{60}

It is not the physiological sense of הֵרָג which is meant in Qoh 3:11, however. It seems obvious that הֵרָג in 3:11 refers to one or more of the symbolic or metaphorical uses of הֵרָג evidenced elsewhere in the HB. The הֵרָג represents a multitude of experiences and feelings, and is considered to function “in all dimensions of human existence and is used as a term for all the aspects of a person: vital, affective, noetic, and voluntative.”\textsuperscript{61}

Internal body parts such as the heart or liver were used to express emotions. The “fundamental emotions of human existence” are rooted in the הֵרָג.\textsuperscript{62} הֵרָג commonly expressed emotional distress (Ps 13:3) and joy (Pss 4:8; 13:6; 16:9),\textsuperscript{63} and also sexual desire (Prov 6:25; Ezek 16:30).\textsuperscript{64} A ‘broken heart’ in Hebrew refers to grief and sorrow (Pss 34:19; 51:19; 147:3; Isa 61:1), and is found in contexts with the ‘brokenhearted’ (Ps 34:16).\textsuperscript{65} The הֵרָג is also the seat of human vices\textsuperscript{66} and virtues.\textsuperscript{67}

\textsuperscript{60} Wolff, \textit{Anthropology of the Old Testament}, 40.
\textsuperscript{61} H.J. Fabry, “בִּלְבָּלēb; בִּלְבָּבēbbābēbābēb,” \textit{TDOT} 7:399-437 (412). Wolff labels these roles of the הֵרָג: feelings, wish, decisions of the will, and reason (Wolff, \textit{Anthropology of the Old Testament}, 40-58).
\textsuperscript{62} Lersch cited in Fabry, \textit{TDOT} 7:414.
\textsuperscript{64} Fabry, \textit{TDOT} 7:414.
\textsuperscript{65} Smith, “The Heart and Innards in Israelite Emotional Expressions,” 429.
\textsuperscript{66} Fabry, \textit{TDOT} 7:426.
\textsuperscript{67} Fabry, \textit{TDOT} 7:429.
And while the heart is the location of malice in such passages as Ps 5:10, it is rare for contempt or hatred to be said to be seated in the heart.

As there is no word for brain in Hebrew, it is supposed that the Hebrew בּ performs functions we accord the brain: power of perception, reason, understanding, insight, consciousness, memory, knowledge, reflection, judgment, sense of direction, discernment. These functions, writes Wolff, “circumscribe the real core meaning of the word.” In some instances (such as 1 Kgs 4:29-34), Wolff suggests, ‘mind’ might be a more appropriate understanding of בּ. Insight originates in the בּ, and it is the seat of wisdom, and of knowledge and the memory.

There are various idiomatic phrases concerning the heart which shed light on בּ בּ in 3:11b. To steal the heart is to deprive someone of insight, or to deceive a person (so Gen. 31:20), and someone who lacks heart lacks insight (so Prov 24:30). When David ‘says to his heart’ in 1 Sam 27:1, “he has all kinds of reflections, makes plans, and considers various factors” and self-conscious

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68 Smith, “The Heart and Innards in Israelite Emotional Expressions,” 432.
69 Fabry, TDOT 7:418.
72 Wolff, Anthropology of the Old Testament, 47.
73 Fabry, TDOT 7:422. For example, Prov 2:2; 19:8; 1 Kgs 3:9, 12; 5:9;10:24; 2 Chr 1:11; 9:23.
75 Wolff, Anthropology of the Old Testament, 48.
76 Wolff, Anthropology of the Old Testament, 49.
thought is often expressed as ‘saying in the heart.’\textsuperscript{77} ‘A whole strategy can therefore be thought through when a man ‘says to his heart.’\textsuperscript{78} Qohelet says to his heart numerous times (1:16; 2:1, 15 [x2]; 3:17, 18),\textsuperscript{79} and such an understanding of the term is appropriate in each case.

The בְּלִי can be “the locus of God’s influence”\textsuperscript{80} as is the case in Qoh 3:11b. Post-exilic texts use בְּלִי, put something into someone’s heart, to describe God’s influence on the human heart. “As the vital core of each individual, the heart is thus the point where Yahweh impinges on human existence.”\textsuperscript{81} In Ezra 7:27 God is blessed for ‘giving this to the heart of the king’ (וְזָכָּה בְּלִי לְמַלְאָך), where ‘this’ is the idea to glorify the Temple in Jerusalem. Nehemiah describes his nighttime mission to survey the walls of Jerusalem as something put into his mind by God to do (וְזָכָּה לְרָאשׁוֹ הָעָם לְעַתָּדוּת; Neh 2:12). It is also God’s idea that Nehemiah conduct a census in Neh 7:5 (וְזָכָּה לְרָאשׁוֹ הָעָם לְעַתָּדוּת). Thus giving to the heart involves a sort of revelation of information or intention directly from God to an individual.

\textsuperscript{77} Smith, “The Heart and Innards in Israelite Emotional Expressions,” 432. For example, Pss 10:6, 11, 13; 14:1; 15:2.
\textsuperscript{78} Wolff, Anthropology of the Old Testament, 50.
\textsuperscript{79} The verb for the speaking in these verses varies between בַּלָּד and בְּלִי. In addition to these verses, there appears to be a variation on the expression in 2:20, while in 7:25 Qohelet ‘turns his mind to know.’ Qohelet also uses the phrase ‘give it to heart’ (7:3), a phrase which describes deriving insight from something (so Isa 42:25). This verse, ‘and the living will lay it to heart,’ will be taken up in Chapter Six, “The Pulse of Death.”
\textsuperscript{80} Fabry, TDOT 7:425.
\textsuperscript{81} Fabry, TDOT 7:426.
Qohelet uses the term ‘give to the heart’ or variations on that term in several verses (1:13; 3:11; 7:3; 8:9, 16; 9:1), but only in one of these verses does the giving belong to God (3:11). In this verse, then, we may read God’s gift of נלוע as a gift of information upon people, which information should possibly result in intentional action.

3.1.3. Relation of נלוע and מִלָּה

How does מִלָּה fit into this equation? The relation between מִלָּה and giving to the heart is not obvious, and the difficulty in relating these two terms is evidenced in the multitude of meanings given to 3:11b. Some commentators interpret לְ in 3:11b as ‘midst’ and associate it with the לְ of 3:11a, thereby understanding 3:11b to mean, ‘he has put eternity into everything.’82 But, as we have seen, this translation does not conform to the idiom of giving to the heart which denotes direct revelation of knowledge or intention. A more likely reading understands לְ as the noetic (that is, thought and intention) and voluntative centre of the individual and מִלָּ as eternity in the sense of a temporal marker. Commentators who hold to these readings of both לְ and מִלָּ are Delitzsch, who sees 3:11 as the human yearning for eternity, and Zimmerli, who considers a ‘sense of eternity’ is inherent in human nature; people have the gift and need “to look beyond the present hour and ask

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82 For example, Lohfink, Ellermeier, and Gerleman, cited in Fabry, TDOT 7:420-421.
about the past and future."83 Svend Holm-Nielsen renders the sense roughly as “He has made human beings cognizant of their existence (life span).”84 It is this last concerning knowledge which is particularly notable here. The idiom ‘give to the heart,’ describing as it does a divine revelation of knowledge and intention, suggests that it is לֶחֶם (which is the content of the revelation, just as it is the need for a census in Neh 7:5, and the intention to rebuild the Temple in Ezra 7:27. Thus לֶחֶם becomes the basis of knowledge and intention or even action. The relation of לֶחֶם to the giving to the heart most likely contains some of Zimmerli’s looking beyond the present, and incorporates some of Delitzsch’s yearning for eternity, and, of course, is based upon a knowledge of the human lifespan in relation to eternity.

3.1.4. Conclusions regarding נֶלֶחֶם לֶחֶם נִתָּנָה לֶחֶם

What then might we say of נֶלֶחֶם לֶחֶם נִתָּנָה לֶחֶם which is given to our heart describes a time in which we did not and will not exist. Though it incorporates the time and spaces during which we are in the world, it specifically marks out a series of times before and beyond our own and spaces in which we may have no part. Darkness, ignorance and loss of self characterise Qohelet’s eternity. This fact is, in Qohelet’s words, given to our heart by God. The phrase נִתָּנָה לֶחֶם denotes direct revelation of knowledge, specifically where that knowledge leads to the intent to act. Thus God’s giving לֶחֶם to our heart must describe our knowledge of

83 Delitzsch, Zimmerli cited in Fabry, TDOT 7:420-421.
84 Cited in Fabry, TDOT 7:421.
It also suggests that this knowledge will lead to action. What this action will be is a matter of debate. It has been suggested that 3:11b expresses the “striving of individuals to transcend themselves in the face of their real limitations.” This is a possibility, but still does not answer the question of what action in particular the revelation of eternity will lead to. This question will be left aside for the moment, and I will return to it in Chapter Six, “The Pulse of Death.” In the meantime I will now turn to the final line of 3:11.

We have now arrived above at a reading of 3:11b which might be summarised as follows: God has given to our hearts, to act upon, the knowledge of eternity, that is, knowledge that there are masses of times and spaces in which we do not exist. The second line of the verse, 3:11c-d, also concerns knowledge, but the term used in this line is find. A word study of makes up much of this section. It will be shown that this word, as it is used in Qohelet, is often used in relation to a hidden knowledge which must be sought and which cannot be found. We will discover that in 3:11 is used in relation to a particular type of ‘knowledge’ which cannot be found: understanding. In addition to a detailed word study of this section also

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85 Fabry, *TDOT* 7:421.
addresses the double negative מָכָל, אָשָּׁר לָא, which I will argue is an emphatic or a pleonastic double negative, intended to negate the ability to understand (מָכָל).

The structure of this section is somewhat elliptical. It will begin with the first phrase of the line, מָכָל, אָשָּׁר לָא, but will then branch out into an extensive word study of מָכָל, which will cast some light on the appropriate rendering of the mysterious מָכָל. I will then turn to a comparison of 3:11 and 8:17, which comparison will also cast some light on מָכָל. Finally, I will return to מָכָל and conclude that 3:11c-d in its entirety describes our inability to understand anything that is done under the sun.

3.2.1. מָכָל אָשָּׁר לָא

The negative particle לָא, attached to the verb יִכְנָה, renders the verb negative. לָא יִכְנָה may therefore be understood as ‘he will not find.’86 Though the sentence, by virtue of this negative particle, at first appears to be negative, describing our inability to find, commentators cannot agree whether this is in fact the case. 3:11c begins with the compound phrase מָכָל, אָשָּׁר לָא, a phrase which introduces a wild-card element to the second half of the verse, for there is in the

86 The verb יִכְנָה carries a primary meaning of ‘find’, and for the moment I will translate it this way. However it will soon be argued that it can be used in a variety of ways, including, as here in 3:11, ‘understanding.’
The phrase המְלֵל בָּא מֵאָר לָא is therefore a double negative, and there is some confusion over how the double negative should be read. There are several ways one might read this double negative: it might be emphatic, or pleonastic, or the second negative could cancel the first negative, thereby rendering the phrase a positive of sorts. The phrase might be read ‘without’ or it might be read ‘without which not,’ and the entire phrase might therefore be read either as upholding the ability to find, or denying the ability to find.

The combination of המְלֵל בָּא מֵאָר לָא is found nowhere else in Biblical Hebrew.

This word, בָּא, is a combination of the preposition ב and the poetic negative particle ל. This word, בָּא, is not uncommon, and usually negates whatever follows it. It is

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87 Whitley (Koheleth, 33) renders v. 11: “even darkness he put into their heart, because of which man cannot discover the work which God did from the beginning even unto the end” (my emphasis). BDB, "בָּא," 115-116, lists this verse as an example of בָּא מֵאָר as a conjunction with a pleonastic מְלֵל, and render the phrase, ‘so that not.’ Barton also reads the phrase as an emphatic double negative (Barton, Ecclesiastes, 105). Seow, in contrast, renders מְלֵל מֵאָר, ‘so that’ (Seow, Ecclesiastes, 163). Shields (The End of Wisdom, 139) also renders the double negative as a positive, translating ‘without which people could not discover.’ He claims that “Qoheleth appears to be asserting that human beings ought to be able to discover the work that God has done from beginning to end” (Shields, The End of Wisdom, 142).

88 We might look here to instances of the double negative in the English language. The double negative in English can either emphasise the negative or cancel the negative. For example, ‘he can’t not know’ might render the statement positive (he can know). Alternatively, it might be that in the past the second negative in such a phrase would serve to intensify the negative (Orin Dale Seright, “Double Negatives in Standard Modern English,” American Speech 41/2 [1966]: 123-126). There is “considerable evidence,” he writes, “in present day speech of the earlier standard in which two negatives were used precisely for the purpose of intensifying the negative aspect” (Seright, “Double Negatives,” 123). The emphatic double negative, though considered lost to English since the eighteen hundreds, is still, according to Seright, alive and well, and can be seen in such phrases as ‘No I will not do it’ and ‘He will never, never do it’ (Seright, “Double Negatives,” 125-126).

89 See BDB, 115.
used in prose as a negative particle,\(^90\) and also occurs numerous times in the sense of ‘without.’\(^91\) It retains its meaning of without even when attached to a preposition, whether that preposition be ב,\(^92\) or ל.\(^93\) Even when מָלֵךְ is attached to a preposition, it retains its meaning of ‘without.’ In Deut 9:28, for instance, מָלֵךְ is rendered ‘without YHWH being able.’ The same is true of מָלֵךְ in Num 14:16; 28:55; Isa 5:13; Hos 4:6; Ezek 34:5; and, Lam 1:4. It seems, then, that in 3:11c מָלֵךְ should be rendered ‘without,’ but does its association with change this?

One of the closest related phrases to מָלֵךְ is מָלֵךְ followed by the negative נ and preceded by the interrogative ה.\(^94\) מָלֵךְ is used with a negative (נ) in Ex 14:11,\(^95\) as well as in 2 Kings 1:3, 6, 16.\(^96\) The pairing of מָלֵךְ and נ in these verses is formally a double negative which in Hebrew functions to emphasise the negative rather than cancelling it. Whitley and Gordis each cite these verses in their treatment of מָלֵךְ in 3:11.\(^97\) Shields however criticises Whitley’s comparison of מָלֵךְ to מָלֵךְ. Whitley, he says, does not note the differences between the two phrases, specifically the interrogative ה and

\(^{90}\) For example in Isa 14:4; 32:10; Hos 8:7; 9:16; Job 41:18 (BDB, 115).

\(^{91}\) It is found joined with a substantive and meaning without several times, such as in Job 8:11; 24:10; 31:39; 33:9; 42:3; Ps 59:5 (BDB, 115).

\(^{92}\) For example with ב in Deut 4:42; 19:4; Josh 20:3, 5; Job 35:16; 36:12 (BDB, 115).

\(^{93}\) Isa 5:14.

\(^{94}\) Whitley, *Koheleth*, 33.

\(^{95}\) אָמַר מָלֵךְ נַהֲרָא מָלֵךְ

\(^{96}\) The relevant passage in all three of these verses is written, אָמַר מָלֵךְ נַהֲרָא מָלֵךְ.\(^{97}\) Whitley, *Koheleth*, 33; Gordis, *Koheleth*, 232.
the insertion of the relative מַעֲרָא between the two negative terms. The possibility that these double negative constructions shed light on 3:11 however must be seriously entertained.

In contrast to the emphatic or pleonastic double negatives in the previous paragraph, there is a second double negative paradigm which results in a positive of sorts. These double negative constructions are very similar to מַעֲרָא אָבִיא לָא in that they consist in a negative followed by relative particle followed by negative. If מַעֲרָא לָא is the same sort of double negative as the double negatives in these passages, it would mean that מַעֲרָא אָבִיא לָא in 3:11 is a double negative which results in a positive.

A double negative with a relative particle between the two negatives is found in the midst of the Passover story. Ex 12:30 describes the pervasive nature of the death of the firstborn in the phrase, translated ‘there was no house where there was not someone dead.’ It could be argued that this phrase results in a positive, in that the line could be paraphrased ‘all houses had someone dead.’ This is true also of the double negative in Num 27:17, ‘so YHWH’s community might not be like sheep that have no shepherd.’ This passage, while making perfect sense with both negatives written long-hand and read as negatives, can be taken as resulting in a

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98 Shields, The End of Wisdom, 141-142.
99 Shields claims that in these constructions, the second negative ‘logically negates’ the first negative (Shields, The End of Wisdom, 142).
100 יָהַ הָהֵר הַעֲרָא הַעֲרָא אֲבָא לָא אַלְּלָה בָּבָי מַעֲרָא מָא
101 יָהַ הָהֵר הַעֲרָא אֲבָא לָא אַלְּלָה בָּבָי מַעֲרָא מָא
positive: so that YHWH’s community might be like shepherded sheep. The same possibility of the two negatives pointing to a positive is at play in Deut 3:4, ‘there was not a town we did not take from them’; 102 11:2, ‘it was not your children who did not know and who did not see the lessons of YHWH your God’; 103 17:15, ‘do not set over you a strange man who is not your brother’; 104 and Josh 8:35, ‘There was not a word from all which Moses commanded that Joshua didn’t read.’ 105

If מְבַלֶּל רָאָה לֹא in 3:11 is like these examples of the double negative with a relative particle, it could mean ‘without which not,’ that is, the second negative might not be emphatic, or pleonastic, but might instead require that both negatives be read as negative, and this in turn could point to a positive. Shields believes that the relative particle אֶזְכָּר acts this way in 3:11, thereby placing the second negative in a subordinate clause. 106 Thus we would arrive at a sense in this verse of, ‘God has given עַל לָנוּ to our heart, without which we don’t find.’ 107

Though it might seem that there is evidence enough to conclude that the double negative מְבַלֶּל רָאָה לֹא should be rendered as an emphatic double negative or as a pleonastic double negative, due to the use of מְבַלֶּל in relationship with a negative such as רָאָה, some doubt must still remain that the insertion of the relative particle

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102 Shields, The End of Wisdom, 141-142.
103 And as Shields argues for a positive double negative the implication of this is that the עַל in our hearts results in our being able to discover the deeds God has done from beginning to end.
between the two negatives might create a double negative which could be rendered along the lines of ‘without which not,’ and with a resulting positive meaning would link 3:11c-d to 3:11b in an entirely different way and change the meaning of the passage.

There are then in this one phrase numerous possibilities. Does the נלע in our hearts lead to what is described in the following lines, or do 3:11b and 3:11c-d stand in contrast? Is the double negative an emphatic negative or a pleonastic negative, or does the intervening relative particle mean the phrase is in fact positive like the examples of the double negative with relative particle offered in the second double negative paradigm above? These possibilities can be diagrammed:

A. causative  B. contrast

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>α. emphatic/pleonastic</th>
<th>β. positive</th>
<th>α. emphatic/pleonastic</th>
<th>β. positive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aα. God has given נלע to our heart so that we can’t find…</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aβ. God has given נלע to our heart so that we can’t not find… 109</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bα. God has given נלע to our heart without us finding…</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bβ. God has given נלע to our heart without us not finding… 110</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These possibilities may be roughly translated:-

108 I will group emphatic and pleonastic possibilities due to their similarity: both result in a negative reading, though one, the emphatic, results in a ‘more’ negative reading than the pleonastic.

109 Where this double negative points to a positive, being able to find.
One option must be eradicated from the outset. Bβ is gibberish. The other three options, however, are possible to varying degrees. It is necessary to look outside of מֵכָל, אַחֲרֵי לָא to decide which of the remaining three options is more viable in the context. Specifically, it is necessary to look at what Qohelet means by מְלָא, find.

3.2.2. מְלָא

It will be seen that מְלָא is a part of Qohelet’s epistemological vocabulary,111 sometimes nuanced toward knowledge, and at other times, as in 3:11, toward

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110 Again, where this double negative results in a positive, being able to find.
111 As discussed in the introductory chapter, Qohelet’s method of arriving at his conclusions is somewhat clouded (pages 45-46). He sees (2:13), or he sets his mind to know (8:16), for example, but beyond his phrases of observation and cogitation we seem to know very little about the processes by which he arrived at his understanding of the world. It is then perhaps misleading to call Qohelet’s search for knowledge an epistemology, for epistemology in the modern sense is sometimes considered to be not so much about what is known, but how it is known, and is epistemology only if the method is empirical. If Qohelet does not explain how he knows beyond these verbal structures then there is not much we can say about his epistemology. But we can consider the entire book of Qohelet as an epistemology. All of Qohelet’s descriptions of the world describe his knowledge of it (no matter how much weight we might give these opinions), and we are able to ask how he came to possess that knowledge. Once we allow for an implicit epistemology, rather than looking only for explicit statements of knowledge seeking, we arrive at a broader understanding of Qohelet’s system of knowledge. Some of Qohelet’s views are experientially verifiable, and it is therefore easy to know how he came about these views. For instance, he says nature is rhythmic, and such a belief may be firmly founded upon observation of the natural world, the turning seasons, the cycles of the heavens (see Chapter Two, “Nature and the Death Aesthetic”). That the poor are oppressed (4:1) is also verifiable, as is his claim that wisdom is generally not valued (9:13-16). But not all of Qohelet’s claims are experientially verifiable. The worker’s sleep is sweet (5:11), he says, but how can he know this? He says quite a lot about God, for example in 9:7 where Qohelet advocates simple pleasure claiming God has long ago approved them. How can Qohelet claim to know the purposes of the deity? This statement, despite being experientially unverifiable, is put forth as knowledge. Qohelet is positing a theory beyond the data available to him. If we are to reconstruct the processes behind the knowledge Qohelet claims, therefore, we must include not simply experiential knowledge, but we must also include knowledge which is arrived at through non-experiential means. Thus any study of Qohelet’s epistemology must allow for non-empirical knowledge. For a debate on Qohelet’s epistemology compare Michael V. Fox, “Qohelet’s Epistemology,” *HUCA* 58 (1987): 137-155, and Crenshaw, “Qohelet’s Understanding of Intellectual Inquiry,” 205-224.
understanding. We will address various other statements of knowledge and understanding in the book (7:14, 24-29; 8:17) to discover whether 3:11c-d seems best to fit statements of inability to understand, or statements of ability to understand. This then will be read back into the phrase מְבַל שָׁאָר לָא, and finally we will be able to describe the relationship between 3:11b and 3:11c-d and the overall meaning of the verse.

3.2.2.1. מָלֵא הָוָא in the Hebrew Bible

The verb מָלֵא הָוָא can mean both ‘find’ and ‘reach,’\textsuperscript{112} but can carry a “broad range of meanings” which usually can be traced back to the meaning, ‘to find.’\textsuperscript{113} The semantic field of מָלֵא הָוָא in the HB involves finding as a result of effort or intention, often as the result of seeking, but can also represent accidental discovery or meeting.\textsuperscript{114} There are a multitude of possibilities for what is sought and then found, such as a resting place, wisdom, the solution to a riddle.\textsuperscript{115} Encountering someone or meeting someone is an easily understandable extension of מָלֵא הָוָא (for example, Gen 4:14, 15; 1 Kgs 19:19; Jer 50:7),\textsuperscript{116} as is seeking and finding God (1 Chr 28:9; 29:12; 73:23).

\textsuperscript{112} The sense of מָלֵא הָוָא as ‘find’ is explained developed out of what was originally a verb of motion, to reach, attain, and links with Ugaritic ‘to reach, overtake, arrive’ suggest that מָלֵא הָוָא in Hebrew also might have this meaning (Anthony R. Ceresko, “The Function of Antanaclasis [ms ‘to find’/ ms ‘to reach, overtake, grasp’] in Hebrew Poetry, Especially in the Book of Qoheleth,” \textit{CBQ} 44 [1982]: 551-569 [553]). Ceresko argues that מָלֵא הָוָא can mean to reach, overtake, seize, more often than has previously been recognised (Ceresko, “The Function of Antanaclasis,” 555).

\textsuperscript{113} S. Wagner, “םָכֹס māsā‘,” in \textit{TDOT} 8:466.

\textsuperscript{114} Wagner, \textit{TDOT} 8:466.

\textsuperscript{115} Wagner, \textit{TDOT} 8:467-468.

\textsuperscript{116} Wagner, \textit{TDOT} 8:470-472.
2 Chr 15:2, 4, 15), and God’s election of Israel (Hos 9:10; Deut 32:10). It can also mean ‘meeting’ in the material or objective sense of an axe meeting someone’s head (Deut 19:5). The HB contains a series of passages in which נלוכ is used to designate the results of an investigation or evaluation (1 Chr 20:2; Esth 2:23; 1 Sam 25:28). In most cases the reference is to the evaluation of circumstances, characteristics, and ethical qualities regarding certain people, in a few instances, though, objects or things are the focus of the verb. It is this last sense in particular, wherein נלוכ is used of investigation and evaluation, which concerns us here.

3.2.2.2. נלוכ in Qohelet

The verb נלוכ occurs 17 times in Qohelet. While in several passages נלוכ does not seem to be related to knowledge or the search for knowledge (9:10, 15; 11:1; 12:10), is one of the cornerstones of Qohelet’s epistemological vocabulary,

117 Wagner, TDOT 8:477-478.
118 Wagner, TDOT 8:478.
119 Wagner, TDOT 8:475-476.
120 Wagner, TDOT 8:474-475.
121 In 9:10 נלוכ, ‘Whatever your hand finds to do, do with all your might,’ does not describe any form of knowledge or understanding, but does carry much the same meaning as when it does describe finding sought knowledge. Instead of setting one’s mind (heart) to know something, in 9:10, the hand finds (and so presumably seeks to find) something to do (לומד). In 12:10, Qohelet is said to have sought to find and write truthful sayings. In this verse the relationship between finding and the effort behind it is made explicit, for נלוכ is paired with seek. Once again, נלוכ describes the conjunction of two things. The group of things which are met are the pleasant words (Cpx-yrbd), and the seeker is Qohelet. The convergence of two aspects, like the hand and its activity in 9:10, or Qohelet and the Cpx-yrbd in 12:10, is again present in 9:15, ‘found in a city is a poor but wise man’ who saved the city but is not remembered. In this verse נלוכ does not describe...
with the remaining thirteen occurrences used relation to seeking and finding knowledge or its like (3:11; 7:14, 24, 26, 27[x2], 28[x3], 29; 8:17 [x3]).

It is certain that in Qohelet בָּחַצֶּה is used idiomatically as a term for evaluation and consolidation of what he has gleaned from experience.123 בָּחַצֶּה is translated differently in these epistemological passages by different commentators. Fox translates ‘grasp.’124 Ceresko suggests that בָּחַצֶּה carries numerous meanings in Qohelet by way of antanaclasis, wherein multiple uses of the same word in a passage can mean different things.125 Both Fox and Ceresko submit that Qohelet utilises the ambiguity of בָּחַצֶּה.126 In the following analysis of Qohelet’s epistemological passages containing the verb בָּחַצֶּה (7:14, 24-29; 8:17) we will see that the meaning of בָּחַצֶּה is able to shift between knowledge and understanding.

Further, its semantic field encapsulates both being able to ‘find’ and not being able to ‘find’ these things. This is especially important in light of מַכֵּס אָשֶׁר לִפְרָנוּי, for if מַכֵּס had been used solely to convey things which could be found then the case for a positive reading of מַכֵּס אָשֶׁר לִפְרָנוּי would be stronger than the case for a

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123 Wagner, *TDOT* 8:481.
124 Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 211.
negative reading of מִלְעָתָּה מָסָר לָא. As will be seen, however, the use of מִלְעָתָּה מָסָר לָא to describe both things which can be found and things which cannot be found does not enable us to decide either way in the case of מִלְעָתָּה מָסָר לָא.

3.2.2.2.1. מִלְעָתָּה מָסָר in 7:14 and 7:23-29

7:14. In 7:14 מִלְעָתָּה מָסָר seems primarily to refer to the inability to know. Qohelet states that one cannot מָסָר what will happen after one (נָחַרְבּוּ). A similar statement is made in 3:22. In that passage, one is unable to see (רָאָשִׁים) what will come after one. In both of these passages נָחַרְבּוּ, after, seems to describe days which will occur during a person’s life. In the first line of 7:14 Qohelet writes of days of good (מהַב) and of bad/misery (רָעִים). These days must refer to days within life. Also in 3:22, נָחַרְבּוּ seems to be confined to the living world, joined as it is with the benefits of taking enjoyment of one’s actions (מִלְעָתָּה מָסָר) while one can, especially in the face of not knowing (here, not seeing, רָאָשִׁים) what is to happen. This same sentiment is found in again 6:12 and 10:14, where we read of the inability to know what is going to happen in a person’s future (נָחַרְבּוּ). The inability to ‘tell’ (רָאָשִׁים) a person what is going to come about (רָאָשִׁים מָסָר, 6:12; רָאָשִׁים מָסָר, 10:14) is limited

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127 מִלְעָתָּה מָסָר (נָחַרְבּוּ) מָסָר מָסָר מָסָר מָסָר
128 מָסָר מָסָר מָסָר מָסָר מָסָר מָסָר מָסָר מָסָר מָסָר מָסָר מָסָר מָסָר מָסָר מָסָר מָסָר מָסָר מָסָר
129 מָסָר מָסָר מָסָר מָסָר מָסָר מָסָר מָסָר מָסָר מָסָר מָסָר מָסָר מָסָר מָסָר מָסָר מָסָר מָסָר מָסָר מָסָר מָסָר מָסָר מָסָר מָסָר מָסָר מָסָר מָסָר מָסָר
130 מָסָר מָסָר מָסָר מָסָר מָסָר מָסָר מָסָר מָסָר מָסָר
to that person’s life time. הֶחֱלָל, ‘under the sun’, is a phrase used by Qohelet which delineates life and being in the world. Thus the inability to know in 6:12 is limited to what will happen in life. It seems likely that this delimitation to the living world is implicit in all the statements which speak of this ability to know. One may also note in these passages the use of various verbs to denote knowledge. 6:12 and 10:14 use both ידוע, know, and בָּנוֹ, tell, and 3:22 uses בָּיָם, see. Given the similar sentiment evidenced in 7:14, it would seem that in that verse גם also acts as a verb of knowledge. Like 6:12, 10:14, and 3:22, it also marks an inability to know. ידוע, בָּנוֹ, and גם are all used in the same way – to describe the inability to know what will happen throughout one’s life.

7:23-29. This passage offers a cluster of 8 of the 17 uses of חכמה in Qohelet, some of which should be nuanced toward knowledge, and others toward understanding.

131 Fox groups 7:24 with the preceding passage, declaring that it and v. 23 concern the inevitability of ignorance (Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 263-265), and vv. 25ff with a unit consisting 7:25-8:1a (Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 265-273). He does state, however, that this unit, “with its ironic self-undermining calculations, flows out of the preceding insofar as it serves to demonstrate the remoteness of wisdom” (Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 266). For this reason there is no great problem in treating 7:23-29 – for our purposes – as one literary unit.
In 7:23 Qohelet makes a poignant confession of his inability to attain wisdom. ‘I will be wise’ (יהוה), he says, but wisdom (יהוה, ‘she’) is far from him.

Commentators have noted the inconsistency in this verse, for not only does Qohelet claim elsewhere that his wisdom never left him (2:9b), in this very verse he speaks of testing ‘all this’ with wisdom (יהוה ניזאôt יְהוָה). How can Qohelet claim both to possess wisdom and not to possess wisdom? One solution to the conundrum this verse presents posits a difference between the wisdom Qohelet does possess, and practises so liberally throughout his book, and the wisdom he seeks but is unable to obtain.132 “In other words,” Fox writes, “he possessed learning and employed his reason (both being forms of הָוָה), but he could not attain the kind of wisdom he was aiming at.”133 This type of wisdom Qohelet seeks but cannot attain is understanding, and such a meaning to 7:23 is supported throughout the rest of 7:23-29, and especially through some of Qohelet’s uses of the verb הָוָה.

The first use of הָוָה in 7:23-29 occurs in the following verse (7:24), in which Qohelet also describes precisely what it is that cannot be understood.

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132 See Fox, A Time to Tear Down, 264, for suggested solutions to the problem.
133 Fox, A Time to Tear Down, 264. See also Murphy, Ecclesiastes, 72.
The phrase מְצַגֶּה, translated ‘who can discover it’ or ‘who can find it out,’\(^{134}\) is a rhetorical question similar to מְצַגֶּה.\(^{135}\) The interrogative מְצַגֶּה is used 16 times\(^{136}\) in Qohelet (2:19, 25 [x2]; 3:21, 22; 4:8; 5:9; 6:12 [x2]; 7:13, 24; 8:1 [x2], 4, 7: 9:4; 10:14) in such rhetorical constructs as that found in 7:24, the answer to which (if such can be the case of a rhetorical question) is “tantamount to ‘no one.’”\(^{138}\) מְצַגֶּה in 7:24 therefore pertains to something which no one can find. It is clear that this absence pertains to מַחְשָׁבָה, ‘that which happens’, which Qohelet writes of in 7:24 as מַחְשָׁבָה, far, and מַחְשָׁבָה, deep, just as he writes of wisdom as מַחְשָׁבָה in 7:23. Thus it is ‘that which happens’ which Qohelet, and indeed no one, can find. But what does this finding pertain to? Does Qohelet mean no one can know ‘that which happens,’ or does he mean rather that no one can understand it?

מַחְשָׁבָה in Qohelet is “virtually synonymous” with מַחְשָׁבָה or מַחְשָׁבָה.\(^{139}\) In 1:9, for instance, it denotes what is מַחְשָׁבָה, under the sun, a phrase describing life in the world. In 3:15 also מַחְשָׁבָה is linked with מַחְשָׁבָה in 3:16. ‘That which happens’ in 7:24 therefore corresponds to what happens in the world. Qohelet does write elsewhere that one cannot know what will happen in the future (רָוָה; 6:12), but it is not certain that it is only the inability to

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\(^{134}\) JPS; NRSV.


\(^{136}\) Jarick, A Comprehensive Bilingual concordance of the Hebrew and Greek Texts of Ecclesiastes, 235, also lists 2:12’s מְצַגֶּה.

\(^{137}\) מְצַגֶּה

\(^{138}\) Fox, A Time to Tear Down, 272.

\(^{139}\) Fox, Qohelet and His Contradictions, 240.
know future events which is being described here in 7:24. It is certainly possible to know something of what happens in the world (for example, 9:11), though one cannot know everything (11:5). It is more likely that המלא in 7:24 denotes understanding what happens in the world, not just knowing what happens in the world. Finding out what happens then refers to understanding “the rationale of events, including anomalous and unjust occurrences.”\footnote{Fox, A Time to Tear Down, 265.} And with the phrase מפי ה useCallback, Qohelet infers that no one may attain such an understanding. In relation to 7:23 we discover that no one, no matter how wise, can be wise enough to understand.\footnote{See discussion of 8:17 below.}

Though 7:25 does not contain the verb in question, it does utilise several terms related to it: באק and KNOW, both meaning seek, and KNOW, as well as turning, used in 2:20 to describe the initial action of seeking knowledge. In 7:25 Qohelet describes how he embarked on a mental journey (ברך), the verbs באק and KNOW outlining the ‘method’ of this mental journey, namely seeking. Qohelet also states the desired outcome of this method – he sought to know (לדעת). It seems that the following verse, v. 26, in which Qohelet explains what he found (מלאת) as a result of this process, should be read in light of the intention stated in v.25. That is, given that Qohelet’s object was to know, what he finds as a result of this object should be read weighted toward knowledge. Thus when he states that a woman is more bitter than death, it would seem that it is an

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140 Fox, A Time to Tear Down, 265.
141 See discussion of 8:17 below.
object of knowledge which has come about through the process of seeking knowledge. It might be, as Fox claims, that this apparent misogyny is bathos, evidence of Qohelet’s wit. Whether it is or not (and I am inclined to believe it is not), what is important for our purposes is that מנה here marks the meeting of one thing – Qohelet’s ב – with another item, an item of knowledge. Qohelet found something, and so in 7:26 מנה can be read as meaning a discovery, or something learned. His discovery would become his knowledge.

שנה occurs twice in 7:27, one as an infinitive construct and once as a first person perfect, and in both cases they seem to be loaded toward knowledge. The verse is a little difficult, due mostly to the seemingly mathematical second stich. ‘One to one’ (שנה לReusable), Qohelet writes, to find שמעון. There seems to be something missing from this stich. What does Qohelet do with the שנה in order to find שמעון? Fox considers that Qohelet is taking a mathematical approach, and translates ‘(adding) one to one.’ It does seem that this line relates to the following verses, and it might be that the שנה can be understood ‘one by one’ or ‘item by item,’ where each of the things Qohelet finds in the following verses is one item. If this is so, then each of the items found in 7:28-29 would make up the שמעון which Qohelet finds in 7:27. This word, שמעון, is used elsewhere in the book, for

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142 Fox, A Time to Tear Down, 268.
143 Fox, A Time to Tear Down, 270.
instance in 9:10 where it is something which one loses in death.\textsuperscript{144} \textit{אֱלֹהִיָּהּ} is pointed \textit{אָלָהָהּ} only in Qohelet, elsewhere it is pointed \textit{אֶלֹהִיָּהּ}, and used of devices or inventions (2 Chr 26:15).\textsuperscript{145} In Qohelet, however, \textit{אֱלֹהִיָּהּ} is used to denote a “considered assessment of life,\textsuperscript{146} that is, what is arrived at by a deliberate process of reckoning,”\textsuperscript{147} referring “to both the process of reckoning and the solution reached.”\textsuperscript{148} If this is so then \textit{אֱלֹהִיָּהּ} at once describes the ‘answer’ and also the process through which Qohelet arrives at the answer. The second \textit{אֱלֹהִיָּהּ} in 7:27, and also the first use of \textit{אֱלֹהִיָּהּ} in v. 27, would reflect this intellectual discovery, and the ‘finding’ could therefore denote discovering a piece of knowledge.\textit{אֱלֹהִיָּהּ} could in v. 27 signify the meeting of the inquiring mind with the object of inquiry, the outcome of which, \textit{אֱלֹהִיָּהּ}, being knowledge.

However, it is unclear whether Qohelet is successful in his search for \textit{אֱלֹהִיָּהּ}, for in v.28 Qohelet writes that he sought (\textit{לֹא} \textit{אֱלֹהִיָּהּ} הָבָּא) but did not find (\textit{לֹא} \textit{אֱלֹהִיָּהּ} מַנְתָּא). What it is that Qohelet sought but did not find is not listed, but more often than not commentators assume that the missing item which Qohelet cannot find is a wise woman,\textsuperscript{149} which sentiment would then be repeated in 7:28c. The relative particle \textit{אֱלֹהִיָּהּ} introduces this line, and it is this small word which enables the reader to

\textsuperscript{144} See Chapter Four, “What it is to be Dead.”
\textsuperscript{145} BDB, 363-364.
\textsuperscript{146} Where a ‘considered assessment’ would aim for both knowledge and also understanding.
\textsuperscript{147} Machinist, “Fate, \textit{miqreh}, and Reason,” 170.
\textsuperscript{148} Fox, \textit{A Time to Tear Down}, 268.
\textsuperscript{149} So Fox, \textit{A Time to Tear Down}, 270; Barton, \textit{Ecclesiastes}, 147.
question whether Qohelet in fact refers to a woman or to the נאו of v. 27. A possible reading would be, ‘…one by one to find the ‘reason of things,’ which my repeatedly sought but did not find.’ If the נאו denotes the ‘reason of things,’ and if one can read vv. 27-28 in this way, then Qohelet could be describing his inability to find the reason of things. Rather than seeking and finding knowledge, then, Qohelet would be seeking and not finding the ‘why’ of things. His lack of finding would translate to a lack of understanding.

This would then contrast with the knowledge Qohelet gains of the people seek (בְּרֵיה in 7:29. This last is something Qohelet does find (מאנה), and in this case it seems to denote knowledge. Qohelet is able to know that people seek many (there is no textual evidence that the people are successful in their seeking), but this is contrast with his inability to find נאו.

Ceresko has argued that Qohelet uses the literary device of antanaclasis, and in light of the multiple uses of מאנה in 7:23-29 but with varying meaning it would seem that he is correct. It can be seen in this cluster of מאנה in 7:23-29 as well as in 7:14 that though each occurrence can be translated ‘find,’ the nuances of the word shift from use to use. It is used of concrete objects such as people (7:28), but it is also used of knowledge (7:14). That מאנה could denote understanding is possibly seen in 7:27-28, and in that reading it seems that the event of finding does not

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150 Also see non-epistemological uses of מאנה in footnote 122 above.
occur. Finally, in 7:24 it seems probable that מנה denotes understanding, and in this verse we also see that understanding is not attainable. It would seem that מנה may be used of something which can be found or which cannot be found. Its use in 3:11, then, does not seem to shed light on the double negative מנה in 3:11. However, the above discussion has shown that where מנה might denote understanding, the ability to find is less certain. We will now turn to the final verse to see if the vagueness regarding מנה might be dispelled.

3.2.2.2. מנה in Qoh 8:17

It is understandable if the sceptical among us require more convincing of the different uses of מנה, especially in regards to the possible different meanings pertaining to the finding of knowledge and or the finding of understanding. There is one verse, 8:17, which has not yet been addressed, and is of particular importance in understanding 3:11. 8:17 is important for two reasons: it plays off knowledge against understanding in a very clear manner, and it also seems to describe the same sort of thing as is described in 3:11c-d.

מנה appears three times in 8:17. According to Fox this verse shows the near synonymity of מנה and ידוע: even if the wise man attempts to know (ידוע) he
cannot find or ‘grasp’ מַתְמוּת the events of life.\footnote{Fox, A Time to Tear Down, 87.} Reading מַתְמוּת and מַכְסֵה as near synonyms results in an understanding of the verse which could be paraphrased, ‘even if the wise man claims to know he is not able to know.’ It is my contention however that מַכְסֵה and מַתְמוּת are not synonymous in this verse.\footnote{Though sometimes מַכְסֵה can function as an epistemological verb tantamount to ‘know.’ Cf. discussion of Qoh 7:14 above.}

In the first and third instances of מַכְסֵה in this verse we are shown that seeing does not result in finding. Qohelet tells us he has seen מַכְסֵה all God’s deeds, but then goes on to say that one cannot מַכְסֵה the deeds which are done under the sun. These two claims, made back to back as they are, clearly show that to see is not necessarily to find. What then could מַכְסֵה mean in this instance? It is more likely that the first use of מַכְסֵה in 8:17 pertains to understanding.

מַכְסֵה in this passage clearly does not mean the ability to locate something, for such an understanding would result in a very strange meaning, ‘I have seen everything, but one cannot locate the deeds.’ Even if we are to take מַכְסֵה as ‘know’ the sentence still does not seem to work: ‘I have seen everything, but one cannot know the deeds which are done.’ It is unlikely that Qohelet, having made claim to see some of God’s deeds, would then state that he does not know anything which is done under
the sun. One would have to believe that for Qohelet seeing is not necessarily knowing, but as can be seen in his use of throughout the book, seeing very often is knowing for Qohelet. Further, when one turns to the third instance of in this verse, it can be seen that should be rendered understanding, both in the first and the third occurrence of in 8:17. If in the final line of 8:17, ‘and even if the wise person claims (lit. says) to know, [the wise person is] not able to ,’ is to be taken as ‘know’ in the same sense as the knowledge the wise person claims, this statement could be read as anti-wisdom, in the sense that wise people tell lies, for if this claims to know but actually is not able to know, the claim would be self-deluded or a lie. Qohelet does not say that this is a false , and without such a caveat we can only take the as a bona fide wise person. So if the wise person knows, why is that person not able to ? Reading the verb in 8:17b as pertaining to understanding results in a far more natural possibility.

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153 One can assume here a certain synonymity between all that God does and the action which is done under the sun, for even if all that God does extends beyond the living world, there can be little doubt that what God does incorporates what happens within the world. Thus when Qohelet says he has seen all that God does, that seeing incorporates what happens in the world.

154 Antoon Schoors, “The Verb in the Book of Qoheleth,” in “Jedes Ding hat seine Zeit...” Studien zur israelitischen und altorientalischen Weisheit (ed. Anja A. Diesel et al; BZAW 241; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1996), 227-241 (227, 241), lists Qohelet’s 47 usages of and concludes that depending on the context “expresses his experience, his examination of it or the knowledge he draws from it.”
It would seem that נלע represents something beyond or different from the knowledge the wise person claims. As in 7:23, we can see that there is some part of wisdom, or a type of wisdom, which is unobtainable. There Qohelet admits that the wisdom he sought was far from him, that he was unable to attain it, even while he retained his wisdom. This opens up that verse to the likelihood that the wisdom Qohelet seeks is a different wisdom than the wisdom he possessed, or at least a deeper wisdom than he possessed, and this same concept is at play in the first and third occurrences of מלחא in 8:17.

The second occurrence of מלחא in 8:17 also likely denotes this absent aspect of wisdom. Here it is human toil to seek and not to find. The position of this מלחא, sandwiched between the absence of understanding in the first and third occurrences of מלחא in 8:17, suggests that the ‘not finding’ should be understood as ‘not understanding’.

3.2.3. Summary of relationship between מלחא and מלחא

To summarise so far, the action described by the verb מלחא requires effort – one must seek to מלחא – but such seeking does not guarantee success. Sometimes the desired meeting of the two aspects will occur (that is, the thing which is sought will meet with the thing which is seeking), but at other times it will not.
This word study offers two further insights into 3:11. 1) מָלַא in 3:11 need not mean ‘find’ in the sense of ‘know.’ It could just as easily mean ‘find’ in the sense of ‘understand.’ 2) If מָלַא in 3:11 does indeed mean ‘understand’ it can shed light on מִבְּלָל יִהְיֶר לָא, for if not even the wisest person can understand (7:23; 8:17), any translation of מִבְּלָל יִהְיֶר לָא which results in the inference that understanding is possible must be declared illegitimate.

Of the four options of the meaning of מָלַא מִבְּלָל יִהְיֶר לָא in relation to מָלַא מִבְּלָל יִהְיֶר לָא first listed on page 31 above, then, there are only two remaining. The four possibilities were:

Aα. God has given מָלַא to our heart so that we can’t find…

Aβ. God has given מָלַא to our heart so that we can’t not find…

Bα. God has given מָלַא to our heart without us finding…

Bβ. God has given מָלַא to our heart without us not finding…

Bβ, ‘God has given מָלַא to our heart without us not finding’, was discarded from the outset on the basis of its not making sense. The possibility that מָלַא represents in 3:11 something which cannot be obtained strikes out Aβ, ‘God has given מָלַא to our heart so that we can’t not find,’ as this option infers that it is God’s gift of

155 Where this double negative points to a positive, being able to find.
which allows us to find. The two remaining options are Aα, ‘God has given לָ֣זְרָהָ֖ה to our heart so that we can’t find’, and Bα, ‘God has given לָ֣זְרָהָ֖ה to our heart without us finding.’ If we accept that מְדַבֵּ֖ר in 3:11 might mean understanding, one option infers that God gives לָ֣זְרָהָ֖ה with the intention that we not be able to understand (Aα), and the other (Bα) infers that our inability to understand is not contingent upon the gift of לָ֣זְרָהָ֖ה but still stands in contrast to it.

3.2.4. A comparison of 3:11 and 8:17

The inability to understand in 3:11 is supported by further comparison with 8:17. One passage in particular in 8:17 (v. 17b-c) is remarkably similar to 3:11c-d. The various points of correlation are particularly clear when the passages are written together:-

Apart from the verb in question being present both in 3:11c-d and throughout 8:17, it will be seen that there are other points of correlation: both passages pertain to ‘the deeds which are done by God’ (3:11) or ‘the deeds which are done’ (8:17); and, in both these deeds are set within a time or a space which correlates to the human life-span (‘under the sun’ [8:17]; ‘from beginning to end’ [3:11]). This section will explore the correlations between 3:11c-d and 8:17b-c and show that 8:17 can shed light on the problem posed by the final words of 3:11, מָרָאֶ֥ה וּנְדוֹרָ֖ם, the phrase.
which informs commentators’ understanding of what it is exactly which can or
cannot be found. This section also draws on the other correlations between 3:11 and
8:17 in order to further determine the meaning of 3:11b and, finally, this analysis
will be read back into 3:11 to determine the meaning of that verse.

3.2.4.1. מְרָאָם וֹנְדֵרָם Pws-d(w #)rm // מְרָאָם וֹנְדֵרָם

The construction מְרָאָם וֹנְדֵרָם found in 3:11 is often rendered ‘both … and’ and
so מְרָאָם וֹנְדֵרָם should strictly be translated ‘both beginning and end.’ The
meaning of that phrase in 3:11, however, is inclusive of all that lies between the
beginning and the end, in which case it should be taken to mean, ‘from beginning to
end.’ We might ask, from the beginning to the end of what?

There is some belief that God’s deeds מְרָאָם וֹנְדֵרָם stands for the entirety of
God’s deeds. While it could be that מְרָאָם וֹנְדֵרָם is equivalent to writing
lkh ‚לכּ, which would then mean that it may be paraphrased ‘everything God does’
or ‘all God’s deeds,’ it seems unlikely that Qohelet would lament the inability either
to know or to understand everything God has done. As has been seen, Qohelet is

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156 Ronald J. Williams, *Hebrew Syntax: An Outline* (2nd ed; Toronto and Buffalo: University of
Toronto Press, 1976), §327, 57.
157 Whitley’s translation of this verse, for instance, suggests belief that all God’s deeds are meant:
‘even darkness he put into their heart, because of which man cannot discover the work which God
did from the beginning even unto the end’ (Whitley, *Koheleth*, 33). Crenshaw (*Ecclesiastes*, 98)
writes, “Qohelet observes that humans cannot really comprehend anything pertaining to divine
activity.”
158 Found in 3:11a.
well aware of the limits of human attempts to know, and understanding is beyond any human. It would then be, in Fox’s term, “trivial” of Qohelet to lament his inability to know everything. Moreover, it would be trivial for Qohelet to lament an inability to understand everything.

But there is nothing in 3:11c-d to show decisively that all God’s deeds are meant. All that is said is ‘the deeds which God has done.’ It could be that rather than representing the entirety of God’s deeds, instead represents the human life-span. cannot refer to the end of the world, for there is no such end. The world is (1:4); it has no perceptible. Further, in 7:2 describes the end of all people, the house of mourning (referring to death. If the end to which refers is death, then the beginning to which refers is the beginning of a life.

That is delimited to life is supported through comparison with 8:17, for in 8:17 the deeds which are done are said to occur. It is generally accepted that describes life in the world. The linear comparison of 8:17c-d and 3:11 c-d above illustrates the correlations between the two passages. It seems likely that we may take and as synonymous. Thus in 3:11 does not refer to the entirety of

159 Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 212.
160 The lamentation of our inability to understanding anything is another matter, however.
God’s deeds, but rather to the human lifespan, or time within the world. The deeds which are done in 8:17 (חנקה הנשה), and the deeds which God does in 3:11 (חנקה הנשה חניאותא) are limited to those deeds occurring within the world, and throughout a human life.

8:17 describes the inability to understand the deeds done within life, and 3:11c-d also seems to describe the inability to understand the deeds done within life. The inability in 8:17 is found in the phrase, בְּלָא יוֹכְלָה אָדָם לְמַצָּא, מָכָל. As was seen above, when מַצָּא is used of understanding it must be negatively loaded, for in Qohelet’s thinking understanding is something not obtainable by humans. This can be seen in 8:17, where humans are not able (יַכְלָא) to understand, and it can also be seen in 3:11. It seems clear, when written this way, that the enigmatic מָכָל echoes the clearer בְּלָא יוֹכְלָה אָדָם לְמַצָּא. The inability to understand is therefore also the topic of 3:11c-d, and מָכָל can be seen as the negative it is. Despite its looking like it conforms to the second double negative paradigm, in which insertion of a relative particle between the two negatives results in a positive, it would seem then that מָכָל conforms to the first double negative.
paradigm, which results in a negative. מבל, א万人次 לא is either an emphatic negative or the לא is pleonastic, but in either case the result is a negative.

3.2.5. Conclusions regarding מבל,万人次 לא

It still remains to be seen however whether מבל,万人次 לא is causative or whether it acts to contrast the two lines. If מבל,万人次 לא is causative, our lack of understanding God’s deeds within the world arises from the עלáb God has given to our hearts. But how could knowledge of eternity so impair our understanding of God’s actions in the world? There doesn’t seem to be any sense-making explanation of the meaning that the causative negative reading produces. It seems unlikely then that מבל,万人次 לא is causative, and therefore the option Aα, ‘God has given עלáb to our heart so that we can’t find,’ must be eliminated.

If the connection between the first and second lines of 3:11 is not causative the only option remaining is one of contrast. ‘God has given עלáb to our heart without us finding’ (Bα) incorporates all the necessary components. It denies the ability to understand, and keeps to one of the double negative paradigms of Biblical Hebrew, in which the second negative element in מבל,万人次 לא is either emphatic or pleonastic, but does not effect the meaning of מבל, without. Simply by translating each passage in light of the above analysis, we arrive at the appropriate relationship:
‘God has given eternity to our heart, without a person understanding what God does from beginning to end.’ The two lines of 3:11 clearly stand in contrast.

3.3. Conclusions regarding 3:11

And so we have arrived at an understanding of 3:11b-d. Through the word study of נֶפֶשׁ we discovered that Qohelet employs that term to mark out spaces or times in which humans have no effect and in which a person does not exist, either before birth or after death. The relation of this term with the surrounding phrase, מִמְּלֹא יָדוֹ, suggests that מִמְּלֹא יָדוֹ is a gift from God which results in sure knowledge, and probably knowledge moreover upon which the recipient acts. Giving מִמְּלֹא יָדוֹ to the heart therefore describes God’s gift of the knowledge that there is time and space before and after our existence and therefore knowledge of our own mortality, a knowledge upon which we should act.\(^{161}\)

In contrast to this knowledge in 3:11b stands 3:11c-d. Our word study of הָפֻּךָן led us to the knowledge that Qohelet uses that word in a variety of ways throughout the book, sometimes referring to knowledge, but other times, such as here in 3:11, as understanding. Understanding is a type of wisdom which no person can attain (7:23; 8:17), and in 3:11 Qohelet places this inability to attain understanding of that which occurs in the world in our life time in contrast with our certain knowledge of

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\(^{161}\) The consequences of this knowledge of mortality, and in particular the actions which arise from this knowledge of mortality, are the subject of Chapter Six, “The Pulse of Death.”
our own mortality. Eternity as something outside of life stands in contrast with מְדַמֵּשׁ עֵדָּם סֵפֹחַ, which is tantamount to life in the world, just as the certain knowledge presented in the phrase מְלַבֵּם stands in contrast with the lack of understanding presented in מַלְאָלִים נָשֵּׂר לָא-יֵדֵעַ. Knowledge, Qohelet shows us, is not understanding, and in 3:11 we are shown both the knowledge of our limitations, and the limitations of that knowledge.
4. What it is to be Dead

We are able from several passages in the book of Qohelet to construct an idea of what Qohelet considers the experience of being dead might entail. In 9:5-6, 10 especially Qohelet offers what might be called a thought experiment on the state of being dead. In these verses he negates ‘mental’ and ‘emotional’ processes¹ such as thought, cunning, memory, wisdom, love, hate, and jealousy, as well as action or work within the world. These passage have been chosen as the entry point into this chapter’s discussion of what it is to be dead, and serve to explore also Qohelet’s particular concept of these processes which are to be lost. It will be seen that by negating these processes Qohelet in effect slips into a morbid solipsism, whereby the death of the experiencing individual results in the ‘death’ of the entire world. To explore this idea of an individual’s death as a cosmic event I will turn to the poem on aging and death in 11:9-12:8 in which death is presented as a reversal of creation.

In addition to this idea of an individual’s death as the death of the entire world is a contrasting idea of an ‘eternal’ (ה’ל) world, uncaring of our absence. Thus Qohelet offers a two-fold vision of what it is to be dead. The first aspect of this vision is Qohelet’s theory of the subjective experience of being dead which consists in the absence of everything: the world, the subjective individual, and even death itself.

The second aspect of Qohelet’s vision consists in the absence of only one thing: the

¹ The categories of mental and emotional are anachronistic, since the ancient Israelites had no concept of the brain as the seat of the intellect nor did they separate the source of the intellect from that of the emotions. See the discussion of ב in Chapter Two, “Nature and the Death Aesthetic.”
dead person. The first part of this chapter is devoted to the first aspect of Qohelet’s vision of the death experience, and part two to the second aspect of Qohelet’s vision of death.

In part one of this chapter we explore those passages which describe what it is to be dead, and draw out the consequences of those descriptions for an individual, which leads to the concept of an individual’s death as a cosmic event, seen in the poem on aging and death. In the second part of this chapter we address the countering second aspect to Qohelet’s idea of the death ‘experience’ as the absence of the dead person from a continuing world.

4.1. Subjective experience of being dead

The most complete description of what it is to be dead is found in 9:5-6 and 9:10.3

5...6...10

Though these two aspects of Qohelet’s vision might seem opposing – with one being a subjective experience of being dead from the ‘place’ of the dead and the other conducted from within the bounds of the world wherein death can only ever be the object of the gaze – it is of course a given that both arise from the one perceiving being and are developed from within the world. Qohelet writes of what it is to be dead from within his experience of life. Further, Qohelet’s claims about death are epistemologically unverifiable. Even so, they are presented as fact. There do not seem to be any rules about what might and might not be known. See Chapter Three, “The Knowledge of Limits and the Limits of Knowledge.”

3 The intervening verses, 9:7-9, can be classified as ‘joy statements’ and are therefore not directly related to this topic of states of death. The close relation of the pleasures one may experience in life and death, however, stand testament to the prevalence of the ‘memento mori and carpe diem’ element of Qohelet’s philosophy of death.
This section will explore the list of losses these verses offer. In an all-encompassing statement, the dead are said to lose any portion in the world (v. 6b). This portion includes wealth, knowledge of mortality, and indeed any knowledge at all (vv. 5, 10), wisdom (v. 10), and thought or invention (v. 10). All action is lost (v. 10), as is the material and emotional reward which we sometimes experience in life (v. 5). The dead do not experience emotion (v. 6), nor do they remember themselves or the world (v. 5). The cumulative effect of all these losses is a picture of the subjective experience of death in which there is no experience of death, and in which the world ceases to be.

4.1.1. The list of losses (9:5-6, 10)

Qohelet makes a sweeping declaration of the losses of the dead when he writes in 9:6b, רוחלם לא ירלווהו והלאה בכל אטריה-נטישה הווה והעמא, "And they have no portion for eternity in all that happens under the sun."
portion, may be used to denote an inheritance or an assigned plot of land,\textsuperscript{4} which portion “(defined in economic or other terms) maintains the individual or small group, and society is based on the totality of all portions.”\textsuperscript{5} However, it is often held that Qohelet uses \textit{הלֵם} figuratively for “the space allotted for human existence.”\textsuperscript{6}

\textit{הלֵם} is found in five verses: 3:22; 5:17, 18; 9:6, 9. It seems in these verses to have a positive loading. In 3:22, a person’s enjoyment (בֵּית הָגוֹיָם) of their work (בָּלָם) is their \textit{הלֵם}. In 5:17, where the \textit{הלֵם} is defined temporally as the number of days God has given a person under the sun or more qualitatively as the number of days God has given a person under the sun for a person to eat and drink and to see good (לֶחָ֖וֹת הָֽשָּׁמֶֽשׁ) in all their toil. In the following verse (v. 18), the \textit{הלֵם} is once again used of pleasure (בֵּית הָגוֹיָם), this time in relation to one’s ability to enjoy one’s \textit{הלֵם}.\textsuperscript{7} The final instance of \textit{הלֵם} in the book, apart from here in 9:6, is in 9:9. In 9:9 also \textit{הלֵם} is placed in relation with enjoyment and הָֽשָּׁמֶֽשׁ. The reader is enjoined to take enjoyment in the ‘wife whom you love, all the days of your \textit{הלֵּֽבָּלִים} life which are given to you הָֽשָּׁמֶֽשׁ, all your \textit{הלֵּֽבָּלִים} days, for this is your \textit{הלֵּֽבָּלִים} in life and in your toil which you toil.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[4] Seow, Ecclesiastes, 151; M. Tsevat, “\textit{הלֵם} chālaq II; הָֽלֵם chēleg; הָֽלֵם chelqāh; הָֽלֵם ch’luqqāh; הָֽלֵם mach’lōgeth,” TDOT 4:447-451 (448-449).
\item[5] Tsevat, TDOT 4:448.
\item[7] This ability to enjoy is a gift of God. Some have it, some do not, and those who have the riches but not the gift of enjoyment are better dead, says Qohelet (6:3). This \textit{Tōb-Spruch} is taken up in the next chapter, “Why Not Suicide?”
\end{footnotes}
There is therefore a strong link between one’s \( \text{מַלְאָכָה} \) and enjoyment, and this is dependent upon being \( \text{מַחֲרוֹת-יִשְׂרָאֵל} \), a term describing being in the world, and being alive.\(^8\) It seems that possession of a \( \text{מַלְאָכָה} \) is a good and pleasurable thing.

There are two terms which function as temporal qualifiers for \( \text{מַלְאָכָה} \) in this line of 9:6, \( \text{מַחֲרוֹת-יִשְׂרָאֵל} \) and \( \text{עֲדֵה-יִשְׂרָאֵל} \). Qohelet distinguishes between \( \text{מַחֲרוֹת-יִשְׂרָאֵל} \) and everything which happens \( \text{עֲדֵה-יִשְׂרָאֵל} \). As argued in Chapter Three, \( \text{מַחֲרוֹת-יִשְׂרָאֵל} \) encompasses all time, but in Qohelet also specifically marks a period of time ending at one’s birth and beginning again at one’s death, and so \( \text{מַחֲרוֹת-יִשְׂרָאֵל} \) is at once subsumed within \( \text{עֲדֵה-יִשְׂרָאֵל} \) and separate from it.\(^9\) However, in this verse \( \text{מַחֲרוֹת-יִשְׂרָאֵל} \) and \( \text{עֲדֵה-יִשְׂרָאֵל} \) seem to mark mutually exclusive time-places. It is for \( \text{מַחֲרוֹת-יִשְׂרָאֵל} \) that the dead possess no \( \text{מַלְאָכָה} \), and this \( \text{מַלְאָכָה} \) is a \( \text{מַלְאָכָה} \) in everything which happens under the sun, a phrase denoting life (and therefore necessarily being in the world). If possession of a \( \text{מַלְאָכָה} \) is a way into the world, and is virtually synonymous with being in the world, then its absence – the absence of life – for eternity counters its presence.

Life in the \( \text{מַלְאָכָה} \) verses is sunlight, and action, and enjoyment. In 9:6 Qohelet plays these concepts off against \( \text{עֲדֵה-יִשְׂרָאֵל} \). He shows that the dead own none (\( \text{מַחֲרוֹת-יִשְׂרָאֵל} \)) of these things. \( \text{עֲדֵה-יִשְׂרָאֵל} \) in this verse is an ‘anti-life,’ for it is a negation of one’s \( \text{מַלְאָכָה} \), a

\(^{8}\) See footnote 17, page 68 for a short analysis of \( \text{מַחֲרוֹת-יִשְׂרָאֵל} \).

\(^{9}\) See page 128.
term Qohelet uses of one’s being in the world and the consequent chance to enjoy one’s life and the activities and experiences which make it up.10

There also seems to be a link between הָלָל and עֹלֶל, toil. Part of one’s הָלָל consists both in toil and in the consequences of toil, the accumulation of possessions within the world.

While toil is often presumed to be a not so good element of life,11 it is actually another of Qohelet’s ambiguous terms which can be positively or negatively loaded. עֹלֶל seems to be something positive in several places in Qohelet (2:24; 5:17, 18-19). In these verses we can see that toil is a good thing when it is paired with enjoyment (2:24; 5:17, 18), or when it distracts one from life (5:19). Toil is negatively loaded, on the other hand, when it is not paired with enjoyment or distraction (4:8; 5:15-16). Thus one can slip from good toil to negative toil with the presence or absence of enjoyment or distraction.

10 Though, once again, this ability to enjoy one’s life is arbitrary. God either gives you the ability or God does not. This verse also suggests that הָלָל and עֹלֶל can run side by side, parallel lines which never meet. That is, during the eternal death, there is still a living world (הָלָל), but the one cannot bleed into the other. This aspect of Qohelet’s concept of time and the world will be discussed in detail below.

11 It has been claimed that עֹלֶל “denotes wearisome activity” (Hinckley G. Mitchell, “‘Work’ in Ecclesiastes,” JBL 32/2 [1913]: 123-138 [126]). So also Murphy, who writes that “there is only pain for one’s toil, and uncertainty about the way its fruits will be employed” (Murphy, Ecclesiastes, 27). This is countered by the view of William P. Brown (“‘Whatever Your Hand Finds to Do’: Qoheleth’s Work Ethic,” Interpretation 55/3 [2001]: 271-284 [278]): “the elusiveness of gain, on the one hand, and the motivation of envy, on the other, fuel the vicious and enervating cycle of toil. Like the aging sun that makes its trek across the heavens (1:5), the toiler is on the verge of burn-out. The only solution appears to be the final one, death, the very ground of gain’s elusiveness. But that is not the end of the matter for Qoheleth. In his sobering acceptance of death, the sage ultimately comes to a positive appreciation of work. By dislodging toil from its market-driven, death-denying context, Qoheleth arrives at his own work ethic.” This work ethic involves finding enjoyment in one’s toil. “Enjoyment has the power to redeem the notion of toil amid (rather than over and against) the vicissitudes of life, the elusiveness of gain, and the ravaging power of death” (Brown, “Qoheleth’s Work Ethic,” 279).
Toil is also a part of one’s portion. "חמל" is linked with one’s portion in 5:17, a verse which further states that it is ‘beautiful’ (רמה) to see good in all one’s toil (רחמים). Toil and portion are linked by enjoyment in 3:22, a ‘nothing is better’ (אין טוב) verse which describes the best way to live. Again in 5:18 toil and portion are linked by enjoyment. 9:9 also links portion and toil, again in the context of ‘the good life,’ namely eating and drinking (9:7), and ‘seeing good’ with one’s spouse (9:9). Thus it seems that when toil and portion are used together, they seem to denote something positive, whether that be beauty, goodness, or enjoyment.

Though חמל often denotes an activity, it also in places denotes the material products of that activity (2:18, 21). When one dies one loses all such material possessions. In 5:14-15 Qohelet writes,

חטוף יאום מכסים אום
ערוך יום בלב מסבך
ומסומה לאיריסים כנספת שחל בידך: 13

Though these verses focus on the evil of not benefiting from one’s toil, they do offer us some insight about what it is to be dead. Qohelet describes specifically that one leaves this world in the very same state as one enters it. The ‘grievous ill’ (רובע הרותל), toiling to accumulate wealth only to lose it all at death, indicates that

12 These verses, which make up part of the ‘joy statements’ of the book, are discussed in Chapter Five, “Why Not Suicide?” pages 261-262.
13 ‘Nothing he can take in his hand will he carry off for his toil’ (Gordis, Koheleth, 253). ‘Just as he came from his mother’s womb so he will return naked – just as he came – and he will carry away nothing of his toil that he might take in his possession’ (Fox, A Time to Tear Down, 237).
there is no transfer of goods from the ‘realm of the living’ into death. One leaves
the world as one enters it: naked (נָואֵת).

והלַם therefore is both something concrete, a possession, for example, like a plot of
land or the material accumulations of one’s toil, and also something more abstract,
like one’s place in the world. The former concrete element of one’s portion is lost
in death, as has been described, but it is not just the external trappings of life which
are lost. One’s very place under the sun – in the world – is lost when one loses
one’s portion in death.

Beyond this, it will be seen below, one loses all the characteristics of the ‘state of
living’ or of being itself. Qohelet remarks the loss of specific life-characterising
attributes, specifically knowledge (9:5, 10), wisdom (9:10), thought/cunning (9:10),
action (9:10), reward (9:5), emotions (specifically love, hate, and jealousy; 9:6), and
memory (9:5). We will now look at each of these losses.

4.1.1.2. dow / רָם /

Though the living know they will die, the dead know (םַע) nothing (9:5), and
there is no knowledge (םַע) in Sheol (9:10). Qohelet does not use knowledge and
knowing to refer only to things which can be known experientially, but also to

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14 See page 171 above.
15 It is for this reason that Qohelet makes the claim that a live dog is better than a dead lion. This line
is dealt with in the next chapter, “Why Not Suicide?”
things which cannot possibly be known experientially. The dead lose both of these
types of knowledge.

The verb ידון, know, is one of the most common in the book and one which
Qohelet often employs in the first singular (דעת) to express his perception of all
which occurs within the bounds of life, including the knowledge he gleans about
death. This knowledge, however, is something experientially unverifiable. In 2:14,
for instance, Qohelet says of the wise person and the fool, ‘I know (דעת) the
same fate (מלך) befalls all of them,’ where מלך refers, as it does throughout
the book, to death.\(^\text{16}\) ידון, then, does not necessarily pertain to ‘experientially
verifiable’ knowledge, for while Qohelet might see that all people die, and therefore
can claim that they have the same fate in that sense, he cannot possibly have
experientially verifiable knowledge of what the death experience is, and so cannot
know in an experientially verifiably way that, once dead, all people have the same
experience of being dead.\(^\text{17}\)

In other verses also Qohelet designates experientially unverifiable occurrences as
knowable. In 3:14 Qohelet ‘knows’ that whatever God has brought to pass will
recur for מלח. In 8:12-13 Qohelet knows it will be good for those who fear God
and won’t be well with the scoundrel because he doesn’t revere God. In 6:10

\(^{16}\) von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, 228.
\(^{17}\) Qohelet’s understanding of the experience of death is the subject of this chapter. It will be seen
that, while Qohelet cannot know in an experientially verifiable way that the death experience is the
same for all dead people, this is exactly what he does claim.
Qohelet writes that whatever happens was designated long ago and it was known it would happen.

Despite his claim of the experientially unverifiable as knowledge, Qohelet does allow that there are some things which cannot be known. A person does not know what is to happen even when it is on the verge of happening (8:7), for example, nor does a person know when they will die (לֹא יָדֹעָהוּ שָׂאַרֹתֵיהּ) (9:12). A person doesn’t know which of their projects will succeed (11:6), or what bad thing will occur on the earth (11:2), just as humans can’t know how the life breath passes into the unborn child or the deeds of God (11:5). These knowledges (or their lack) seem to describe events which are hidden from the gaze – future events, miniscule, mysterious events, and cosmic, mysterious events.

Qohelet also uses the rhetorical phrase, מַתי יִהוּדָה, to describe certain lack of knowledge (2:19; 3:21; 6:12; 8:1). These are rhetorical questions or perhaps more precisely, questions which may be answered in the negative. No one can know the issue in question. We get a sense of what can’t be known in 2:19, with the phrase מַתי יִהוּדָה concerning whether the one who comes after you will be wise or foolish.

Qohelet uses מַתי יִהוּדָה again in 3:21 when he asks who knows if the breath of a human goes up and that of an animal goes down. Who knows (מַתי יִהוּדָה) what is best for man in his life, and who can tell him what will come after him under the

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18 The equivalent phrase מַתי יִם מֵמַלְכָּתָם occurs in 7:24.
19 So Fox, A Time to Tear Down, 272.
sun (6:12). In 8:1 Qohelet asks who knows (וַיְהִי לָהּ) the meaning of the saying which follows in that verse. The verses seem to cover not just events or knowledge which are hidden, but also things which should perhaps be available to one, being as they are contained within a person, such as the knowledge of what is good for a person throughout their life. Both the ‘internal’ knowledge of what is good for one and the ‘external’ knowledge of the meaning of a phrase, are rendered unknowable with the phrase רָאָה. They are placed on the same level as something as definitively unknowable as the comparative directions of the breaths of animals and humans, or what will happen in the future.

In addition to experientially unverifiable knowledge, and also Qohelet’s concession that certain things really cannot be known, Qohelet’s knowledge can also pertain to self knowledge, the knowledge of one’s own history, deeds, or emotions. This is so in 7:22, where Qohelet writes that the heart knows you have reviled others. In 1:17 Qohelet describes setting his mind to know wisdom but through this come to know that this was the pursuit of wind. Sometimes, knowledge is best understood as ‘experience.’ This is so in 8:5: ‘the keeper of commandments will not know bad things’ (רָאָה רַע).

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20 For increased wisdom is increased vexation, and to increase knowledge is to increase sorrow (1:18). This line is discussed in Chapter Six, “The Pulse of Death.”
21 This is followed, however, by the enigmatic ‘but the wise person will know time and judgment,’ wherein, if ‘knowing’ is used the same way, the wise person is said to experience time and judgment.
And so knowledge and knowing seem not to be restricted to one ‘type’ of knowledge, but describe various types of knowledge and knowing. Qohelet describes himself as knowing equally things which cannot possibly be known and things which are right in front of his face or within his own person. But whatever the ‘type’ of knowledge, a dead person loses all access to it and all ability to ‘practise’ it, which point, made in 9:5, is repeated in 9:10, where it is stated that there is no knowledge (דֶּשֶׁם) in Sheol, the ‘abode’ of the dead.

4.1.1.3. 

In 9:10 also wisdom is listed as a loss incurred in death. Far from denigrating wisdom throughout the book, Qohelet upholds wisdom as inherently valuable (1:13, 16; 2:13-14; 9:16-18).\(^{22}\) Despite the inherent value of wisdom, however, it does have its limitations: wisdom does not save one from death (2:15-16), nor does it ensure respect in life (9:13-15). A detailed discussion of wisdom in relation to death is the subject of Chapter Six, and the short treatment of wisdom here will serve only to foreshadow that larger discussion.

There are two parts to wisdom which we might understand intuitively: it is necessary for a wise person both to be able to cogitate as well as to apply those cogitations in a practical manner. If we are to take the story of the old wise man who saved his city from siege (9:15), for instance, we may extrapolate both of these

\(^{22}\) Countered of course by the sorrow increased wisdom and knowledge bring their possessor (1:17). This is the subject of Chapter Six, “The Pulse of Death.”
aspects. In order for the old man to put into action his plan to save his city from siege, he would first have had to think up that plan of action. Further, there are two types of wisdom evidenced in Qohelet: attainable wisdom and unattainable wisdom. As was seen in the previous chapter, Qohelet describes a wisdom which he could not attain (7:23).23 This seems to be the wisdom of understanding. As will be seen in Chapter Six, the other wisdom, attainable wisdom, has death at its centre and requires that the wise person meditate on death. All of these aspects of wisdom, except for understanding (which was never possessed), are lost in death.

4.1.1.4. 

Like wisdom, the lost item נַחֲלָת (9:10) also exhibits the two-tiered definition of inner cogitation and practical application. The noun is found four times in Qohelet, as the singular נַחֲלָת in 7:25, 27 and 9:10, and as the plural נַחֲלָתִים in 7:29. Gordis states that נַחֲלָת carries two meanings: ‘conclusion of thought,’24 or ‘conclusion, substance of thought,’ in 7:25, 27, but ‘contrivance, device’ in 7:29 and 9:10.25 This term in 9:10 is translated variously by various commentators. Fox renders it ‘calculation,’26 the NRSV ‘thought,’ and the JPS ‘reasoning.’ It might be, however, that נַחֲלָת carries a negative loading, in that it is used elsewhere of weapons of war and of cunning (2 Chr 26:15).

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23 Pages 149-150.
24 Gordis, Koheleth, 284.
25 Gordis, Koheleth, 281.
26 Fox, A Time to Tear Down, 289; Qohelet and His Contradictions, 259.
Nw#x is an abstract noun meaning 'accounting, investigation.' The primary meaning of the related verb, b#x, is 'draw, put together,' with the secondary meaning related to putting together figures. "goes beyond the meaning of reckoning with numbers and quantities, referring rather to values and factors in general: weighing, evaluating, calculating, rational assignment of place and rank, the technical accounting of a merchant."  

The plural twnb#x appears twice in the HB: Qoh 7:29 and 2 Chr 26:15. In 2 Chr 26:15 it is used with another two variations on b#x, in the phrase twnb#x b#wx tb#hm, in an attempt to describe catapults and ballistae shooting arrows in defence of Jerusalem, for which there was no technical term. Nb#x can therefore in some instances represent technical inventions or devices. There does seem to be an air of negativity about Uzziah’s machines of war. The twnb#x made Uzziah popular and strong, and when he was strong Uzziah became an arrogant and corrupt king (2 Chr 26:16). This possible negativity might also be found in Qoh 7:29, in which humans are said to seek many (Mybr) twnb#x. It is most likely that the twnb#x in 7:29 are not devices such as Uzziah’s catapults but are rather mental cogitations, complex plans, which people put into action, probably with a negative

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27 K. Seybold, "hāšab, ḥōšēbb. hēšbōn; hēšēbbōn; mishēlbōn; mah’sēbet,“ *TDOT* 5:228-245 (229).
loading as they run counter to the right, straight, upright (דָּרָא) nature which God gave us.

In Qoh 7:27 the singular noun נַעֲבָּר seems to be the answer to a mathematical problem or the outcome of an exercise in measurement or tallying. The נַעֲבָּר at which Qohelet’s tallings arrive is ‘the reason of things’ according to the JPS. נַעֲבָּר is paired with wisdom in 7:25 as well as in 9:10. In 7:25 Qohelet describes his search for various mental faculties, setting his mind to know and to seek or spy out or explore (חרב) and seek (בְּקַשּׁ) wisdom and נַעֲבָּר. A נַעֲבָּר in 7:25 and in 9:10 would seem to represent the fine processes of the mind as it engages in investigation, seeking, plotting, and devising.

The use of נַעֲבָּר in 9:10 therefore seems to describe the loss in death of any ability to investigate or to devise plans, whether they are plans for good or plans for bad, and to put any of those plans into action.

4.1.1.5. מַעֲשָׂה

9:10 also compares the ability ‘to do’ in life with the inabilities in death. There is no מַעֲשָׂה in Sheol. The noun מַעֲשָׂה in 9:10c counters the two ‘doing’ verbs in v. 10a and v. 10b. These two initial verbs (לְמַעֲשָׂה; לְמַעֲשָׂה) are situated within the world. This is made clear in 9:9, in which verse מַעֲשָׂה, a term designating life and
living, is used twice. It is within this time-space that one should ‘do,’ for in its opposite, Sheol, there is no doing. It is best therefore to understand מַלְכָּתָה in 9:10, with Fox\textsuperscript{31} and the JPS, as action. Death entails not just the absence of certain deeds, such as work, but the total absence of every possible activity. The first line of 9:10, ‘whatever your hand finds to do, do with all your might,’ proves this point. The collective חֵל does not specify one activity over another, indeed the חֵל can be understood here as ‘anything,’ hence the common translation ‘whatever.’\textsuperscript{32}

Anything one’s hand finds to do should be done with strength or might (יִקְרָא), for there is no doing (מַלְכָּתָה) (anything) in Sheol.

4.1.1.6.

Qohelet says also that the dead have no more שֶׁבֶר, reward (9:5). Seow understands שֶׁבֶר economically, taking it to mean ‘wages.’\textsuperscript{33} He notes that it seems to have an economic loading in 4:9, ‘Two are better than one because they have a good benefit (שֶׁבֶר) for their toil.’ But שֶׁבֶר is not necessarily only monetary reward. In 4:9-12 Qohelet writes of the benefits arising from being one of a pair. The placement of 4:9, within a description of the superiority of belonging to a pair, suggests that שֶׁבֶר refers to some sort of emotional benefit as well as the monetary benefits of toil. Not

\textsuperscript{31} “The reason for being active in life (v. 10a) is the absence of any activity afterwards (v. 10b)” (Fox, \textit{A Time to Tear Down}, 295).

\textsuperscript{32} For example, JPS; NRSV; Crenshaw, \textit{Ecclesiastes}, 158. In contrast, R.B.Y. Scott, \textit{Proverbs, Ecclesiastes} (Anchor Bible 18; New York: Doubleday, 1965), 245, translates ‘everything.’ The outcome is the same, however.

\textsuperscript{33} Seow, \textit{Ecclesiastes}, 301.
only do two toilers typically yield more produce, a pairing increases one’s ability to enjoy the fruits of one’s labours. The cause for the good reward (שָׁבַר תָּבוֹן) of 4:9 is the help one partner gives the other in difficult times (4:10), the warmth they can offer each other (4:11), and the united front they present to the world (4:12).

Qohelet seems not to be speaking of a business partner but of a life partner. Therefore more than just the monetary or concrete rewards of toil. It is also the more ephemeral aspects of benefit or reward, such as enjoyment, warmth, comfort, and feelings of safety.

4.1.1.7. hbh, शान्ति, रक्षण

The dead person loses all such feelings, and all emotions too. In 9:6 Qohelet notes three emotion which will perish or die (देहक): love (हि), hate (नादि), and envy or jealousy (नन्दि). This is an almost perfectly balanced line, with the words at beginning and end (हि and देहक) similar sounding, and those in the middle (नादि and नन्दि) similar sounding also. The first two emotions, love and hate,

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34 देहक has two meanings: I. Stray, wander, be lost, II. to perish (B. Otzen, “abhadh; "bhēdāh; "ābh’ēdān; bhēdāh, "bhaddāh,” TDOT 1:19–23 [20]). Often the Qal form means simply ‘to die’ (Isa 57:1; Ps 41:6; 49:11; Job 4:7, 11, 20; Qoh 7:15; Jon 1:6, 14) (Otzen, TDOT 1:23). An abstract noun meaning ‘devastation, destruction,’ comes from this root, as does the name for the Place of Destruction, Abaddon. It is sometimes used in parallelism with grave (Ps 88:12) and Sheol (Job 26:6) (Nicholas J. Tromp, Primitive Conceptions of Death and the Nether World in the Old Testament [Biblica Orientalia 21; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1969], 80).

35 Longman writes: “These three are not all pleasurable emotions, but they certainly are intense. One the one hand, it does appear that Qohelet believes that even unpleasurable emotions are better than no emotions at all. On the other hand, the relative advantage of life is really a double-edged sword: To live is to love, yes, but it is also to hate and envy, not an unmixed blessing’” (Longman, Ecclesiastes, 229).
likely serve as ‘bookends’ and we might see in them a poetic ‘bracket’ within which lie the other, unlisted but implied, emotions. Qohelet’s inclusion of ™nq on the short-list of emotions however is more subtle and involved.

Why is ™nq included on the short-list of emotions lost in death? If all emotions are inferred through love and hate, there is no reason to list any emotions other than love and hate. Or, if not all emotions are inferred through the bracketing love and hate, why choose ™nq of all possible emotions? That the loss of ™nq in death is important to Qohelet is evidenced by the singularity of its inclusion.

™nq alternately means envy, ardour, zeal, or jealousy.36 It is used 19 times in the wisdom literature.37 Emotions associated with ™nq include ℩(anger), ℬ(wrath), and ℨ(vexation, sorrow).38 It refers “primarily to a violent emotion aroused by fear of losing a person or object,” that is, envy or jealousy.39 There is some difficulty distinguishing between envy and jealousy. Some passages emphasise the ‘envious’ side of ™nq.40 Such a one is Qoh 4:4, where it is stated that all ℱ(toil) and all ℬ(skilful labour) arise from one man’s ™nq of another. In this case, ™nq seems to give rise to actions – though labelled ℱand ℬ – that could be either negative or positive. As has been seen

36 BDB, “™nq,” 888.
39 Reuter, TDOT 13:49.
40 Reuter, TDOT 13:51.
under the discussion of \( \text{h)nq} \) above, \( \text{h)nq} \) is an ambiguous term, sometimes negatively loaded, while the qualification ‘skilful’ (\( \text{lw^} \)) labour suggests that \( \text{h)nq} \) can sometimes produce something positive. On the other hand, other passages suggest a connotation of jealousy. For example, \( \text{h)nq} \) rots the bones in Prov 14:30, and is mighty as \( \text{ln} \) in Song 12:6. It has been suggested, however, that \( \text{h)nq} \) is best taken as ‘passion’ rather than envy or jealousy in those two verses for “the fundamental constellation of jealousy” – the triangle between the jealous individual, the lover, and the rival – is not mentioned.\(^4^1\) One could say the same of \( \text{h)nq} \) in Qoh 9:6. No mention is made of a lover or a rival. How can it? The verse pertains to absent things. But there is a triangle, we shall see, that brings about this emotion.

While it might seem that it is the \( \text{h)nq} \) experienced in life that is lost in death, it might rather be that it is \( \text{h)nq} \) as an experience of the dead which Qohelet is denying.

It is helpful to ask why the dead might experience \( \text{h)nq} \), for in the ‘traditional’ HB concept of death, the dead retained some sense of themselves and ability to experience the state of being dead. This experience of being dead might give rise to their feeling \( \text{h)nq} \), but it is difficult to piece together any incontestable description

\(^4^1\) Reuter, *TDOT* 13:50. It does seem more likely that the references to \( \text{h)nq} \) in Song 12:6, at least, is closer to jealousy than envy, since it occurs in the context of love poetry.
of Sheol and the afterlife experience to judge whether would be a reasonable response. Whether Sheol was the final resting place of all individuals even is a matter of debate. Burns claims Sheol is neither good nor evil, and is “simply the final assembly-point of all humanity.” Johnston however claims that Sheol is not used indiscriminately of the place all people go at death. It is, he says, used predominantly of the wicked, the afflicted righteous, or sinners. He notes only two examples where Sheol is said to be the place all people go at death: Qoh 9:7-10, and Ps 89:48-49. Johnston’s view is not the dominant view, however. It is commonly held that Sheol was the destination of all people. Textual descriptions of the presumed experience of the afterlife suggests it was considered a place of forgetfulness where one forgets God and is forgotten both by God and by the living (Pss 6:6; 88:6; 88:12), a place of darkness (Ps 88:6, 12; Lam. 3:6; Sir 22:11; Job 10:21), inactivity and silence (Pss 94:17; 115:17).

Some biblical texts suggest a potentially unrestful state for the dead (1 Sam 28:7-25; 2 Sam 4:12; 2 Kgs 13:20-21; Isa 14:9; 57:11; Ezek 32:21). Elizabeth Bloch-Smith claims that “Israelite and Judahite narrative and prophetic passages relate the dead’s benevolent and malevolent powers to foretell the future, create life, revive life and exact vengeance.” The famous story of the necromancer of Endor in 1 Sam 28:7-

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44 Elizabeth Bloch-Smith, *Judahite Burial Practices and Beliefs about the Dead* (JSOTSup 123; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992), 121.
25, the only narrative about necromancy in the Hebrew Bible,\textsuperscript{45} seems to show that the dead were considered able to tell the future. They might also have been able to revivify, as the corpse which touches Elisha’s bones does in 2 Kgs 13:20-21. Bloch-Smith suggests that 2 Sam 4:12 and Isa 57:11 evidence a fear that the dead might harm the living. It is for these powers, says Bloch-Smith, that “the living would want to appease them by providing for their needs.”\textsuperscript{46} The dead in Sheol are shown to be active in only two passages in the HB, both prophetic oracles: in Isa 14:9 the dead stir to new arrivals; and in Ezek 32:21 the long dead explain that they have come down and are still. Some scholars latch on to these texts as exemplars of the preservation of disparate views of the underworld,\textsuperscript{47} but Johnston considers that they only “confirm that inactivity is the norm.”\textsuperscript{48} Johnston concludes however that the few descriptive details of Sheol suggest “a somnolent, gloomy existence without meaningful activity or social distinction.”\textsuperscript{49} Most scholars follow this line of thought: that the Israelites could not “conceive of death as the complete cessation of life, and had the dead surviving in a shadowy existence beneath the earth.”\textsuperscript{50}

Archaeological evidence suggests that the occupants of Israel also practiced certain rituals for the dead, such as giving offerings of food and water, and certain ancient beliefs hint at the dead’s animosity towards the living. In Mesopotamian myths the ghosts of dead people, \textit{etemmu}, “disembodied apparitions who have come out of the

\textsuperscript{45} Though other texts make mention of it (Deut 18:10-14; Lev 19:31; 20:6, 27).
\textsuperscript{46} Bloch-Smith, \textit{Judahite Burial Practices}, 146.
\textsuperscript{47} So Martin-Achard, \textit{From Death to Life}, 39.
\textsuperscript{48} Johnston, \textit{Shades of Sheol}, 76.
\textsuperscript{49} Johnston, \textit{Shades of Sheol}, 85. Emphasis added.
tomb or the underworld,” were thought to roam about and attack whatever living person they came in contact with if they had not been properly buried or were not regularly offered food and drink.\textsuperscript{51} It has also been suggested that tonsuring and self-mutilation were practised in order to protect oneself against the wandering dead,\textsuperscript{52} but one can only theorise that such practices as self-mutilation were viewed “as an attempt to assuage the envy which the dead possess for the living by inflicting suffering on oneself or as a desperate attempt to disguise oneself from ghosts on the haunt by making oneself unrecognizable.”\textsuperscript{53}

In conclusion, if the dead were thought to retain some characteristics of life, if in a drastically diminished form, then both envy and jealousy could be apt translations of הָיוֹת. We might imagine the dead, knowing about their state and their inability to be a part of the world, subjected as they are to an eternity trapped in the murky underworld of Hebrew afterlife belief, envying the living their livingness. Life is

\textsuperscript{52} George Adam Smith cited in Brian B. Schmidt, \textit{Israel’s Beneficent Dead: Ancestor Cult and Necromancy in Ancient Israelite Religion and Tradition} (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1996), 167. That the dead would require placation and avoidance suggests that they might experience negative feelings about being dead, but there is, again, no agreement on this point. Some scholars, such as Schmidt (\textit{Israel’s Beneficent Dead}, 287), claim that the Bible doesn’t explicitly document fear of the dead, while Bloch-Smith (\textit{Judahite Burial Practices}, 146), as noted above, claims 2 Sam 4:12 and Isa 57:11 as potential evidence of fear of the dead. And the “mere existence of an afterlife says nothing in and of itself about the nature or power of those who attain it and diverse grave goods in and of themselves can say little or nothing about the underlying ideational concepts” (Schmidt, \textit{Israel’s Beneficent Dead}, 282). That is, offerings of food and water, and the jewellery, amulets and figurines found in burials plots cannot tell us of the underlying beliefs which are themselves irrecoverable. “If the extra-biblical Syro-Palestinian mortuary rites of care, feeding and commemoration as well as the cosmology of the netherworld preserved in biblical tradition are any indication of more broadly embraced pre-exilic beliefs, then at least the properly buried and regularly attended Israelite dead were pitied and their memory immortalised” (Schmidt, \textit{Israel’s Beneficent Dead}, 284).
\textsuperscript{53} Schmidt, \textit{Israel’s Beneficent Dead}, 287. They are, though, certainly death or mortuary practices. Though Schmidt concludes on p. 288 that fear of the dead, in light of lack of supporting biblical and extra-biblical evidence, is inadequate explanation for the observance of self-mutilation rites and the absence of ancestor cults and worship, he says that they do evoke “a genuine sense of death’s intrusion upon the world of the living” (Schmidt, \textit{Israel’s Beneficent Dead}, 290).
the object, the living the owner, and the dead the ‘people’ who want the object for themselves. The same is true if we understand הָנָק as jealousy. Life is the lover (the object), the living the rival, and the dead the ‘people’ who want the lover for themselves. Should the dead retain some mental faculty, or some emotion, they might feel הָנָק. As it is unlikely the individual dead people would envy each other, the only sensible reason for this envy the dead possess would be that the living possess something the dead envy. But this, Qohelet makes it clear, is not the case. The dead experience no envy and are jealous of nothing.

This statement in 9:6 puts an end to any possible belief in the dead retaining any vestige of life. It is possible to interpret the inclusion of הָנָק on the list of losses as the denial of the dead’s envy/jealousy of the living. It is possible to interpret it to mean that, if the dead did retain some vestige of life, they would go envying the living. But the dead do not envy the living any part of their portion in all that happens under the sun. The dead also lose the emotions of love and hate in death, emotions which possibly act to bracket every emotion one might feel in life.

In summary so far, then, the dead have no love or hate, no envy or jealousy, and no knowledge, wisdom, or thought left in their hearts (or hearts to contain such things). Finally, they do not even remember the world (9:5).
The passage concerning memory in Qoh 9:5, מִרְכָּז נַשְׂכַּת אֲדַרֶם, is usually taken to mean that the dead are forgotten by the living.\textsuperscript{54} מִרְכָּז is a compound of מִרְכָּז, ‘memory, remembrance,’ as in Akkadian zikru ‘mention, name, fame,’\textsuperscript{55} and a מ- ending, the meaning of which is contentious. The JPS, NRSV, and Crenshaw posit an objective genitive reading of the ending on מִרְכָּז, thereby rendering ‘memory of them,’\textsuperscript{56} and implying that the dead are forgotten by others. Seow, though, takes the final מ- as the subjective genitive and understands מִרְכָּז to mean ‘their memory’ or ‘their name.’\textsuperscript{57} Both the objective and the subjective genitive readings of מִרְכָּז are assumed by these scholars to refer to the dead people being forgotten by another party, presumably the living, but this need not be the only possibility.

The phrase מִרְכָּז נַשְׂכַּת אֲדַרֶם can also admit of a reflexive meaning, wherein it is the dead who forget. This phrase can be understood therefore both along the lines of ‘for memory of them is forgotten’ and ‘for their memory forgets itself.’ The forgetfulness of the dead is not a new theme. As mentioned above, Sheol is in places considered a place of forgetfulness. Sheol is said to be the ‘land of

\textsuperscript{54} Crenshaw (\textit{Ecclesiastes}, 161), for example, takes it to mean, “those who survive soon forget the persons who preceded them.” Seow concludes that this verse refers to the forgetting of the dead people by those who are living, and compares it with such verses as Isa 26:14; Ps 6:6; Wis 2:4 (Seow, \textit{Ecclesiastes}, 301).

\textsuperscript{55} Seow, \textit{Ecclesiastes}, 301.

\textsuperscript{56} Crenshaw, \textit{Ecclesiastes}, 161.

\textsuperscript{57} Seow, \textit{Ecclesiastes}, 301.
forgetfulness’ in Ps 88:12. Nor does God remember the dead (אֲלָ אֱלֹהֵי יָמָה; Ps 88:6). There is no remembrance of God among the dead (אֲלָ אֱלֹהֵי יָמָה; Ps 6:6).

In order to establish this possible reflexive interpretation we will now turn to another HB passage (Deut 32:26) in which מַרְפֵּץ admits of the same reflexive interpretation. We will also discuss the role of the Niphal verb form and, finally, we will address another verse in Qohelet (2:16) in which the dead are said to forget themselves.

The מַרְפֵּץ compound which is present in 9:5 is found also in Deut 32:26, in the Song of Moses.

Both the JPS and the NRSV note the difficulties in this verse. The NRSV makes it, ‘I thought to scatter them and blot out the memory of them from humankind,’ while the JPS ‘I might have reduced them to naught, Made their memory cease among men.’ Most commentators also translate this verse along these lines.58 Like Qoh. 9:5, it is unclear whether the final מִ is a subjective genitive or an objective genitive.

We are left with two options for Deut 32:26: either we can understand the passage,

58 George A.F. Knight (The Song of Moses: A Theological Quarry [Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1995], 89), follows the NRSV exactly; Richard D. Nelson translates, ‘I thought I would strike them down, make the memory of them cease from the human race’ (Deuteronomy: A Commentary [The Old Testament Library; Louisville and London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002], 365). Gerhard von Rad makes it, ‘I would have said, “I will scatter them afar, I will make the remembrance of them cease from among men”’ (Deuteronomy: A Commentary [trans. Dorothea Barton; The Old Testament Library; London: SCM Press, 1964], 194); Jeffrey H. Tigay makes it, ‘I might have reduced them to naught, Made their memory cease among men,’ or rather, ‘made their name cease among men,’ where that means “wipe them out entirely” (Deuteronomy [The JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia and Jerusalem: The Jewish Publication Society, 1996], 309). Though Tigay does not write an ‘of’ in his translation, it is implied in the possessive ‘their.’
‘I will cut them in pieces and put an end to people’s memory of them’ (objective genitive) or ‘I will cut them in pieces and separate from people their memory’ (subjective genitive). The second of these possibilities offers us two more alternatives: either the ‘their’ refers to the ‘people’ or to those whom God wishes to punish, those whom God will ‘cleave in pieces.’

The final מָרַך- on בָּרֵך in Qoh 9:5 is most likely also this sort of ending. As in Deut 32:26, where it is possible that the מָרַך- can be read both as a subjective and objective genitive, so too can the מָרַך- in Qoh 9:5 be both a subjective and objective genitive.

In Qoh 9:5 and Deut 32:26 both, בָּרֵך might be either ‘their memory’ or ‘memory of them,’ but beyond this it is possible to read this as representing both a group of people who will forget themselves, and a group of people whose memory will be forgotten by others.

This dual reading is made possible by the use of a particular verbal stem. לֹאַב in 9:5 is not ‘lost,’ but is more accurately, ‘forgotten.’ לֹאַב is the 3ms Niphal perfect of the verb root לֹאַב, meaning ‘forget.’ The root לֹאַב occurs 104 times in the HB, with the Piel and Hiphil of לֹאַב being causative (‘cause to forget’), while in the Hithpael (such as in Qoh 8:10) it means ‘to be forgotten.’

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59 The verb מָרַך can be rendered ‘separate’ or ‘put an end to.’
60 As in the NRSV, for example.
61 86 in the Qal (‘forget’), once in the resultative Piel (‘cause to be forgotten’; only in Lam 2:6), once in the Hiphil (‘make forgotten’; Jer 23:27) and Hithpael (‘be forgotten’; Qoh 8:10), and 13 times in the Niphal (‘be forgotten’ or ‘forget oneself’) (H.D. Preuss, “לֹאַב šākah,” TDOT 14:671-677 [672]).
The Niphal, such as the verb נֵבְעָל in 9:5, is sometimes considered the passive Qal stem, but it has a variety of functions, including expressing: a reflexive meaning; reciprocal action; the active to or for oneself; and an emotional state. The semantic relationships most often realised are the passive (mostly of the Qal) and the reflexive (mostly of the Qal). Within the semantic category of the reflexive, the subject of the verb is both the ‘agent’ and the ‘patient.’ For this reason this category is also called the double status Niphal. It is possible to distinguish between the ordinary reflexive (‘And I will avenge myself on my foes’; Isa 1:24) and the reciprocal (‘When men strive with one another’; Exod 21:22). A third Niphal occurs in the Niphal but not in the Qal, and these express an active meaning of the verb.

The Niphal נֵבְעָל of Qoh 9:5 could therefore take any one of a variety of meanings, which options seem to be grouped around two possibilities: either the verb refers to the living, who forget the dead, or it refers to the dead, who forget themselves. It is necessary to turn to the other occurrence of the Niphal נֵבְעָל in Qohelet (2:16) to clarify the role it might be playing in Qoh 9:5.

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Although נֵבְעָל “occurs 18 times in the Aramaic portions of the OT, these occurrences are ascribed to a different root with the meaning ‘find, find oneself’” (Preuss, *TDOT* 14:672).


In Qoh 2:16, נַשְׂבַּח carries a two-fold meaning in which both the dead forget themselves and the dead are forgotten by the living.

This verse may be broken into three sections: there is no remembrance of the wise or of the fool; in the days to come all will be forgotten; and, how can the wise and the fool die like deaths?

There is no remembrance (נִרְחָם) either of wise people (מְכֵי) or of fools (כָּסִיל). The period of time in which this lack of remembrance takes place is marked לְאֹלֶּחַ.

As seen in the Chapter Three, that term is employed by Qohelet partly to denote a period outside of life, during which time one cannot participate in any aspect of the world. In this part of the verse, then, the wise person and the fool both are forgotten in the time after their death. This sentiment is echoed in the third section of the verse. The final line asks why the wise person and the fool die just the same. This line, like the first line of the verse, describes the levelling nature of death, and perhaps casts in doubt the oft-assumed superiority of wisdom over foolishness.67

Sandwiched between these two lines is the verb in question, the Niphal נְשַׁבֵּח. The previous description of the lack of remembrance of both wise and fool, and the following lament that wise and fool meet the same fate, could cling to this inner line

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67 As seen above, it is better in Qohelet’s philosophy to be wise than it is to be a fool, but part of being wise is understanding that wisdom will not save one from death. For more on this see Chapter Six, “The Pulse of Death.”
and lend some meaning to the pivotal verb, הָשָׁם. However, it makes little sense to take this forgetting as belonging only to the living. Surely it can never be said of the living that they will forget ‘everything’ (ארלם). The living might forget the memory of the dead, but they will not forget נֹאֵל until such time as they themselves are dead. Sheol is sometimes referred to as the land of forgetfulness, and this usage of the Niphal הָשָׁם is possibly one such reference, inferring that it is the dead who forget.

2:16 and 9:5 both link (lack of) remembrance with death. The question remains, though, who is doing the forgetting? It is possible to read both of these verses as describing the forgetfulness of two parties, the dead, who will forget themselves, and the living, who will forget the dead. Though it is true that the dead are forgotten by the living, it is also true that the dead forget everything. All other items on the list of losses in 9:5-6, 10, are losses ‘incurred’ by the dead. The dead lose emotions (love, hate, and envy/jealousy), they lose a portion in all that happens under the sun, and they lose knowledge, thought, and wisdom. To turn about and say that it is only the living who lose memory of the dead is to move against Qohelet’s description of what it is to be dead in this passage, which he describes from ‘the perspective of’ the dead. That is, it is not the actions or inactions of the living which are being described, but of the dead. Memory therefore is one more item that the dead lose.

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68 Ps 88:13; 31:13; Qoh 2:16; 8:10; 9:5; Job 28:4; 24:20; Ps 9:18 (Preuss, *TDOT* 14: 676).
To be sure, Qohelet does say that the dead are forgotten by the living,\textsuperscript{69} but here in
9:5 Qohelet also highlights the memory loss of another group, the dead, who will
forget themselves. הים, either ‘their memory’ (subjective genitive) or ‘memory of
them’ (objective genitive) relates to the verb in that it refers to that which is to be
lost. There are two final possibilities for the passage concerning memory in 9:5: we
may combine the subjective genitive with the reflexive, and so arrive at ‘their
memory forgets itself,’ or we may mix the objective genitive with the passive, and
so arrive at ‘memory of them is forgotten.’ However, given that the list of losses
seems to describe the perspective of the dead, it is more likely that the forgetting
here is something that the dead are doing. We might therefore understand the phrase
הים לה with to mean, ‘their memory forgets itself,’ or, to paraphrase, the dead
forget themselves.

4.1.1.9. Conclusions regarding list of losses

This then is Qohelet’s vision of the dead person’s experience of death. Qohelet
could simply have written 9:6b,

\[\text{הלא אתלכא, ווד ליעליכא ב酽 Aph, ווד ולעטח החות לפאא.}\]

The loss of a portion in ‘everything under the sun’ does tell us what Qohelet thinks
we lose: everything by which life is characterised. We might call all other items on
his list of losses poetic overkill. But Qohelet’s list is a necessary extrapolation of his
all-encompassing loss of everything under the sun as it induces an imaginative

\textsuperscript{69} In 1:11, for instance.
response to the declamation that all will be lost in death. Death is not just a removal from the world, he says, nor an inability to partake in the world and all it contains. Qohelet makes sure that we understand completely what we might hope to experience. The dead person, we see, hangs apart from the world. The dead person does not remember his or her spouse, the partner whose love, and whom loving, brought comfort during life, nor does the dead person feel any remnant of that love. The dead person feels no hate, and no envy or jealousy of the living. The dead person doesn’t think and cannot act. The dead person experiences no emotions, not even envy of those who are still living, for, we are told, the dead person doesn’t remember the world, doesn’t know, and cannot perceive the world.

If we imagine ourselves a dead person in this way we begin to understand the magnitude of Qohelet’s vision of the experience of being dead. Qohelet believes the experience of being dead is this: there is no experience. When we die, we cease to exist, and the world and our self are lost to us. As soon as a person dies that person loses all knowledge and all memory. Without this knowledge the dead person cannot know they are dead, nor can the dead person remember what the process of dying was like. Survival of some form of mental aptitude after death – the retention of something such as knowledge or memory – is necessary to experience our death. The loss of memory of the experience of life, the loss of knowledge and emotion, make death a nothingness in which not even the experience of death survives. In

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70 This is present in my reading of the loss of שֶׁמֶךָ, reward.
Qohelet’s vision of death we are all incapable of experiencing our own deaths as the
subject of that death.

4.1.2. Personal eschatology as cosmic eschatology

There is no such thing as a dead person in Qohelet’s death, which idea consequently
also kills the world and everything in it. It is little wonder that Qohelet elsewhere
images death as a reversal of creation, a cataclysmic event akin to the destruction of
the cosmos. This section will explore this notion of an individual’s death being
raised to the level of a cosmic event, with particular attention being given to the
poem on aging and death in Qoh 11:9-12:7 and the arguably eschatological imagery
within that poem (12:2). Qoh 12:2 is laden with images of cosmic cataclysm. It
describes the darkening of luminaries as well as perpetual cloud cover, both of
which are elements in the day of YHWH motif and eschatological passages found
throughout the Hebrew Bible (for example, in Ezek 13:13; 30:3; 32:7-8; 38:22; Job
3:4-5; Joel 2:2, 10; 4:15; Zeph 1:15). This section will also compare 12:2 with some
of those texts (Ezek 13:13; 30:3; 32:7-8; 38:22; Job 3:4-5) with the purpose of
showing that death in 11:9-12:7 is raised to the level of a cosmic event.

4.1.2.1. The poem on aging and death (11:9-12:7)

11:9-12:7 is generally supposed to be either a poem on aging and/or on death.
Terms such as literal, symbolic, allegorical, and metaphorical are thrown around by
every exegete who attempts to tackle the imagery in 12:1-7, but as these terms are sometimes used differently by different writers they are not as helpful as they might be. On whatever level the images function, it seems clear that old age and death are related in 11:9-12:7.

4.1.2.1.1. Debate regarding the relation of death and old age

The traditional approach to the poem is as an allegory of old age.71 Some commentators think the poem presents an image of a house in disrepair,72 though the poem is alternately thought to describe a rainstorm,73 or to be a metaphor of old age using the image of winter.74

Barton, claiming that all “have agreed that the passage [12:2-6] is allegorical, but as to details of the allegory there are wide differences of opinion,”75 offers 7 groupings of allegorical readings of the poem which appear to subsume all other categories of possible readings: 1) the various figures refer to anatomical details of an old person’s failing physical powers;76 2) the verses represent an old man’s approaching death through the figure of a storm; 3) the approach of death is imaged through the

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71 See Seow, “Qoheleth’s Eschatological Poem,” 210, for lists of people who adhere to the various approaches.
72 Douglas B. Miller, Symbol and Rhetoric in Ecclesiastes: The Place of Hebel in Qohelet’s Work (Academia Biblica 2; Atlanta: SBL, 2002), 148.
74 Loretz, Qohelet und der Alte Orient, 190-191.
fall of night; 4) the images represent the closing of a house at the approach of a sirocco; 5) the verses are a literal picture of the gloom of a household when the master has just died; 6) the verses catalogue the wintry weather which immediately precede a Palestinian springtime, called the ‘seven days of death’ because they endanger the aged and sickly; 7) the verses are in general a picture of old age, but one line of thought is not followed throughout.

Fox notes that no one approach alone solves all the difficulties of interpreting 12:1-7. He suggests that the images interrelate on three levels - allegorical, literal, and symbolic. Allowing for multiple possibilities, whatever they might be called, to play equally important roles in understanding this poem enables a more complete reading of the various images and their role within the whole poem.

There is little agreement on how the themes of old age and death are expressed in the poem. Gordis claims the poem’s “general intent [is] as a description of the progressive debility and decay of old age” and Davis follows Gordis, but considers that the poem doesn’t present one line of thought throughout. Charles

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77 Barton, “Remember Thy Creator,” 368. Barton favours this latter option, a modification of 1), but which seeks to avoid, “by the exercise of a little plain sense, the vagaries to which excessive zeal for anatomical identification has led, and in doing so strikes the right path” (Barton, “Remember Thy Creator,” 368).
78 Fox, “Aging and Death in Qoheleth 12,” 386.
79 By this Fox refers to the funereal imagery he finds in the poem.
80 The symbolic level for Fox refers to the eschatological imagery he considers present in the poem (Fox, “Aging and Death in Qoheleth 12,” 386). The possibility of the presence of eschatological imagery in the poem is taken up below.
81 Gordis, Koheleth, 338.
Taylor thinks 12:1-5 a dirge on the occasion of death. Ogden argues that a single theme, death, holds the verses together. Murphy takes the most sensible approach, concluding that the distinction between old age and death is minimal in 12:1-7, with both themes present in the poem. Rachel Dulin, though she considers that, for Qohelet, “the immediate issue is life, not death,” admits that it is unclear whether the days of sorrow or evil of which Qohelet writes in 12:1 refer to old age or to death. “In the eyes of Qoheleth,” she writes, “old age is the prelude to death. It is a time in which a person remains alive, but is consciously walking to his or her eternal home.” If old age is considered the prelude to death, speaking of agedness is a strong allusion to death, and old age becomes the extended process of dying.

There are however some verses in the poem which refer specifically to death-related practices and to death itself. In 12:5, for example, Qohelet writes of the mourner who will go about in the streets. Other passages (12:5, 6, 7) clearly take death as their subject. The מָלֵךְ указ to which all must go in 12:5 undoubtedly denotes the metaphorical ‘place’ of death. Whether or not the silver cord and the broken bowl, pitcher and wheel of 12:6 carry any other meaning, they may certainly be read as imaging death, a reading which is compounded by 12:7, ‘and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the breath returns to God who gave it.’

84 Ogden, Qoheleth, 198.
85 Murphy, Ecclesiastes, 114.
87 Dulin, “‘How Sweet is the Light,’” 267.
88 Dulin, “‘How Sweet is the Light,’” 269.
89 See Chapter Three, “The Knowledge of Limits and the Limits of Knowledge.”
The presence of death in the poem then is something which cannot be denied. Further, it is possible to read other verses in light of the presence of death. Applying death to 12:2 is a particularly fruitful endeavour, and we will now turn to this verse.

4.1.2.1.2. Eschatological\(^{90}\) imagery in 12:2

Some medieval commentators thought the poem eschatological,\(^{91}\) a sentiment echoed by a few modern commentators, who range from believing the poem eschatological only in places to believing the poem to be eschatological in its entirety. Seow, for instance, holds that the poem in vv. 2-7 is no longer just about old age per se,

although traditional sayings – perhaps even an old poem – about old age may lie in the background. The poet now portrays the demise of human life in entirely eschatological terms. All the images in vv. 2-7 are consistent with the author’s intent to depict a permanent end of human existence and, hence, the end of all possibilities to enjoy life either on earth or in the hereafter.\(^{92}\)

H.A.J. Kruger concludes that there seems to be evidence of a wise warning against, or typical wisdom speculation on, a threatening global natural disaster of an

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\(^{90}\) There are numerous studies on eschatology, some of which incorporate eschatology in the HB. See for example: Donald E. Gowan, *Eschatology in the Old Testament* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986); Walter Brueggemann, “Faith at the Nullpunkt,” in *The End of the World and the Ends of God: Science and Theology on Eschatology* (eds. John Polkinghorn and Michael Welker; Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 2000), 143-154; Zachary Hayes, *Visions of a Future: A Study of Christian Eschatology* (New Theology Series 8; Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1989); D. Rudolf Bultmann, *History and Eschatology* (Edinburgh: The University Press, 1957). These studies however are not useful for defining eschatology here. Rather, it is more helpful simply to assess the way scholars have used the term ‘eschatology’ in Qohelet. With regard to this book, ‘eschatology’ seems to refer to the end of a life, or to the end of the physical world. It is in these senses that I will use the term.


\(^{92}\) Seow, “Qoheleth’s Eschatological Poem,” 211.
apocalyptic nature.\textsuperscript{93} Fox considers an eschatology to be one of the possible interrelated levels of meaning in the poem.\textsuperscript{94}

Whether the eschatology of Chapter 12 is restrained (Fox) or full-blown (Seow), 12:2 clearly draws its imagery from eschatological material.

\begin{quote}
ֵד אַלּ בֵּן נַעֲרַהוּ דַּעַמְשׁ מַעַדַּה
והירח והכוכבים
הshr הַעֲבָדָה אָחָר הָעַנָּה
\end{quote}

The images in 12:2 have been read in a multitude of ways. The images could represent the loss of sight in the aged, or they could represent the loss of enjoyment Qohelet presumes an aged person experiences. In another sense, this verse describes “the extinction of an individual life.”\textsuperscript{95} Light will go dark at death.\textsuperscript{96} In yet another possibility, the darkened luminaries image “the extinction of a universe.”\textsuperscript{97}

Qohelet pairs four luminary terms. The sun and light are paired, as are the moon and stars. This could be hendiadys (so Gordis\textsuperscript{98}), but one of the pairings is not truly similar. Though moon and stars are adequately similar in that they were considered sources of light in the night sky, sun and light are not truly compatible. The parallelism can’t be perfect as there’s no other daytime light to pair with the sun,

\textsuperscript{94} Fox, “Aging and Death in Qoheleth 12,” 386.
\textsuperscript{95} Fox, “Aging and Death in Qoheleth 12,” 394.
\textsuperscript{96} Fox, \textit{A Time to Tear Down}, 322
\textsuperscript{97} Fox, “Aging and Death in Qoheleth 12,” 394.
\textsuperscript{98} Gordis, \textit{Koheleth}, 341.
and ‘light’ as such is independent of the sun and other luminaries. The ‘light’ was created separately in Genesis 1. God first says ‘Let there be light’ in Gen 1:3; only in Gen 1:14-18 does God create the sun, the moon, and the stars. It could be therefore that in Qoh 12:2 Qohelet is harking back to the P creation myth, and hence depicting a reversal of creation, when he writes that these luminaries will ‘grow dark’ (נָעַם).

Not only might the darkened light sources represent a reversal of creation, or the physical or psychological experiences of the aged, it could also be an image of death.

This is the final mention of the sun in the book. The sun is mentioned 35 times and is clearly associated with life. Qohelet’s multiple uses of the phrase ‘under the sun’ reference time spent alive and in the world. Its use in 1:3 is representative, denoting all that happens in life. In 1:9, ‘under the sun’ once again denotes life and living, but here it is related to the repetitive nature of all that occurs in the world, much like 1:5, wherein the cycles of the sun are used to illustrate the (somewhat monotonous) natural cycles of life and nature. There is nothing to be gained from any deed, Qohelet notes in 2:11, again employing the term ‘under the sun’ to mark out time spent in life, toiling and doing various deeds (which ability, it was noted above, is absent in death). Throughout the entire book the image of the sun, and of being ‘under the sun,’ serves the purpose of carving out the period of time one spends in

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99 Fox, A Time to Tear Down, 322; Murphy, Ecclesiastes, 113.
life, in the world. ‘Light is sweet,’ Qohelet writes in 11:7, ‘and it is pleasant for the eyes to see the sun.’ The light in this verse, paired as it is with the sun, which represents life and being in the world, is the light of life. This light and the sun are two of the four luminaries extinguished in 12:2.

It can be seen that the darkened luminaries in 12:2 can be read as loss of eyesight in old age, as well as a reversal of creation. The only way to do justice to the complex poem, and its place in the intentional complexity of the book of Qohelet, is to allow each of these possibilities to interrelate. That said, the imagery of this first half of the verse is clearly intended to be, on some level, eschatological (as well as possibly depicting the decrepitude of old age), and this eschatological imagery is carried through to the final half of the verse.

The NRSV translates the last part of this verse, ‘and the cloud returns with the rain.’ Though סְנָה sometimes has the secondary meaning ‘with,’ it more often means ‘after.’ We can therefore take this passage to mean, ‘and the clouds return after the rain.’ This being so, the image is not of a gathering storm, but of rain upon rain and also, paired as it is with the darkening luminaries, a further loss of light.

A mass of rain clouds has two effects: they block out luminaries, and they let rain fall on the land. Vaihinger thought it referred to winter, as the rainy time or time of

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100 Leahy, “The Meaning of Ecclesiastes 12:1-5,” 376. Ruth 1:15-16 is sometimes thought to show that the clouds come with the rain (Longman, Ecclesiastes, 268-269).
The “unexpected return of the clouds soon after a storm, once more shutting out the light, is a bad sign and brings gloom, both literally and psychologically.” Qohelet might have in mind a Middle Eastern winter rainstorm which is normally followed by blue skies that promise good weather. This image of rain and clouds is, like that of the darkened luminaries, often interpreted in light of the experience of the aged. In an anatomical reading this image could be a glaucoma or represent loss of eyesight by other means. A psychological reading takes the clouds that return after as depicting the “repetitive gloom into which the elderly may be prone to fall as they encounter setback after setback in the final years of their lives,” when time no longer heals the elderly person, and the clouds gather again and again until they are killed. Barton, too, thinks the frequency of the storms figures the increasing gloom of age. Fredericks suggests that the returning clouds represent “the despair and terror of imminent death” that the individual faces in old age.

Like the darkened luminaries, the returning clouds and the rain they bring image a reversal of creation. In Gen 1:6-8 God creates a dome in the midst of the chaos waters, separating the waters into those below the earth and those suspended above the sky, held back by the dome or the firmament. Several HB passages (Gen 7:11, 12; 8:2) show that rain (and other precipitation) was thought to come from the

103 Crenshaw, Ecclesiastes, 185.
106 Barton, “Remember Thy Creator,” 368.
opening of ‘windows’ in this firmament. In the flood narrative, for instance, ‘the windows of the heavens were opened’ (Gen 7:11), resulting in rain falling on the earth (Gen 7:12).\textsuperscript{108} It was only when these windows in the heavens were closed that the rain was restrained (Gen 8:2). The chaos waters are pushed to the outer limits of the world and restrained there until such time as the firmament windows open and the waters are let through. The “return of a dark cloud after there has already been rain is surely a sign of divine destruction. Implicit here is the threat of cosmic destruction, a return of the catastrophic deluge: the chaos water will no longer be restrained.”\textsuperscript{109}

Similar imagery to that of Qoh 12:2 can be found in other ancient Near Eastern and HB texts. There is a comparable version of cosmic destruction from Tell Deir ‘Allā on the east bank of the Jordan. The gods of the divine council ordain a cataclysm, which begins with a darkening of the sky through a rain cloud and the withholding of light.\textsuperscript{110} Such images are present also in various HB texts, including Job 3:4-5; Ezek 30:3; and 32:7-8.

That day! Let it be darkness!
Let Eloah above not seek it!
Let no light shine on it!
Let darkness and death’s shadow reclaim it!
Let cloud hang over it!
Let demons of the day terrify it.\textsuperscript{111} (Job 3:4-5)

\textsuperscript{108} When J and P are combined.
\textsuperscript{109} Seow, “Qoheleth’s Eschatological Poem,” 212-213. These waters are also reminiscent of Sheol. Dominic Rudman (“The Use of Water Imagery in Descriptions of Sheol,” \textit{ZAW} 113/2 (2001): 240-244 [244]) argues that water can represent the chaos which engulfs people when they cease to live – they move from the realm of creation (life, order) to that of non-creation (death, chaos).
\textsuperscript{110} Seow, “Qoheleth’s Eschatological Poem,” 213.
For a day is near, the day of YHWH\textsuperscript{112} is near; it will be a day of clouds, a time of nations. (Ezek 30:3)

When I blot you out, I will cover the heavens, and make their stars dark; I will cover the sun with a cloud, and the moon shall not give its light. All the shining lights of the heavens I will darken above you, and put darkness on your land, says the lord God. (Ezek 32:7-8)

In Ezek 32:7-8, “the whole process of judgment is accompanied by the darkening of the sky and of the stars,” “elements of cosmic eschatology.”\textsuperscript{113} The gloom from the darkened light-sources is compounded by the cloud-cover. The elements of darkness and thick clouds are shared by Qoh 12:2 and some of the so-called day of YHWH texts, such as Ezek 30:3 above.\textsuperscript{114} In Ezek 30:3, also, clouds are

\textsuperscript{112} There is some contention over whether the Day of YHWH texts are in fact eschatological. When the term is used in Lamentations, it might not be a singular event marking the end of time, but a past and a future event to be understood as an expression of God’s wrath (Norman K. Gottwald, \textit{Studies in the Book of Lamentations} [Studies in Biblical Theology 14; London: SCM Press, 1954], 87). Mowinckel theorises that the day of YHWH is the day of God’s New Year festival in the Israelite cult, on which day God is enthroned and also delivers the Israelite from their misfortune (Sigmund Mowinckel, \textit{He That Cometh} [ed. G. W. Anderson; Oxford: Blackwell, 1959], 145), but he “does not associate an eschatological view with this original cultic concept, but argues that it was a later development within prophetic circles” (Elizabeth Boase, \textit{The Fulfilment of Doom? The Dialogic Interaction between the Book of Lamentations and the Pre-Exilic/Early Exilic Prophetic Literature} [Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 437; New York: T & T Clark, 2006], 108). Von Rad rejected Mowinckel’s enthronement festival theory, claiming that the day of YHWH concept had its origins in the Israelite traditions of holy war, and describes an event in which YHWH rises up against YHWH’s enemies in battle (Gerhard von Rad, “Origin of the Concept of the Day of Yahweh,” \textit{Journal of Semitic Studies} 4/2 [1959]: 97-108 [103]). Von Rad, too, states that the concept was not originally eschatological (von Rad, “Day of Yahweh,” 106). K. Schunck suggests two lines of development in the pre-exilic use of the day of YHWH motif, one which is eschatological and one which is not eschatological (K.D. Schunck, “Strukturlinien in der Entwicklung der Vorstellung vom ‘Tag Jahwes,’” \textit{VT} 14 (1964): 319-330 [320]). “The day of Yahweh in Ezekiel is not confined to one singular future event given that days against Israel [7:1-27] and Egypt [30:1-19] are described” (Elizabeth Boase, \textit{The Fulfilment of Doom?}, 126), and so, depending upon one’s definition of eschatology, it might be that the day of YHWH in Ezekiel is not eschatological. Even if it is not, however, the imagery is certainly that of great destruction, and this great destruction at the very least may be read into Qoh 12:2.


\textsuperscript{114} Other constituent elements within this motif include: “the appearance of Yahweh; descriptions of battle; descriptions of the events of the day, including changes in the natural sphere; reference to the scope of the day (i.e. against Israel, the nations, the world or the cosmos); the reasons for the day; descriptions of the impact of the day; and references to time, either past, imminent or more distant future” (Elizabeth Boase, \textit{The Fulfilment of Doom?}, 113).
representative of a day of destruction,\textsuperscript{115} while a cloudy day as a day of misfortune is also described in Joel 2:2 and Zeph 1:15. Job, while he is making a performative wish that the night of his conception and the day of his birth might ‘perish,’ uses this same imagery (Job 3:4-5). He speaks of darkness as well as an absence of light, and of clouds settling on that day (or, on that night and that day), suggestive of unshifting cloud-cover. The order of Job’s curse in these verses has been described as “reversing the order of creation and returning the universe to primordial chaos and darkness.”\textsuperscript{116}

An “overflowing rain is a scourge of God” in Ezek 13:13 and 38:22.\textsuperscript{117}

Therefore says the Lord God: In my wrath I will make a stormy wind break out, and in my anger there shall be a deluge of rain, great hailstones will fall, and a stormy wind will break out. (Ezek 13:13)

With pestilence and bloodshed I will enter into judgment with him; and I will pour down torrential rain and hailstones, fire and sulphur, upon him and his troops and the many peoples that are with him. (Ezek 38:22)

Ezek 13:13 is found within a chapter in which Ezekiel is ordered to prophesy against the prophets who have falsely prophesied peace for Israel (Ezek 13:2-23), while Ezek 38:22 is a part of a prophecy against Gog (Ezek 38:2-23). Both use an image of continuous heavy downpour to denote the end of a particular group of people. The loosing of waters from the sky in these verses is unmistakably a reversal of creation, like the continuous rain of the flood narrative (Gen 7:11).

\textsuperscript{115} Zimmerli (\textit{Ezekiel 2}, 160) notes a correlation with 2 Sam 14:7; 21:7; Isa 42:3; 43:17; Joel 2:10; 4:15.

\textsuperscript{116} Habel, \textit{The Book of Job}, 104.

It can be seen therefore that Qoh 12:2 is laden with images of cosmic cataclysm. Not only do all sources of light grow dark, the separation of the primeval waters is reversed. The chaos waters are slipping through the windows of the firmament. The loss of light and the presence of clouds echo eschatological imagery found elsewhere in the HB. Qohelet is imaging a return to chaos with the darkened luminaries and the flood imagery, making dark what once was made light, and covering the land again with the deep out of which it was brought by God. This reversal of creation, situated within the poem on aging and death in Qoh 11:9-12:7, suggests that for Qohelet, death is itself a reversal of creation.

4.1.2.2. Conclusions regarding Qohelet’s eschatology

Qohelet’s concept of what it is to be dead, explored throughout § 4.1. of this chapter, leads him to this idea of an individual’s death resulting in universal destruction. As we have seen above, for Qohelet death is an event of cosmic proportions linked with un-creation and the end of the world. “For the person who dies, the stars blink out, the sun goes dark (only the living ‘see the sun’), activities cease, and the world grows silent.”\footnote{118} Qohelet uses such eschatological imagery because “every individual is a microcosm and every death is a catastrophe; it is, in fact, the end of the world.”\footnote{119}

\footnote{118} Fox, “Aging and Death in Qoheleth 12,” 394.  
\footnote{119} Fox, “Aging and Death in Qoheleth 12,” 394.
4.2. Death from the subjective living

There is another aspect to Qohelet’s vision of what it is to be dead which is
dissimilar to the above understanding of what it is to experience death. In this
contrasting idea we are able to say that there is life after death, but it is perhaps
unfortunate for the dead person that this life belongs only to those who are left
behind. In addition to Qohelet’s eschatological vision of death, in which everything
must die along with the dead person, is Qohelet’s knowledge that the world does
carry on after one’s death. Though we might intuitively understand that the world
doesn’t really end when we die,\textsuperscript{120} there are several passages in which the continued
existence of the earth, contra the cessation of one’s own existence, is made clear
(1:11; 2:16a; 8:10; 1:4; 12:5).\textsuperscript{121}

We may infer the survival of the world through some passages concerning the
forgetfulness of the living. In 1:11, for instance, Qohelet laments: ‘The people of
long ago are not remembered, nor will there be any remembrance of people yet to
come by those who come after them.’ This passage emphasises the perpetual

\textsuperscript{120} An understanding based upon our perception of the deaths around us – see below.
\textsuperscript{121} Some passages seem to describe the survival of the earth beyond our own death, but upon closer
inspection actually do not. In 6:12 Qohelet asks, ‘who can tell them what will be after them under
the sun?’ Qohelet appears to contrast life under the sun with what is ‘after’ a person or people, where
the ‘after’ could be taken to designate the loss of all the experiences categorised above. But this is
not the case, as becomes clear when we look at 7:14. 7:14, ‘God has made one as well as the other
(prosperity and adversity), so that mortals may not find out anything that will come after them,’ can
be used it to shed light on what 6:12 means. ‘After them’ is not in 7:14 a reference to death, as might
be thought in 6:12 above, but is instead a reference to life. So, in the above, ‘what comes after them’
refers to occurrences which occur within the bounds of life. Rather than contrasting ‘under the sun’
and ‘after them’ in 6:12, therefore, it would be more accurate to treat them as parallel terms,
representing equivalent time-spaces. Both ‘after them’ and ‘under the sun’ would therefore represent
time in the world. Neither 6:12 nor 7:14 refer to any time after death or to the experience of death.
Both, rather, refer to the epistemological problem noted elsewhere in the book of Qohelet, that one
cannot know (much) about the events which are to afflict throughout our lives.
forgetfulness of all those who inhabit the earth. Just as we have forgotten those who came before us, future people will be forgotten in turn.\(^\text{122}\) In 2:16a Qohelet again describes the absence of remembrance of the dead by those left behind: ‘For there is no memory of the wise person or the fool forever.’\(^\text{123}\) This passage, though it concerns the questionable advantage of wisdom over folly in the face of death,\(^\text{124}\) rests upon the knowledge that neither will be remembered. Both a wise person and a foolish person will be forgotten just the same. In both of these verses, it is possible to invoke a surviving group of people in order that they might forget the dead. Clearly Qohelet understands that there will be people left behind after he dies, if only eventually to die and be forgotten themselves.

The forgetting of the dead by the living begins even at the moment of death with the neglectful treatment of their corpses by the living. In 8:10 Qohelet writes,

\[
\text{w)bw} \text{ Myrbq My(#r} \text{ yty)r Nkbw} \\
\text{w#(-Nk r#) ry(b wxkt#yw} \text{ wklhy #wdq Mwqmmw} \\
.\text{lbh hz-Mg}
\]

The verb \text{wklhy} is used of people walking about in mourning in Pss 38:7; 42:10; and Job 30:28, and here denotes a funeral procession.\(^\text{125}\) This verse therefore concerns the burial of the wicked (\text{רשעים קבורה}) and their funeral procession,

\(^\text{122}\) The present generation is noticeably absent from this verse but may be inferred; we will forget past generations and we will be forgotten by future generations.
\(^\text{123}\) As discussed in detail above, the second half of this verse has a possible two-fold meaning, in that it could be that it is both the dead who are forgotten by the living, and the dead who forget everything, although, as argued, the latter is more likely.
\(^\text{124}\) See Chapter Six, “The Pulse of Death.”
\(^\text{125}\) Fox (\textit{A Time to Tear Down}, 284) says this verse shows a burial custom of beginning the funeral procession at the synagogue (rather than the temple, he argues, due to the absence of the definite article).
but is variously translated due to several textual difficulties.\textsuperscript{126} The second half of
the second line, \textit{w\#(-Nk r\#) ry(b wxkt\#yw} contains a verb we are familiar with.
The verb as it stands comes from the root \textit{N\#}, forget, discussed above.\textsuperscript{127} This
verb is sometimes translated ‘lauded’ or ‘praised,’ meaning that the wicked who
receive burial are praised, but, in line with its proper meaning of ‘forget,’ is usually
taken to mean that “honest people are forgotten soon after death.”\textsuperscript{128} Fox rightly
notes that the righteous would not be differentiated from the wicked in terms of
forgetting or remembering, for Qohelet elsewhere says that both the wicked and the
righteous are forgotten just the same (2:16).\textsuperscript{129} While the verb retains a primary
meaning of ‘forget’ therefore, he claims that it is better to understand the verb as
‘neglect’ in this context.\textsuperscript{130} Other HB passages support such a possibility. In Ps 9:19
\textit{N\#} is used of neglecting a person, not caring for them and in Ps 102:5 of
neglecting to eat one’s food. In Isa 49:15, a woman neglects (\textit{N\#}) her baby, and
Deut 24:19 refers to leaving (\textit{N\#}) a sheaf lying in the field. This passage does not
therefore describe, as with the verses discussed above, the forgetting of the dead
person by the living per se, but rather that “honest people are ‘forgotten’ insofar as
their corpses are neglected at the time of death.”\textsuperscript{131} This verse, in describing the

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{126} For instance, the NRSV translates, ‘Then I saw the wicked buried; they used to go in and out of
the holy place, and were praised in the city where they had done such things. This also is vanity.’
Seow (\textit{Ecclesiastes}, 276) translates, ‘Thereupon I saw the wicked brought to burial, and they
proceeded from a holy place; but those who have acted justly were discarded in the city. This, too, is
vanity.’
\textsuperscript{127} Pages 183-184 above.
\textsuperscript{128} Fox, \textit{A Time to Tear Down}, 284. Where the word \textit{\#} is taken as an adverb ‘justly’ or ‘rightly’
(Seow, \textit{Ecclesiastes}, 285).
\textsuperscript{129} Fox, \textit{A Time to Tear Down}, 284.
\textsuperscript{130} Fox, \textit{A Time to Tear Down}, 284.
\textsuperscript{131} Fox, \textit{A Time to Tear Down}, 284)
\end{flushright}
burial of the wicked and the forgetting/neglecting of the righteous, describes an existence beyond a death, in the sense that there must be a world for the dead to be either buried or forgotten in. Qohelet is positing a level of existence beyond the point where the dead individual no longer exists.

Though the dead person, far from the world, cannot know of the events which occur in the world after they are gone, something which occurs (or doesn’t occur) can affect the quality of their life. Further, Qohelet abandons the idea of immortality through remembrance in that the dead are not remembered (1:11; 2:16; 8:10; 9:5). The lack of remembrance negatively impacts the inherent value of life. Also, we find that the posthumous burial event can affect the value of one’s life. The absence of a proper burial is a concern for Qohelet, and is found again in 6:3. That the wicked are given burial troubles Qohelet (8:10), in which verse he counters the burial of the wicked with the neglect – arguably the lack of (proper) burial – of the righteous. In 6:3 ‘the stillbirth’ (לְפַנֵיהוּ) is better off than a rich man who cannot sate his gullet, or who doesn’t receive a proper burial. Once again Qohelet shows that, though he images one’s own death as the end of the world, he is also able to conceive of the world existing without the dead person in it. And though the dead person no longer exists, something which occurs in a space which is no longer accessible (even if the dead person retained in death some aspects of their living self, they could still not enter into the world-space) is able to harm them.

132 Both of these passages are addressed in Chapter Five, “Why not Suicide?”
So, although Qohelet conceives of death as a total annihilation of the individual, and depicts that event in cosmic terms as the annihilation also of the entire cosmos, he can still concern himself with the events that occur after death, notably the value of a proper burial. This posthumous event affects Qohelet. But we must wonder whether such an event might harm the dead person, or whether they might only harm the dead person when that person is still alive. That is, once Qohelet is dead he can’t care whether he is given a proper burial. Such a thing, and their prospective absence, can only harm him while he is living. It is clear though that this instance of posthumous harm requires some belief that there will be a world in which the posthumous event will occur in order to affect him. His concern for such matters highlights his belief that the world will actually survive beyond his own death.

The idea of a surviving world is echoed in some uses of בָּנָן in the book. The very term Qohelet employs to describe the time an individual spends both in life and in death prohibits Qohelet from truly eliminating the world along with the dead individual. The word בָּנָן, while incorporating time in the world, is used in the book particularly to denote a period of time either before one is born or after one dies. בָּנָן, as shown in Chapter Three, can be defined as a period of time during which one is removed from the surviving world. The subjective experience of death as a complete annihilation, even unto absolute nothingness, is in contradiction with the term used to denote the period of time one spends in death.
In some verses (1:4; 12:5) מלחם seems to suggest a world surviving beyond the death of the individual. In 1:4 מלחם refers to the continued existence of the world after the death of a number of its populace. מלחם in this verse gives the reader an image of earthly longevity, over against the brevity of human existence, imaged in the goings and comings of a multitude of generations. The earth exists before and remains after the lives which make up a generation. 133 Qohelet, we might assume, understands himself to be one of the many who make up one of the generations of which he speaks in 1:4. He understands himself, with his generation, to go (that is, to die) and to be replaced by another generation. This process continues for מלחם, a period in which the world exists but Qohelet does not. Since Qohelet describes subjective death as the destruction of the world, how can he then designate the period of time he will spend in death מלחם, a time in which an individual, in death, cannot partake in the continuing world?

In 12:5, Qohelet describes the מלחם הביא לعالم to which all must go, where הביא לعالم is undoubtedly a euphemism for death, and in the same verse writes of the mourners who ‘go about in the streets.’ If we again insert into this equation Qohelet’s subjective experience of death as a universal cataclysm resulting in non-existence for any- and everything, we can see the paradox inherent in the conjoined descriptions of the הביא לعالم and the mourners who go about in the streets. How can there be mourners, how can there be streets even, if there is nothing left after

133 And, of course, must be present during the lives of the generations also.
death? Obviously, once again, the world must survive beyond the death of an individual, even if, as is the case in Qohelet’s thought, there is no world for the dead person.

In summary, Qohelet presents a death in which the world remains unchanged but for the absence of the dead person. He presents this image by way of his descriptions of the forgetting of the dead by the living, as well as the harm incurred by the absence of a proper burial. Further, his concept of eternity is double-edged, describing as it does the time spent in death by the dead person as well as the time the earth carries on in parallel to that death. This entire strand of Qohelet’s idea of what it is to be dead runs alongside the concept of what it is to be dead which we addressed in section one. And so Qohelet presents a death in which everything dies with the individual, and a death in which nothing changes but for the death of the individual.

In this second aspect of Qohelet’s vision of what it is to be dead, death is still an inability to participate in all that occurs under the sun. Both aspects of what it is to be dead therefore rest upon the idea that death is a separation from life. However, in the first idea of death an individual’s death is the death of everything, while in the second idea of death, death is simply a removal from the world, which carries on regardless of our removal from it. The only life after death in Qohelet’s philosophy is the life of those the dead one leaves in his wake.
4.3. Conclusions regarding what it is to be dead

Qohelet speaks of an individual taking the world with them into death, but he leaves open a curtain beyond which we catch a glimpse of the world still turning, despite the cosmic upheaval and the descent into chaos which occurs with every individual’s death. Even as Qohelet images the death of all things, he assures us of their continued existence.

Qohelet’s vision of what it is to be dead therefore consists in two ideas. In the first idea of the experience of death, a death is a loss of everything which individualises us and everything which characterises life, and is also the death of the entire world and everything in it. In the second, a death does nothing to the world which carries on without us, though the dead person is, as in the first idea, dead and gone. These ideas might seem mutually exclusive. The world cannot at once exist and not exist. Qohelet’s two-pronged vision of the experience of being dead might then appear to be paradoxical (in certain places), but this is not so.

We might classify each of the aspects of being dead by virtue of its point of view. In the first, the point of view is that of the dead person. We have seen, however, that a dead person, as Qohelet images them, lacks all things which characterise life, such as emotions, knowledge, and memory. A dead person therefore knows nothing, feels nothing, sees nothing, and there is nothing of the dead person remaining, not even a body, for it disappears with the world. With no eyes to see, no mind to
perceive, no memory to remember, the dead ‘person’ ‘exists’ in a non-space. Even to speak of a ‘dead person’ is to assume a being which is not. There is nothing in this imagined subjective experience of death. There is no individual, there is no world, there is not even a ‘nothing,’ as such. In this death, the world doesn’t exist, nor did it ever exist, for there is no knowledge or remembrance of its history. If the subjective experience of death is as Qohelet writes it, there is no subject, and without a subject, in this aspect of Qohelet’s vision of death, there can be no object.

The second point of view is expressed as if from the perspective of being in the world, which we could call the subjective living. In this point of view we find Qohelet’s (and our own) experience of watching death, as opposed to his presumed experience of being dead. In this point of view, death is the object of our gaze, but we do not experience the state of being dead. This is the point of view of the person left behind. Here, we watch someone die, and forecast our own death from the experience of watching others die. We will die, and the world will carry on, just as it did when our grandparents and our parents died.

One consequence of Qohelet’s theory of what it is to be dead is that we simply cannot experience our own death.\textsuperscript{134} We can only ever experience death through the

\textsuperscript{134} Of course, there is one overwhelming problem with Qohelet’s two-fold vision of the experience of death. In short, Qohelet’s philosophy of experiencing death allows only for the experience of one group of people – the living – and only one experience – life. In his proposed subjective experience of being dead, as we have seen, there is no possible experience just as there is no death. In Qohelet’s theory of the subjective living, in which death is the object of the gaze, there is here too no experience of death, for death is only ever the object. Qohelet has fenced himself in, and disenabled himself from speaking coherently about the experience of death, except as something external to us which is the object of our vision and which happens to people and animals around us. Death is a perception or a perception of an experience of others, but it is not – it cannot be, in Qohelet’s vision
deaths of others, or through contemplation of our own dyings and deaths.\textsuperscript{135} Though no one can experience death as the subject, all people can experience death as the object of their gaze. I can watch you dying, I can view your body when you are dead, I can witness your body being burnt or put in the ground and I can tuck all that away and watch myself and my fellow living beings, the seasons, the rivers, and the luminaries, all lost to you, continue our circuit of the world.

Though Qohelet’s theory of the experience of death might seem a terrible hrqm, fate, it would seem so only from the point of view of the subjective living. For Qohelet’s subjective dead person, for the being who is no longer a being at all, there is one consolation: once dead, we will forget we are dead, just as we will forget that we ever were, and that there is a world continuing without us, filled with the objects, the activities, and the people we once loved or hated. Should we fear death, the cause of our fear, our coming death and its requisite separation from ourselves and everything we know, carries within it the cure for that fear, our ‘subjective experience’ of our own death, which involves an absence of everything: the absence of subject, of object, of experience, and even the absence of absence itself.

\textsuperscript{135} For the further contemplation of our own death, see Chapter Six, “The Pulse of Death.”
5. Why Not Suicide?

There are certain aspects of Qohelet’s worldview which give rise to the question, why not suicide?\(^1\) Qohelet does in fact state in places that it is sometimes better to be dead – or never to have been born – than it is to be alive. These ‘better-dead’ statements seem to present specific situations in which death or non-birth are preferable to life (4:2, 3; 6:3; 7:1). This chapter will address these statements, called *Tôb-Sprüche*, and ask, does Qohelet advocate suicide? Do Qohelet’s claims that death is sometimes preferable to life mean that one should seek death in those instances?

The question of suicide in Qohelet is a complex one, and it is necessary to foray into accounts of suicide and death wish in the rest of the HB. Further, there is one *Tôb-Spruch*, found in 9:4b, which contradicts the better-dead sayings, claiming instead that it is better to be alive than dead. One must ask what relationship the death-positive and the death-negative *Tôb-Sprüche* have to each other. In an attempt to answer that question we must address Qohelet’s contradictions, and irony.\(^2\)

This chapter is in five main parts. The first addresses the *Tôb-Spruch* form, its patterns, its rhetoric, and its use in Qohelet for matters not concerned with death.

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\(^1\) These aspects, such as, people suffer from oppression, for example, or that some people lack the God-given gift to enjoy their lives, are discussed below.

\(^2\) This discussion of irony has been left until after each of the death-related *Tôb-Sprüche* have been assessed in order first to present the basic understanding of each *Tôb-Sprüche*, and only then to introduce irony, which might invert the meaning of each *Tôb-Sprüche* or otherwise distort them beyond recognition.
The second part addresses death-positive *Tôb-Sprüche* in Qohelet, and in the third a comparison will be made between the death-positive *Tôb-Sprüche* and accounts of suicide in the HB. The fourth addresses the one death-negative *Tôb-Spruch* which stands in contrast to the better-dead sayings, and here also we will assess the so-called joy statements. The fifth section assesses the use of irony with regard to the relation between the death-positive and the life-positive *Tôb-Sprüche* and the joy statements, focusing in on the possibility that complex irony is at play in the text. Finally, we will assess whether or not any definite conclusions can be drawn from all this with regard to Qohelet’s stance on suicide.

5.1. The *Tôb-Spruch* form

There are a number of passages in Qohelet which conform to the sentence structure which is sometimes labelled *Tôb-Spruch* (4:3, 6, 9, 13, 17; 5:4; 6:3, 9; 7:1, 2, 3, 5, 8; 9:4, 16, 18)\(^3\) and some of these *Tôb-Sprüche* describe situations in which Qohelet says it is better to be dead than alive (4:2, 3; 6:3; 7:1). The function of the *Tôb-Sprüche* however is not clear. It could be that they simply serve to mark off subunits within the text and that their declamations are not to be taken seriously, or it could be that they are to be taken seriously, describing actual situations in which it is better to be dead, and thus setting out the requirements which must be met to suicide. This section will explore theories about the rhetorical uses of the *Tôb-

\(^3\) Ogden lists a second group – 4:2, 17; 7:1b; 9:17 (Graham S. Ogden, “The ‘Better’-Proverb [*Tôb-Spruch*], Rhetorical Criticism, and Qoheleth,” *JBL* 96/4 [1977]: 489-505 [490]).
Spruch form, as well as Qohelet’s use of the form for statements which are not concerned with death.

5.1.1. Theories regarding the Tōb-Spruch form

Baumgartner was the first to differentiate this particular type of proverb among other classifications of proverbs, recognising a particular pattern of \( \text{Tōb} + A + \text{Tōb} + B \), ‘better A than B,’ while Zimmerli gave this type of proverb the name it carries now, Tōb-Spruch, ‘better saying.’

There have been several theories about the function of the Tōb-Spruch. Zimmerli considered the Tōb-Spruch “a reflection of the human and limited dimension rather than providing an absolute norm for conduct,” and that the Tōb-Spruch “attested the unique realm of possibilities for man’s choice.” H.H. Schmid thought that Tōb-Sprüche described “an exclusive expression denying any possibility to the second element,” while Bryce concludes that the Tōb-Spruch functions rhetorically as either an introductory or concluding device, with its “literary force and particular nuance” dependant upon its context. Longman describes the function simply: “it

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4 W. Baumgartner, “Die literarischen Gattungen in der Weisheit des Jesus Sirach,” ZAW 34 (1914): 165-198. The ‘better’ proverb was considered a part of the Komparation category, which was itself a part of the two main categories of proverb, Mahnung and Vergleich.
10 Bryce, “‘Better’-Proverbs,” 353.
takes one thing or a relationship between two things and compares it favourably with another thing or another relationship.”\textsuperscript{11}

5.1.2. General \textit{Tôb-Sprüche} in Qohelet

The \textit{Tôb-Sprüche} one finds in Qohelet (4:3, 6, 9, 13, 17; 5:4; 6:3, 9; 7:1a, 2, 3, 5, 8; 9:4, 16, 18) for the most part conform to the traditional pattern of $\textit{תב''כ} + A + \textit{מ''ב} +$ B. Ogden lists a second group (4:2, 17; 7:1b; 9:17) which though lacking the $\textit{תב''כ}$ element are from other points of view “indisputably T-S in intent and operation.”\textsuperscript{12} Ogden writes that “Qoheleth has taken the basic T-S form with its acknowledged function within the tradition and made personal application of it as a medium for his own unique viewpoint.”\textsuperscript{13} Qohelet’s use of the \textit{Tôb-Spruch} form is not limited to the role set out by Bryce, of marking the beginning or end of a literary passage, but serves “as a specifying statement for an introductory admonition, as well as providing a fulcrum about which complementary values move.”\textsuperscript{14} According to Schoors,

Even if the grammatical subjects are concrete, such as a youngsters, a king, a dog and a lion, or oil, they always represent a certain type of life, behaviour or destiny, which are philosophically evaluated. With V. D’Alario we can conclude that in Qohelet the “better than” proverbs “express the system of values which the author invokes when formulating his judgments; the traditional values are contested and we assist at a real reversal of the criteria of valuation.”\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{11} Longman, \textit{Ecclesiastes}, 134.  
\textsuperscript{12} Ogden, “The ‘Better’-Proverb,” 492.  
\textsuperscript{13} Ogden, “The ‘Better’-Proverb,” 504.  
\textsuperscript{14} Ogden, “The ‘Better’-Proverb,” 504.  
\textsuperscript{15} Schoors, “Words Typical of Qohelet,” 34-35.
Qohelet’s methods of using the Tôb-Spruch therefore better allow him to express his own viewpoint, and serve to emphasise his conclusions.\textsuperscript{16}

Qohelet’s Tôb-Sprüche describe the superiority of a number of things, not just death. Such non-death Tôb-Sprüche can be found in 4:6, 9, 13, 17; 5:4; 6:9; 7:5; 9:16, 17, 18.

In 4:6 Qohelet writes of the superiority of ṭn, satisfaction or gratification, over toil and the pursuit of wind (חטף ור軟體 ור主机); in 4:9 of the advantage of two (people) over one; in 4:13 of the advantage of a poor but wise youth over an old and foolish king; and in 4:17 the advantage of obedience over the offerings of fools. In 5:4 Qohelet describes the advantage of not vowing over vowing and not fulfilling, while in 6:9 he writes that the sight of the eyes is better than wandering desire (מלשון זבל) (thereby advocating fidelity?). A wise man’s reproof is said to be better than a fool’s praise in 7:5, and wisdom better than valour or strength (ומראה זבל) in 9:16. The softly spoken words of the wise are better than the screams of a fool in 9:17, and again in 9:18 wisdom is superior to weapons of war.

A (good) name is better than (fragrant) oil (7:1a). This declaration of the advantage of a good name is followed in 7:1b by the declaration that the day of death is better than the day of birth. This is one of a series of Tôb-Sprüche\textsuperscript{17} which compare the

\textsuperscript{16} Ogden, “The ‘Better’-Proverb,” 504.
\textsuperscript{17} Following Ogden, and therefore including the passages which lack the לוח-element.
benefits of life and death. This Tôb-Spruch states that death is generally better than life (7:1), while others offer reasons or circumstances within which death in preferable (4:1-3; 6:3). The following will discuss these death-positive Tôb-Sprüche in order to discover under what circumstances in particular Qohelet says it is better to be dead.

5.2. Qohelet’s death-positive Tôb-Sprüche

5.2.1. Death is better because life is a misery (7:1)

In 7:18 Qohelet suggests that death is generally better than life.\(^{19}\)

Though it is the second part of this verse which relates to the theme of death, and this part of the verse lacks the \(\text{bw}^+\)-element of the Tôb-Spruch, it is highly likely

\(^{18}\) This verse seems to have an echo in 7:8, \(\text{דב}^+\text{ר} \text{דר} \text{ר} \text{דר} \text{דר} \text{דר} \text{דר}\), so long as one takes \(\text{דר}^+\) as ‘thing’ rather than as ‘word.’ One must also, for this to work as a death-reference, consider life to be a ‘thing.’ Assuming those two factors – \(\text{דר}^+\) is ‘thing’ and life is a thing – then this passage could refer to the superiority of the end of a life over its beginning. It could be so even if one takes – as does the JPS – \(\text{דר}^+\) to mean ‘matter.’ Once again, this requires life to be a ‘matter.’ But if so, 7:8a could permit the understanding that the end of a life is better than the beginning of a life. That is, death is better than birth. The completing phrase however casts doubt over this possibility. \(\text{דר}^+\text{ד} \text{דר} \text{דר} \text{דר} \text{דר} \text{דר}\), better ‘patient’ (that is, long, or slow) of ‘spirit’ than ‘forceful’ of ‘spirit.’ If we are to take this as elucidating the previously assumed point, that the end of a life is better than its beginning, we could read into this verse a caveat: yes, death is better than life (birth), but don’t be impatient for it. That is, in the context of our question of whether or not Qohelet sanctions suicide, this verse, should it be read this way, would come down in the negative. One shouldn’t, we could read, seek death impatiently. Commentators however do not draw such conclusions about this verse. The end of a matter is better than its beginning, writes Fox, therefore “one should wait patiently to see how things turn out” (Fox, A Time to Tear Down, 254). Ogden reads this as ‘the end of a word is better than its beginning,’ and ‘the patient one better than the proud,’ recalling 1 Kings 20:11, “‘Let not him who girds on his sword boast like him who ungirds it!’” (Ogden, “The ‘Better’-Proverb,” 502).’ Though it is possible therefore to read in this verse a declaration of the preference of death over life (but with the caution not to seek it out) such an idea has not before been put forward.
that this \( \text{כַּלְמַע} \) element can be read into the verse by way of ellipsis. The \( \text{כַּלְמַע} \) element is present in the first half of the verse – a (good) name is better than good oil – and is not needed to understand the comparison between the two noun phrases in the second half of the verse, which reads literally ‘and the day of death than the day of (his; \( \text{יְהוֹוָה} \)) birth’ but which can easily be read, ‘and the day of death is better than the day of birth.’\(^{20}\)

In 7:1 Qohelet himself offers no reason why death is preferable to birth, but commentators offer to fill in the blank. Most commentators try logically to connect 7:1a and 7:1b and to explain why Qohelet might speak of the day of death as preferable to the day of birth by way of this assumed connection. But a logical connection between v. 1a and v. 1b is not necessary, as Gordis notes, “the link residing merely in \( \text{כַּלְמַע} \).”\(^{21}\) However, following Rashi’s assertion that they are connected, Gordis suggests that the day of death is superior to the day of birth here as one’s reputation cannot decline after death.\(^{22}\) Gordis also suggests that due to the use of oil at birth rituals,\(^{23}\) Qohelet’s statement that a name is better than oil would lead him to think of the relative situation of the day of birth, also, which would

\(^{20}\) One could also theorise that a scribe transposed the \( \text{יְהוֹוָה} \) which now fronts \( \text{כַּלְמַע} \) from the second \( \text{כַּלְמַע} \). This would make the sentence read, ‘better a name than oil’ (\( \text{כַּלְמַע וָּשָׁם מַשָּׂא} \), ‘and better the day death than the day of birth’ (\( \text{כַּלְמַע וָּשָׁם מַשָּׂא מַשָּׂא} \)). Still, it is not necessary to posit scribal error in order to read the line in this way, as it is clear that the comparison of a good name over against good oil, and the day of death over against the day of birth – with both good oil and the day of birth coming off as inferior options – is the intent of the verse.

\(^{21}\) Gordis, \textit{Koheleth}, 266.

\(^{22}\) Gordis, \textit{Koheleth}, 266. Ibn Ezra also holds this position (\textit{Avot} 2:4).

\(^{23}\) A possibility also noted by Scott, \textit{Proverbs, Ecclesiastes}, 235.
draw him to the conclusion that the day of death is better than the day of birth.\textsuperscript{24}

Seow relates the two parts of the line in the following way:

Qohelet alludes to the adage in the wisdom tradition that an enduring reputation is preferred over material possessions, even over life. But he quickly challenges the seriousness of the proverb. He does so by carrying the assumption of the saying to its absurd conclusion: if one’s name (memory) is better than the present possession of good, then the day of death is better than the day of birth.\textsuperscript{25}

Fox claims that the importance lies in the second part of the verse rather than in the first. Fox, stating that oils were used in preparing a corpse for burial, understands 7:1a “in a double sense: a (good) reputation is better than a pleasant rub-down with fine oils; and a remembrance is better than a proper burial.”\textsuperscript{26} In light of Qohelet’s “recurring melancholy” Fox suggests that Qohelet praises death as a release from the trials of life (such as endless toil and witnessing oppression),\textsuperscript{27} and Longman considers this passage evidence of Qohelet’s “world-weariness.”\textsuperscript{28} Like Fox, Murphy sees a link to burial, but considers it a quotation which “may have been originally directed to consol a person who could not afford expensive perfume and ointments for burial but possessed a greater treasure in his reputation.”\textsuperscript{29} Murphy disagrees with both Lauha and Delitzsch who take 7:1b as evidence of Qohelet’s “pessimistic preference for death over life (4:2; 6:3).”\textsuperscript{30} Though Murphy does agree that with Qohelet “life must be looked at from the point of view of death” he argues that v. 1b moderates v. 1a, and that only with death does one attain a good

\textsuperscript{24} Gordis, \textit{Koheleth}, 266-267.
\textsuperscript{25} Seow, \textit{Ecclesiastes}, 244.
\textsuperscript{26} Fox, \textit{A Time to Tear Down}, 251.
\textsuperscript{27} Fox, \textit{A Time to Tear Down}, 252.
\textsuperscript{28} Longman, \textit{Ecclesiastes}, 182.
\textsuperscript{29} Murphy, \textit{Ecclesiastes}, 63.
\textsuperscript{30} Cited in Murphy, \textit{Ecclesiastes}, 63.
reputation. Ogden suggests that Qohelet is looking for a solution to the problem of human suffering. Death, he proposes, “is preferable because it may open the way into a future where injustice is a problem finally and happily resolved.” Ogden thus proposes that Qohelet intimates an ‘existence’ beyond death in which the issues of oppression and injustice can be happily resolved.

There are therefore multiple reasons offered as to why Qohelet might think the day of death superior to the day of birth: one cannot ruin one’s reputation once dead (Ibn Ezra, Gordis, Murphy); it is not better, and the comparison is just to show the absurdity of the received wisdom (Seow); Qohelet sees death as a release from life’s suffering and toil (Fox); Qohelet is rather a maudlin pessimist and actually thinks death is preferable to birth (Lauha, Delitzsch); and, Qohelet hints at an afterlife which will resolve issues of injustice and oppression (Ogden).

It is unlikely that death is preferable because one’s good reputation is cemented at one’s death, due to Qohelet’s discarding the notion of immortality through remembrance. Given Qohelet’s view that we are not remembered for long after death, it is unlikely that the day of death is better because, once dead, one can no longer damage one’s reputation. Further, if 7:1 were the only verse which expressed the superiority of death over life, Seow’s claim that Qohelet is showing up the absurdity of the claim that a good name is better than oil would be more

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31 Murphy, Ecclesiastes, 63.
32 Ogden, Qoheleth, 101.
33 See Ogden’s discussion of אספֵץ (Ecclesiastes, 22-26).
34 See Chapter Four, “What it is to be Dead.”
35 Fox, A Time to Tear Down, 251-252.
convincing. But Qohelet does write elsewhere of the advantages of death over life (4:2, 3; 6:3; see below), and so his statement of the superiority of death over birth in 7:1b is not as absurd as Seow claims. As for Ogden’s notion that Qohelet tentatively puts forward an idea of a happy afterlife, one need only look to the description of what it is to be dead in 9:4-10 to see that he did not entertain any such possibility.36

The suggestions put forth by Lauha, Delitzsch, and Fox are similar. For Fox, Qohelet sees death a release from a life made miserable by suffering, injustice, and toil. For Lauha and Delitzsch, Qohelet is inherently miserable and therefore sees death as preferable. In this last it is necessary to ask, what is making Qohelet miserable? Would he be happy and scorn death if there was no suffering, no injustice, and no need to toil? If we give Qohelet the benefit of the doubt and conclude that he is a miserable pessimist due to the miseries inherent in life, then Lauha, Delitzsch, and Fox all seem to say: Qohelet claims death is preferable to birth because life is a misery. So, while Qohelet himself does not say in 7:1 why death is preferable, we may safely assume that death is only preferable because life is misery-making.

5.2.2. Death is better, non-birth is best; witnessing oppression (4:1-3)

In the Tôb-Sprüche found in 4:1-337 (specifically in v. 2 and v. 3), Qohelet offers specific circumstances in which non-existence (death or not being born) is

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36 See Chapter Four, “What it is to be Dead.”
37 "אשכח飲み האחרון Atatürk" הותקע נושו הותקע הותקע
preferable to life. Just as there are two Tôb-Sprüche in 4:1-3, so too are there two separate descriptions of non-existence. The first is contained in v. 2, where the dead are more fortunate than the living, and the second is found in v. 3, where those who have never been born are more fortunate than both. Though commentators differ in their reading of this passage, all seem to agree that Qohelet’s Tôb-Sprüche, their declaration of the superiority of death or non-existence over life, stems from his taking issue with oppression.

V. 2, though lacking the element of a Tôb-Spruch, may still be counted among this type of proverb. This is the first Tôb-Spruch of a complex of two Tôb-Sprüche with the of v.3 informing the relevant verb in v.2, praise. Qohelet ‘praises’ the dead, ‘who have already died.’ In order to avoid the pleonastic clauses in v. 2, Fox, following Ginsberg, supports parsing and as causal. Instead of translating ‘the dead who have already died’ and ‘the living who are still alive,’ then, one might instead obtain two “stylistically superior” subordinate clauses: ‘So I declared the deceased – since they are already dead – more fortunate than the living – since they are still alive.’ Whether one supports the pleonastic

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38 Death and non-birth are shown to constitute non-being in Chapter Three, “The Knowledge of Limits and the Limits of Knowledge.”
39 Both Hillel and Shammai agreed “that it is better not to be born than to be born!” (Jarick cited in Longman, Ecclesiastes, 135).
40 Fox, A Time to Tear Down, 219.
phrases or not, it is clear that to Qohelet’s mind the dead are to be held above the living. In either case, Qohelet praises the dead for reason only of their being dead, and does not praise the living for reason only of their being alive. Death commends itself for no other reason than that, when dead, one is dead.

The second type of non-existence is found in v. 3. This one, superior to both the living and the dead (ומְרָבָּתָם מַהְיוֹדָם), is the one who has ‘not yet been’ (לֹא חָי) according to the NRSV or ‘not yet come into being’ according to the JPS. Most commentators understand לֹא חָי as ‘yet’ or ‘still.’ Michel translates “der noch gar nicht ins Dasein getreten ist,” claiming that a life’s oppression without hope of a reckoning after death makes life not worth living. Krüger translates “not yet (!) existed,” the blatant impossibility of which leads him to label this passage ironic. Gordis, too, accepts a meaning of ‘yet,’ and Whitley ‘still.’ A vowel emendation renders the Aramaic lōḥ, time, therefore making the phrase ‘whose time has not happened.’ In either reading, ‘who has not yet been’ or ‘whose time has not happened’ both clearly refer to ‘someone’ who was never born. The

41 Michel, Qohelet, 139. My italics.
42 Michel, Qohelet, 140: “Ohne Hoffnung auf einen Ausgleich nach dem Tode (vgl. 3, 16-22) machen tröstlose Unterdrückungen das Leben Lebensunwert.”
43 Krüger, Qoheleth, 96. See below for a discussion on irony in the death-related Tôb-Sprüche. Emphasis and exclamation his.
44 Gordis, Koheleth, 239. Mishnaic לֹא חָי, yet, “suggests rather that our spelling here is the old orthography for the ai diphthong in which the Yod was unexpressed.”
45 Whitley, Koheleth, 41.
46 Cited in Whitley, Koheleth, 41. Dahood proposes that לֹא חָי is an adverb derived from the Ugaritic 'dn, time.
does not exist in the sense of being in the world (عالميًا), and this is a good thing, for the one who is not does not have to see/experience (شعبيًا) the evil work which is done here.

In 4:1-3, either one should be better dead, or one would be better never to have been born. The three options, life, death, and non-birth, are arranged hierarchically. Non-birth is at the top of the hierarchy as the most desirable state of (non-)being while life is at the bottom of the hierarchy as the least desirable state. Death occupies the middle-ground: it is more desirable than life, but less desirable than never being-born.

Although Qohelet does not explicitly state why it is better to be dead than it is to be alive in v. 2, we might easily infer this from the context. 4:1-3 is a discourse on oppression. In v. 1 Qohelet claims to have seen (شعبيًا) all the oppression which occurs in the world and laments the plight of the oppressed who have no one to comfort them. There is some difference of opinion in the weight given to Qohelet’s description of the oppression of others. Some commentators state that Qohelet advocates helping the oppressed, such as Krüger who claims this passage is “in no way inferior to comparable statements in the prophetic writings,” while others remark that Qohelet is “more concerned with the disturbance to his own

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Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 95. Caneday (“Qoheleth,” 99) also writes, “Qoheleth was a man torn by the presence of evil and vexed by the ravages of injustice, oppression and death.”
equanimity.” Murphy however claims that it is the experience (not the witnessing) of oppression which makes death preferable to life, as death “frees one from trouble.” Both Crenshaw and Murphy claim that this praise of the dead and the unborn arises from a “high appreciation of life” or “a vision of the way things should be in a perfect world.” It is the suffering resulting from oppression which causes Qohelet to praise non-existence.

Whether Qohelet is a true social reformer or whether he would simply prefer not to get his eyes dirty is not answerable. The more important issue with regard to our purposes is whether Qohelet means that it is better to be dead than to experience oppression, or whether it is better to be dead than to witness the suffering of the oppressed. The use of the verb is ambiguous in this regard.

While one cannot witness oppression without someone being oppressed, and one cannot be oppressed without witnessing oppression (namely, one’s own), one can witness oppression without being oppressed oneself. If Qohelet were actually saying that oppressed people are better off dead then he would in effect be saying that all people (bar one) are better off dead. This is because in 5:7 Qohelet advises that one shouldn’t be surprised by oppression, as one level of people is ‘watched over’ by another, higher, level, with both watched over by yet another level.

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48 Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 219. Qohelet’s focus is not on the oppression itself “which is a given and not a discovery” (Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 218).
49 Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 38.
50 Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 38. “Because life is not what it should be – in the face of human oppression, he can praise the dead and the unborn” (Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 38).
This verse implies that oppression may stem from any level of government, any social level (so long as it is inflicted downwards), with no one accountable for their actions due to the ‘cronyism’ inferred in the hierarchy of protection. No one, then, is free from oppression. Everyone is potentially oppressed, and potentially an oppressor, except of course for those at the very bottom, who can be oppressed but who cannot oppress, and the one at the very top, who might oppress but who cannot be oppressed. However, everyone in this hierarchy of oppression may witness oppression in addition to experiencing oppression.

The distinction between being oppressed and witnessing oppression therefore is somewhat blurred. Qohelet’s use of הָרֵעַ in v. 1 suggest a connection to witnessing oppression. Qohelet’s emphasis here, as in much of his book, is on viewing or witnessing certain acts, circumstances, and events, and the understanding or knowledge that the witnessing implies. His statement, ‘I turned and saw’ (הָרֵעַ אֵין וַיָּתְבוֹא) implies a realisation, the first glance only seeing, the double take, the turning back, eventuating in a realisation. V. 2’s praise of the dead for being dead, after Qohelet’s description of his ‘realisation’ (הָרֵעַ) of oppression in the world, suggests that death is better than life for one needn’t, once dead, carry the burden of this realisation. However, the immediately preceding lines (v. 1 c, d) concerning the suffering of the oppressed and their lack of comfort, suggests that

53 This one at the top could be the king, or God. In Both Job and Lamentations “culpability for the existence of oppression in the world is traced to God” (Seow, Ecclesiastes, 186). If Qohelet maintains the royal fiction in this 5:7, we might assume that he is free from human oppression.
death is superior to life as, once dead, one needn’t ever be oppressed. It is possible that death is better in v. 2 both on the grounds of witnessing oppression and on the grounds of experiencing oppression.

This ambiguity is present also in v. 3. Here, the lot of the one who has not yet been, or the one whose time has not been, is superior to both the dead and the living because they will not ראר שד the evil work (<typeof:undefined>) which is done in the world. It could be that the verb ראר serves both to denote the act of witnessing by people such as Qohelet as well as the experience of oppression by those who are oppressed.55

And so it would seem in 4:1-3 that Qohelet creates a hierarchy of worst/better/best in response possibly both to witnessing oppression and also to experiencing oppression. These categories potentially, given the hierarchy of oppression in 5:7, incorporate anyone at all. Clearly, the best option, non-birth, is not really an option at all. The option given in v. 3 isn’t an option any living person can choose.56 Though it is not within our power to choose the best ‘option’ in this hierarchy, existence is not an inescapable lot. Death is the second best in the hierarchy. And choosing death is definitely an option.57

56 Seow, Ecclesiastes, 187.
57 Accounts of voluntary death in the HB are discussed below.
Both 7:1 and 4:1-3 therefore suggest that death or non-existence is preferable due to the misery of life and due to the oppression inherent in the world.

5.2.3. Better non-existence than non-enjoyment or lack of burial (6:1-6)

In 6:1-6 Qohelet offers additional reasons why one would be better dead: when one is unable to enjoy one’s life (v. 3) and when one does not receive a proper burial (also v. 3). In 6:1-6 Qohelet writes,

‘There is an evil/misery (ລາຍໄຊ) which I have seen under the sun,’ Qohelet writes in 6:1, and it is an evil which bears greatly upon people (ຈາກствие}. An initial reading of 6:1-6 suggest that the evil spoken of in v. 1 is that all the good things the ‘man’ (ឆា) of v. 2 possesses – wealth (ចូល), assets (nontha), and...
honour or plenty\(^{58}\) – which God has given to him will go to a stranger \(^{59}\). Fox connects this passage with 5:12-16. In 5:12-16 Qohelet describes the ‘sick misfortune’ of a man who derives no pleasure from his wealth while he toils and hoards his earning, then loses everything. The ‘evil’ of 6:1 is similar to that in 5:12-16, but here in 6:1 a person with everything is unable to enjoy any of it as the wealth is turned over to a stranger.\(^{59}\). stranger, needn’t indicate a foreigner as it might in Proverbs 9:17, but could simply represent “the ‘someone else’ who enjoys what a rich man worked to acquire.”\(^{60}\) It is worth noting here that there is a touch of death about this passage, as one’s riches do not go to a stranger (unless one is unlucky in business as in 5:12-16) until one dies.

6:3 introduces a second problem, or the true heart of the problem according to Fox,\(^{61}\) to the previous verse’s description of the relative merits of wealth.\(^{62}\) This person receives the “traditional signs of the good life (many children and a long life; cf. Gen. 25:8; Job 42:17), but does not derive satisfaction from them.”\(^{63}\) Thus, in addition to the wealth, honour and success of v. 2, v. 3 describes other signs of ‘success’: lots of children, and a long life. This verse introduces the problem of

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58 Seow claims that one must continue the pattern of being able to partake in the items, and so translates ‘plenty.’ \(^{dwbk}\) carries such a meaning in Gen 31:1; Isa 10:3; 61:6; Nah 2:10. The same three nouns occur in 2 Chronicles 1:12 of God’s gifts to Solomon (Seow, Ecclesiastes, 210).
59 Fox, Qohelet and His Contradictions, 219.
60 Crenshaw, Ecclesiastes, 126.
61 Fox, Qohelet and His Contradictions, 219.
62 While there appears to be two Tôb-Sprüche in this verse, there is in fact only one. The first seems to appear in the phrase \(\text{hbw+h-Nm}\), but this phrase qualifies the life-experience of the person in question: a long life and many children is ‘the good’ \(\text{hbw+h}\) from \(\text{Nm}\) which the person in question draws no satisfaction.
63 Crenshaw, Ecclesiastes, 126.
pleasure, that is, “However many children a man has for heir and however long he may live, his life is wasted if he himself has not known pleasure.” Seow writes that “there are people who simply cannot enjoy what they have.” The heart of the problem, suggested by the descriptions of the rich person here and by the reaction of the commentators, is that the rich person simply cannot enjoy anything they have. A person might be fecund beyond belief, says Qohelet, but if they do not enjoy life’s good things, they are better off not existing.

The element of non-existence arises in 6:3. The lot of the person who has all this but is not satisfied by it (literally, ‘and his nephesh she is not sated/satisfied’; הבש לארהב) is compared to that of the ‘stillborn,’ הבש. The following verses give a description of a stillborn: the stillborn comes into חמה, and goes into darkness (חרם), and in darkness its name will be covered (כותר) (v. 4); it does not see the sun, and has no ‘awareness’ (לא ידע). Its last characteristic, מכם נוה ותל, is debatable. Seow offers a literal translation, ‘the one has more rest than the other’ and paraphrases, ‘it [the stillborn] has more rest than he [the one without enjoyment].’ Thus he renders נוה ‘rest’ or ‘repose.’ In this reading the

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64 The relevant verb here is הבש, sated or satisfied. Initially it might seem that the verb requires a reading suggestive of gluttony, that is, despite having so much, one still wants more, but it also denotes enjoyment or pleasure.
65 Fox, Qohelet and His Contradictions, 219.
66 Seow, Ecclesiastes, 225.
67 This noun is used only here and in Job 3:16 and Ps 58:9.
68 So Seow, Ecclesiastes, 212.
69 Seow, Ecclesiastes, 213.
stillborn obtains more rest (death) than the one who does not enjoy. But there is another possibility, in which הָרָדָה is rendered ‘satisfaction’ or ‘enjoyment.’71 Given the verb נָעַבְדָה, satisfied, sated, (meaning, according to commentators, to take pleasure in something) in 6:3, it could be that this meaning is present also in הָרָדָה. Such a meaning is not out of place, and need not undermine the sense of הָרָדָה as rest/death. If one allows for such a multiple nuances we arrive at a sense of the darkness of the stillborn as a restful death, and, contra the experience of the person who has everything but who is not satisfied (נָאֹבְדָּה), the stillborn’s un-experience is satisfying (ודא). And so the Tôb-Spruch of v. 3 makes the claim that it is better to be born dead than to be alive, in possession of wealth, status, children, and longevity, but to take no satisfaction in any of these things.72 Thus it is the lack of pleasure in life which grants the stillborn its advantageous position over life. But there is one more element of v. 3 which has yet to be discussed, v. 3e’s הָרָדָה לְאָֽרָהְּבָּהָ לוֹ.

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70 He notes that bnht ‘in repose’ was found on a jar in a tomb (RES 1975) while in the Ahiram Inscription nht might have a “double reference, to the royal rest and to the eternal repose of the king (KAI 1.2)” (Seow, Ecclesiastes, 213).

71 There is a הָרָדָה noun and verb which describe descent and descending, but the הָרָדָה which is translated ‘rest’ is thought to be derived from רָדָה, rest (Marvin R. Wilson, “tx'nf (nahēt) go down, descend,” TWOT 1:573. Passages containing the later use of הָרָדָה as rest or quiet are Job 17:16; 36:16; Prov 29:9; Isa 30:15, 30. In Qohelet, הָרָדָה is found only in 4:6, 6:5, and 9:17. Gordis argues, citing the Mishnaic phrase פָּנָיו הָרָדָה, ‘joy, pleasure,’ that הָרָדָה here in 6:5 should not be translated ‘rest’ but rather ‘satisfaction’ (Gordis, Koheleth, 259).

72 Or, if we incorporate v. 2, to have the spoils of one’s toil go to a stranger.
The part of this verse describing the absence of a proper burial has “perplexed the commentators,”73 the reason being, according to Fox, that “it seems odd that Qohelet would place so much weight on the formality of burial, as if that could somehow compensate for a life of joyless toil.”74 Some commentators and translators move v. 3d to another position. The JPS shifts the clause only a little further in the verse, and is thereby able to translate, ‘Even if a man should beget a hundred children and live many years – no matter how many the days of his years may come to, if his gullet is not sated through his wealth, I say: The stillbirth, though it was not even accorded a burial, is more fortunate than he.’ The JPS notes in regard to this shift that stillborns were cast into pits or hidden in the ground in no recognisable graves. Ginsberg (following Hitzig) moves the clause to 6:5a, but this is not a good thing, says Fox, “since it makes that verse imply that a burial is a bad thing.”75 It must be that the aspects of the stillborn described in vv. 4-5 are considered by Fox to be positive.76 Thus, by shifting this passage about lacking a burial into the midst of the positive values of stillbirth-ness, lacking a burial becomes a positive trait of the stillborn, and therefore burial becomes something negative.

But there is no need to move v. 3d, as Seow notes.77 However, in keeping this passage in position within v. 3, Seow marks it as another “of the fool’s many

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73 Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 242.
74 Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 242.
75 Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 242.
76 Qohelet’s description of the stillbirth’s lot as preferable therefore would not be taken ironically.
77 Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 211.
It is not a ‘proper burial’ the rich person worries about, says Seow, but the place of burial, the allusion being to the practice of the rich of “securing their burial sites to insure proper interment (cf. Gen 23:3-9; Isa 22:16).” Further, he claims that Qohelet elsewhere is “so consistenly focused on the enjoyment of life and so assiduously evasive about what happens in the future” that Qohelet could hardly here be concerned with a proper funeral.

While it is true that Qohelet carries on about our inability to know what will happen ‘after’ one (for example, in 6:12 and 7:14), these passage refer to what will occur in the world between now and our death, or after our death, within the world, when the world carries on and we are absent from it. Also, Qohelet is quite clear about some aspects of the future. He claims that all go to one place (6:5), and that all share the same fate (for example, 2:14; 9:2, 3). Death, though it is a future event, is a certainty. And it is not a surprise that his thoughts, once on death, might turn to burial. Indeed, this is not the only passage concerning a funeral. It is clear from 8:10 that Qohelet finds the absence of proper burial troubling, and this idea is at play also in 6:3. Though, as Fox says, Qohelet probably wouldn’t consider “a stately burial sufficient to bestow meaning on a pleasureless life,” it would seem that it is of enough importance to make Qohelet say that a stillborn’s lot is preferable to the lot of a person who will not be buried. Paired with an inability to enjoy one’s life, lack of proper burial casts the stillbirth’s lot as preferable.

78 Seow, Ecclesiastes, 211, having read v. 3c, והвшие ייסר וירש, as ‘yet he complains that the days of his years will come to pass.’
79 Seow, Ecclesiastes, 211.
80 Seow, Ecclesiastes, 211.
81 Fox, A Time to Tear Down, 242.
Like the one who is not yet born in 4:1-3, this passage offers an impossible solution to the problems of the one who cannot enjoy, to the one whose wealth will go to a stranger, and to the one who will not receive a proper burial. One cannot become a stillborn after the fact. Death is also present in this passage. In the plaint about burial Qohelet has the rich person posit a time in which they will be dead. Also like 4:1-3, then, there are two examples of non-existence in this passage: stillbirth and death. But death doesn’t play the same role in 6:1-6 as it does in 4:1-3. Here death is not offered as advantageous over living. Rather, one’s coming death – if one thinks one will not be buried – is reason to prefer non-existence.

5.2.4. Conclusions regarding death-positive Tôb-Sprüche

Taken together, the death-positive Tôb-Sprüche of 7:1, 4:1-3, and 6:1-6 offer us a series of instances in which non-existence is said to be preferable to life. These are: when life is miserable; when one witnesses or experiences oppression; when one cannot enjoy one’s life; when a stranger will benefit from one’s toil; and, when one will not receive a proper burial. Even better than death is either never having been born or being born dead. The seriousness of these passages does come into question, in part because the ideal existence (non-birth or stillbirth) is an impossibility for anyone already living. Qohelet’s use of death with non-birth might suggest that those particular Tôb-Sprüche, and perhaps even the better-dead Tôb-Sprüche generally, are not to be taken seriously. Obviously, from the

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82 Also, these verses can be taken ironically. For the time being irony has been suspended but will be reintroduced below.
perspective of a living person,83 non-birth can only be wishful thinking.84 Qohelet’s
descriptions of the state of non-existence are used in a particular way, however. As
it is an impossibility to reverse one’s creation (once created), Qohelet uses the
image of the non-born as a marker of a contrary existence. It is not that he wishes to
undo his own creation, as such, since this is an impossibility. Rather, it is the non-
creation of the unborn he envies. The optimal preference, non-birth, is impossible,
but even so Qohelet uses it as an example of the ideal ‘life’: a life that never was.

It cannot be denied, however, that death is a possibility. Though one cannot undo
one’s creation by becoming a stillborn, or a never born, one can undo one’s creation
by dying.85 But it is a big step from complaining about certain aspects of life to
actively seeking to end that life. Can Qohelet’s death-positive Tôb-Sprüche be taken
as advocating suicide? In an attempt to answer this question we will now turn to
accounts of voluntary death in the HB and ask, how do Qohelet’s Tôb-Sprüche
relate?

5.3. Comparison of the death-positive Tôb-Sprüche and Hebrew Bible suicide

It is at least possible that Qohelet advocates suicide in the Tôb-Sprüche, but the
question of whether the Tôb-Sprüche do advocate suicide is not definitively
answered by turning to instances of suicide in the HB. While there is no edict

83 And, as seen in Chapter Four, “What it is to be Dead,” there is no other possible perspective.
84 We might think here of Job’s desire to undo his own conception, and the day of his birth (Job 3:2-
19).
85 See Chapter Four, “What it is to be Dead,” especially Qoh 12:2 (pages 203-211), for discussion on
death as reversal of creation.
against suicide in the HB, there do seem to be requirements for when suicide is an appropriate action. In order for suicide to be acceptable in the HB, the suicider must be in an imminently fatal situation which is also greatly shameful. All accounts of suicide in the HB present these two necessary components. Qohelet’s death positive Tôb-Sprüche do not explicitly conform with the suicide categories presented by HB suicides. However, it is possible that these two necessary components are present in the book of Qohelet, and thus his Tôb-Sprüche could very well be taken to advocate suicide.

5.3.1. Accounts of suicide in the Hebrew Bible

Different scholars list different accounts of suicide in the HB. Droge and Tabor, for instance, list six “specific accounts” of voluntary death in the HB. They are: Saul and his armour bearer (1 Samuel 31; 2 Samuel 1; 1 Chr 10:1-7); Zimri (1 Kgs 16:18); Ahithophel (2 Sam 17:23); Samson (Judg 16:30); and, Abimelech (Judg 9:50-57). Clemons, as with Droge and Tabor, lists Saul and his armour bearer, Ahithophel, Zimri, Samson, and Abimelech, but he also lists Jonah (1:12-15).87

There are three accounts of Saul’s death (1 Samuel 31; 2 Samuel 1; 1 Chron. 10:1-7). In 1 Sam 31:3 Saul is ‘pierced exceedingly’ (ד”מ לָךְ) by Philistine archers.

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86 Droge and Tabor, A Noble Death: Suicide and Martyrdom Among Christians and Jews in Antiquity (San Francisco: Harper, 1992), 53.
87 James T. Clemons, What Does the Bible Say About Suicide? (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 16-23. Whereas Droge and Tabor (A Noble Death, 60, emphases theirs) cite Jonah as an example of a voluntary, “self-inflicted capital punishment,” they also note that it is not clear “whether the author intends to report Jonah’s actual death and resuscitation or his bare escape from death.”
Saul tells his armour bearer to ‘take your sword and pierce me with it lest these uncircumcised come and pierce me and make a toy of me’ (v. 4). The armour bearer will not do due to his ‘great awe/fear,’ and so Saul must take the sword himself and fall on it. The armour bearer, seeing Saul is dead, also falls on his sword and dies with him (v. 5). The author makes no distinction between the deaths of Saul, his three sons, the armour bearer, and all his men, who were ‘united on that day’ (1 Sam 31:6). And, after the Philistines have decapitated Saul (v. 9), placed his armour in the temple of Ashtaroth, and thrust or impaled (םר) his body on the wall of Beth-shan (v. 10), the ‘lively men’ of Jabesh Gilead retrieve Saul’s body and the bodies of his sons to Jabesh, burn them, bury the bones, and fast for seven days (vv. 11-13). Again, no distinction is made between Saul’s sons, who died in the battle proper (v. 2), and Saul, who fell on his own sword.

The second account of Saul’s death (2 Samuel 1) is told to David from the perspective of a passing Amalekite whom Saul asks to ‘kill me’ (םתרון). There are chariots and lords of the horse coming closer (םרב), a verb with connotations of cleaving the flesh (v. 6). Saul’s reason for his request is that ‘cramps’ have taken hold of him (سوء בר) yet his life is still with him (יכר). The Amalekite kills Saul, for he knew Saul could not live after he had fallen (v. 10). Despite the Amalekite having brought the trappings of kingship to David (v. 10), the Amalekite is killed for daring to kill Yahweh’s anointed (vv. 14-16). David mourns for Saul, Jonathan, the people of Yahweh and the house of Israel who fell
by the sword (vv. 11-12). In this account, too, Saul is given a proper burial by the people of Jabesh-Gilead (2 Sam 2:4-7).

In the later post-exilic account of Saul’s death in 1 Chr 10:1-7 the Chronicler echoes 1 Samuel 31 almost word for word, but there are telling variations. Whereas in 1 Sam 31:3 Saul is ‘pierced exceedingly’ by the Philistine archers, in 1 Chr 10:3 Saul is simply ‘pierced’ (לְכִפֵּס). His command to his armour bearer is the same, except for the reason he gives for the request. In 1 Sam 31:4 he fears that the Philistines will pierce him and make a toy of him, but in 1 Chr 10:4 Saul fears only that the Philistines will make a toy of him. As in 1 Samuel 31, Saul seizes the sword and falls on it, and the armour bearer, seeing Saul is dead, does the same (1 Chr 10:4-5), and Saul, his three sons, and all his house died together (וְתָמַם מֵאֲבָרָיו; v. 6). As in both other accounts of his death, Saul is given a decent burial by the people of Jabesh-Gilead. These people retrieve Saul’s body (also, presumably, his head (הלֶב)) which in this account is impaled in the temple of Dagan [v. 10]) and the bodies of his sons, return them to Jabesh, burn them, and bury the bones (vv. 11-12). However, in line with the reward/punishment thinking of the Chronicler, an epilogue is attached to this story of Saul’s death, claiming that God killed Saul for his ‘trespass’ in that he did not keep the word of Yahweh, and that he consulted Sheol for advice (אִמָּת אֹזֵן לְדָרָיו) rather than consulting God (vv. 13-14).
In Chronicles, then, Saul is a villain whom Godpunishes with death. This would mean that God brought about the circumstances of his suicide. However, as with the other two accounts there are two elements present: Saul is wounded, and the Philistines are approaching. Though Saul’s wound in Chronicles doesn’t seem to be life threatening, it is enough that it would allow him to fall into the clutches of the Philistines. One might safely assume that the Philistines won’t just ‘make a toy’ of Saul, but will eventually kill him. Thus imminent death and the threat of shame are present in 1 Chronicles 10. Despite the absence of the shame-making ‘toying’ by the Philistines, 2 Samuel 1 still has both elements. The approach of the chariots and cavalry implies imminent death, as do Saul’s disclosure that ‘cramps’ have seized him as well as the Amalekite’s knowledge that, once fallen, Saul will not get up. Perhaps falling into Philistine hands would be shaming enough, but again, it may be safely assumed that Saul feared the treatment he would receive at the hands of the Philistines. Thus, death was imminent and shame likely. Both elements are explicit in Saul’s request of his armour bearer in 1 Samuel 31. Saul reveals that the Philistines will kill him and make sport of him. That Saul receives a burial and is mourned in all three accounts – even the negative Chronicler’s – shows that there was no shame attached to taking one’s own life in these circumstances.

Both Zimri and Ahithophel kill themselves after their political machinations are thwarted. Zimri, commander of half the king’s chariots, rises against King Elah of Israel in Tirzah, striking, killing, and succeeding him (1 Kings 16:9-10). During his seven day reign Zimri kills Elah’s male kindred and friends, wiping out the House
of Baasha (1 Kings 16:11). But the armies hear of Zimri’s acts, declare Omri the King of Israel, and rise against Zimri, besieging Tirzah (1 Kgs 16:16-17). Seeing the armies and knowing himself defeated, Zimri flees into the citadel of the king’s house and burns the king’s house down with himself inside it (1 Kgs 16:18). The narrator notes that Zimri died in this fire because of the sins he committed in the sight of God and the sins he made Israel commit (1 Kgs 16:19). Thus Zimri, sure to die by the hand of the new king’s army, sought to circumvent his imminent death by killing himself. He also seeks in his suicide to circumvent the shame of being captured and executed. In his suicide he burns himself but also the citadel of the palace. This is an act symbolic of Zimri’s reclamation of power within a shameful situation.

We first read of Absalom’s treasonous relationship with David’s advisor Ahithophel in 2 Sam 15:12. This counsellor advises Absalom to rape David’s concubines (2 Sam 16:20-22). When David hears of Ahithophel’s treachery he prays that God ‘turn the counsel of Ahithophel into foolishness’ (2 Sam 15:31), and sends Hushai to pretend fealty to Absalom and frustrate Ahithophel’s counsel (v. 34). Ahithophel offers counsel which is ignored in favour of Hushai’s advice (2 Sam 17:1-14), and Absalom’s revolt fails (2 Samuel 18).
Daube states that Ahithophel hangs himself after a failed revolt,\textsuperscript{88} while Droge and Tabor claim that Ahithophel kills himself after one of his plans fails resulting in his humiliation.\textsuperscript{89} Neither is strictly true. At the time that Ahithophel rides his donkey home, sets his household in order, and ‘strangles’ himself and dies (רָתִּים וֹנֵף; 2 Sam 17:23), the revolt has not yet failed. In fact, the reason given for Ahithophel’s suicide is ‘he saw that his advice had not been taken’ (v. 23). It could be that Ahithophel saw the revolt was doomed to failure and, having predicted the outcome, knew he would eventually die for his part in the revolt. For one whose counsel was ‘like an oracle from God’ (2 Sam 16:23) such a deduction would not be difficult. But it also shows how humiliating is must have been to have one’s counsel ignored for such bald, bad advice. If Ahithophel had not hung himself he almost certainly would have been executed and this probably played a part in his decision. But his driving force, stated in 17:23, was that his advice was ignored. This, we might safely assume, was shameful enough to drive him to hang himself.

Ahithophel was buried in the tomb of his ancestors (יִקְבֶּר בְּקַבְרֵיהֶם; 2 Sam 17:23), inferring that suicide in these circumstances was not considered shameful.

Samson also suicides (Judg 16:30). Betrayed by Delilah, captured by the Philistines who blind him and make him grind in the ‘prison’ (Judg 16:21), an activity considered by some to be women’s work and symbolic of rape,\textsuperscript{90} and who also make him dance for them (Judg 16:25), Samson is shamed, certainly, and also most

\textsuperscript{88} David Daube, “Death as a Release in the Bible,” Novum Testamentum 5/2-3 (1962): 82-104 (87).
\textsuperscript{89} Droge and Tabor, A Noble Death, 56.
likely facing imminent death, as he is helpless (he must be led about by a boy; Judg 16:26) among his mortal enemies. He is helpless but for his hair, which having grown back somewhat allows him to petition God for the strength to destroy his Philistine enemies to revenge the loss of his eyes (Judg 16:28). Thus re-infused with Nazarite strength, Samson grasps the load-bearing temple pillars (Judg 16:29), but before pulling on them, Samson makes the request which turns his death into a suicide. ומרת, he says in Judg 16:30, expressing his intention to bring about his own death. Once again, a suicide receives an honourable burial: all of Samson’s family come to retrieve his body and bury him in the tomb of his father (Judg 16:31).

Abimelech’s suicide is recorded in Judg 9:50-57. Abimelech had besieged the city of Thebez, and all its citizens were shut up in the strong tower. As Abimelech was drawing near to set the tower alight, a woman dropped a mill-stone (בערב) upon his head, crushing his skull. In order that one might not say of him that ‘a woman slayed (נהרג) him,’ Abimelech, like Saul, requests that his armour-bearer kill him, and the armour bearer does this (v. 54). The author makes it clear that Abimelech’s death is punishment for the murder of seventy of his brothers (Judg 9:56-57), all of whom were killed atop one stone (יobble; Judg 9:5). There is then a sense of poetic justice to the death of Abimelech; he killed upon a stone and was killed by one. Or he would have been, had not Abimelech petitioned his armour bearer to kill him, thus exercising the last of his personal power to avert dying from

91 Used here and 1 Sam 11:21.
cracked skull, and in doing so to avert the shame which would have been his had a
woman killed him. This account is recorded without censure or condemnation –
apart from the blatant characterisation of Abimelech as a villain – suggesting that
the author had no quarrel with the manner of Abimelech’s death. “The point of the
story is that God says that justice was done. It is death by the hand of a woman that
brings shame, not the act of voluntary death per se.”92 The account of Abimelech’s
death suggests that “to die at once, honourably, is better than to die shortly, in an
abject manner.”93

Finally, the book of Jonah is sometimes thought to offer important information on
both death wish and suicide in the HB, for according to some commentators it
contains both of these phenomena. Jonah clearly wishes for death in 4:3, but Jonah
might or might not suicide in 1:12-15. There are several factors which feed into this
lack of clarity. First, one must ask whether Jonah intended to die, and second, one
must ask whether Jonah does in fact die. Finally, however, it is impossible to
conclude whether Jonah’s acts constitute voluntary death.

Whilst fleeing from God Jonah boards a ship, and while he is on the ship a deadly
storm blows up. In order to calm the violent storm which threatens to destroy both
the ship and all the people on it, Jonah tells the sailors that the storm will pass if he
is thrown into the sea. Droge and Tabor state that Jonah chooses to be thrown into
the sea in an act of voluntary death, a self-inflicted capital punishment, they say, for

92 Droge and Tabor, A Noble Death, 54.
rebelling against God. Though it is possible that Jonah sought to punish himself, there is nothing in the text to confirm the theory. All we know is that God caused a storm to come upon the sea which threatened to break up the ship (Jon 1:4), that Jonah is responsible for the calamity (Jon 1:7, 10, 11), and that Jonah knew the storm would abate if he is thrown into the sea (Jon 1:12). Against their will, and forced into the circumstances Jonah’s God has brought upon them (Jon 1:13-14), the sailors cast Jonah into the sea and thereby save their own lives (Jon 1:15).

It is this last element which is the most difficult to diagnose as an act of suicide. In the other suicides listed above, the suicide has been brought about by imminent death and a dose of shame. It seems that there is a real threat that Jonah is going to die anyway, in that the storm will destroy the ship. What is missing is the element of shame. And what is present here that is not present in any other HB suicide account is the element of suicidal self-sacrifice in order to save another. It could be that this is enough to render Jonah’s self-sacrifice something other than suicide. On the other hand, it could be that, for the prophet Jonah, the shame would be incurred if he allowed other people to die as the result of his lack of sacrifice. This is a difficult position to hold since Jonah is fleeing in order that he needn’t prophesy to the Ninevites and in doing so save them from God’s wrath (Jon 1:2-3). Further, he is no closer to wanting to save the Ninevites in 4:3, when he asks God to kill him rather than making him carry out his prophetic duties. Where then is the shame element in Jonah’s ‘voluntary death’?

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94 Droge and Tabor, *A Noble Death*, 60.
Another problem arises when we ask, is Jonah portrayed as dying? Jonah seems to experience a poetic death in the belly of the fish. The hymn sung to God from within the fish’s ‘internal organs’ or ‘inward parts’ (יוֹלָד) is filled with classic Sheol imagery. Jonah in fact describes his situation in 2:3, ‘From the belly of Sheol I cried out for help.’ Jonah describes a watery grave: he is ‘deep’ in the ‘heart of the seas,’ and water is all round him (Jon 2:4, 6); he is driven from God’s sight (Jon 2:5); he is ‘at the roots of the mountains’ (Jon 2:7), and near which may be found the entrance to the underworld, a place Jonah describes in 2:7 as both a land (♮ךֵמָלָא) and a pit (נֵסֶב) sealed over with bars. As Jonah drowned he cried out to God, who caused the fish to swallow him, in effect suspending the moment of his death. The author has, however, linked Jonah’s death and his descent into the belly of Sheol with the belly of the fish which became the receptacle of Jonah’s life. Paradoxically, the fish’s belly serves as the chamber of death, as a symbol of Jonah’s escape from death, and as a place which is neither death nor life but is suspended between the two. It is not possible, then, to conclusively assess whether or not Jonah is portrayed as dying, or of falling into a symbolic death such as is found in numerous HB text (for example, Prov 7:25-27; Ps 88:2-10), and so it is not possible to conclude whether or not his act in having himself thrown overboard constitutes voluntary death.
5.2.4. Conclusions regarding Tôb-Sprüche and suicide

In summary, suicide in the HB (apart from Jonah, which is very difficult to categorise) requires that one’s death already be certain, and imminent, and that one’s self-inflicted death allow one to escape a shameful situation, and maybe even reclaim a certain amount of power and honour. This is not the case with any of the explicit reasons given for non-existence to be preferable to life in Qohelet’s death-positive Tôb-Sprüche. In these formulaic statements, death is preferable or superior to life in the cases of one’s inability to enjoy one’s possessions, or having to witness or experience oppression, or lacking a burial, or, generally, in the case of life being a misery.

However, there is a sense in which Qohelet’s Tôb-Sprüche do fit in with accounts of suicide in the HB. Death is certain in the book (2:14-16; 3:19-20; 7:2; 8:5b-6a; 9:2-3). Further, Qohelet states that one cannot predict the time of one’s death (9:12), suggesting that death was not just something that would happen when one grew old (so in the poem on aging and death, 11:9-12:7), but something which might happen momentarily. Also, Qohelet might be expressing in his Tôb-Sprüche his desire to reclaim a certain amount of power. It is clear that people in Qohelet’s world lack the ability to effect anything which is or which occurs (3:14; 7:13). The certainty and potential imminence of death, coupled with the inability to otherwise effect the world, could possibly conform to the reasons set down for legitimate suicide in the HB.
So if we attempt to match up the *Tôb-Sprüche* with accounts of suicide in the HB we can only conclude that the specific reasons for the advantage of death over life in Qohelet’s *Tôb-Sprüche* do not fit the criteria offered in HB accounts of suicide.95

95 Comparison of Qohelet’s *Tôb-Sprüche* with thoughts about suicide and ‘actual’ suicides within the ancient Greek philosophical world also shed little light on whether or not the *Tôb-Sprüche* might condone suicide. There is no one attitude to suicide among the ancient Greeks. “In the Greek world each philosophical school had its own position on the question, and opinions ranged from the Pythagoreans’ categorical opposition to suicide to the welcoming approval of the Epicureans and the Stoics” (Georges Minois, *History of Suicide: Voluntary Death in Western Culture* [trans. Lydia G. Cochrane; Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1999], 43). Generally there was no discrimination against suicide in the ancient world “provided there was sufficient justification” for it. Philosophers concerned themselves less with the act itself than with the “context in which it was performed” (Arthur J. Droge, “Mori Lucrum: Paul and Ancient Theories of Suicide,” *Novum Testamentum* 30/3 [1988]: 263-286 [263]). Reasons commonly invoked by Greeks who speak of suicide are: “suicide is permissible at the command of the state (the case of Socrates), if one is under the oppression (αναγκασθεις) of incurable pain, or if one is faced helplessly with intolerable shame” (J.M. Rist, *Stoic Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 236).

Though the Pythagoreans were opposed to suicide, Pythagoras was thought either to have starved himself to death “out of weariness with life,” or that he was killed while fleeing from Syracusans, who were able to kill him as he refused to cross a field of sacred legumes (Minois, *History of Suicide*, 45). In either case Pythagoras died voluntarily. Plato seems to have condoned suicide under certain circumstances (Droge, “Mori Lucrum,” 264-5). While in the *Phaedo* the character of Socrates implies that an individual, who is one of the gods’ possessions, ought not to take their own life because that means usurping a privilege that belongs only to the gods, Socrates leaves one point obscure when he says that it is not unreasonable to say than an individual must not kill himself until god sends some necessity upon him, such as had then come upon Socrates (62C) (Droge, “Mori Lucrum,” 265-266). In the ninth book of the Laws Plato states that a suicide who has taken their own life for the wrong reasons (i.e., indolence or cowardice) should be denied public burial (Rist cited in Droge, “Mori Lucrum,” 266). Plato recognises at least three circumstances in which suicide is permissible: 1) if one has been ordered to by the polis; 2) if one has encountered devastating misfortune; or, 3) if one is faced with intolerable shame (Rist cited in Droge, “Mori Lucrum,” 266). These three reasons are commonly invoked by most Greeks who speak of suicide (Rist cited in Droge, “Mori Lucrum,” 266). Aristotle adopts a similar position in the *Nicomachean Ethics* by insisting that a person who kills themself in anger is guilty of a crime punishable by the state (Droge, “Mori Lucrum,” 266). Aristotle “condemns suicide because it is an act counter to justice committed against one’s own person and against the city, because it is an act of cowardice in the face of responsibilities, and because it is counter to virtue. We must remain at our posts and confront the vicissitudes of existence with serenity” (Minois, *History of Suicide*, 46). However, in the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle says that “‘the great-souled man…holds that life is not worth having at every price’ (*Nicomachean Ethics* IV.3.23; Loeb ed., 221)” (Minois, *History of Suicide*, 46).

Suicide for the Cynics was not a matter of great importance (Rist, *Stoic Philosophy*, 238). “Of course the wise man is free to commit suicide, just as he is free to do anything else which is not vicious – but his freedom to take his own life is of no more importance than his other freedoms” (Rist, *Stoic Philosophy*, 238). While there are many famous examples of Cynic suicides (Diogenes died voluntarily by holding his breath; Metrocles choked himself; Menippus hanged himself; Demonax starved himself; Peregrinus self-immolated) they do not offer theoretical reasons why they might have suicided “other than the practical one of inability to preserve a Cynic way of life” (Droge, “Mori Lucrum,” 267). The Epicureans, while having a reputation for condemning suicide,
Qohelet cannot then be advocating suicide. But Qohelet’s view that death is certain and, for all we know, imminent, as well as his belief that we lack the power to effect change in the world, could feed into or underlie the Tôb-Sprüche. If this is so, then the situations presented in the Tôb-Sprüche could be situations which could trigger the desire to reclaim one’s power. For Qohelet, these situations could stand in for the shame element of the wider HB suicide pattern. Combined with his death obsession, it would be little wonder if his thoughts turned to suicide.

rather seem to have concerned themselves with the foolishness of taking one’s life for the wrong reasons, such as from physical infirmity or fear of death (Droge, “Mori Lucrum,” 267-268).

There is also no single theory of suicide among the Stoics, “though we can recognize a number of largely unformulated assumptions common to many of the Stoics” (Rist, Stoic Philosophy, 254), and it can be stated that the Stoics “taught that suicide was acceptable under a number of conditions” (Walter Engler, “Stoics and Epicureans on the Nature of Suicide,” in Proceedings, 1994 [10 vols.; Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy; Lanham: University Press of America, 1994], 10:67-96 [68]). Suicide is mentioned in passing in early Stoic philosophy as a legitimate choice if undertaken rationally (Rist, Stoic Philosophy, 241-242). Rist believes that for Socrates, as well as for the early Stoics (such as Zeno, Cleanthes and Antipater of Tarsus), although the wise person has the authority to take their own life, a sign from heaven will be required “for most of us” (Rist, Stoic Philosophy, 246). For the Stoics, “the cosmic deity is the Logos of which human reason partakes. An individual’s logos therefore will allow him to determine the divinely appointed time for his exit from life” (Droge, “Mori Lucrum,” 269).

One may see then by way of this brief sketch of certain Greek philosophies’ attitudes to suicide that there was no one view. The Pythagoreans condemned it even while two stories of their founder’s suicide circulated. Aristotle, too, condemned it even while writing that ‘life is not worth having at every price’ and thus leaving the door open to suicide under certain conditions. Aristotle does not say when suicide is allowed, only when it is not: one is not to kill oneself in anger, nor to escape poverty, passion, or pain. Epicureans were not opposed to suicide, but considered it legitimate only under certain conditions. It was not a legitimate act in the face of physical infirmity or fear of death. The Stoics and the Cynics both condone suicide.

Do the reasons given to prefer non-existence over life in Qohelet’s death-positive Tôb-Sprüche match up with any of the reasons offered for suicide in the Greek philosophies before Qohelet? The short answer is no. If we compare the death-positive Tôb-Sprüche with the reasons for legitimate suicide in the Greek world, we see that his reasons are not compatible with those given by the Greeks for a rational suicide. If for the moment we assume that the Tôb-Sprüche do advocate suicide, and if we read them in line with Stoic or Cynic suicide philosophy, then a sign from God is required to show the wise one when is the right time to suicide. Qohelet’s God would never do this. And so Qohelet, even if open to suicide, couldn’t do it for the divine sign would never arrive.
5.4. A contradiction: better life at any cost

The remaining death-related *Tôb-Spruch* of 9:4, the life-positive *Tôb-Spruch*, suggests that life is preferable to death no matter the circumstance. This is not an isolated passage of life-affirmation. There are verses in the book in which Qohelet expresses joy in the activities of life. In 11:8, for instance, Qohelet writes that we should rejoice all the days of our lives, while in 9:9 Qohelet writes that God has approved that we ‘see life’ with the wife whom we love. There are also several passages which have a ‘nothing is better’ form which, though similar to the *Tôb-Spruch* form, advocate only enjoyment of life (2:24; 3:12, 22: 8:15). These joy statements, as they have been called, can be brought to bear on our reading of the life-positive *Tôb-Spruch* of 9:4. This section will address those passages and ask, what relation do they have to the death-positive *Tôb-Sprüche*, how can we read pro-life and pro-death statements in light of each other, and what does this say about Qohelet’s attitude toward life, and toward death, and toward his place in the world?

In order to do this we will have to address theories of irony in the text, and the current debate about Qohelet’s contradictions.

5.4.1. The death-negative *Tôb-Spruch* (9:4)

In contrast with the three death-positive *Tôb-Sprüche* above is that of 9:4b.

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The dog (בלול) was a despised animal in the ancient Near East while the lion was the royal animal.97 Judah is praised as a lion’s ‘whelp’ (נזר אריות) in Gen 49:9, who has grown on prey, and who crouches like a lion (اور), and who, it is implied, is feared like a lion (לבך). The dog, however, receives no such praise. A dead dog (בלוב המז) is spoken of with derision in 1 Sam 24:15; a ‘dog’s head’ (ראש כלב) indicates someone lacking worth in 2 Sam 3:8; and a dead dog (‘this dead dog’; הלבת הפה ומז) again is an insult in 2 Sam 16:9. It would seem that a dead dog was a common enough epithet in the ancient Israelite world and that such an insult is the source of Qohelet’s imagery in 9:4b. Qohelet has taken the expectation of the lowly dead dog and inverted it. It is not the lion’s lot which is preferable, but rather the dog’s. The inversion offers us the reason why a dog would be better than a lion: because one is dead, and the other alive. Life is enough to render the existence of the lowest cur preferable to the greatest lion. The following verse, 9:5, offers the reason why it is better to be alive than it is to be dead: it is better to be alive because ‘the living know they will die but the dead know nothing.’ A live dog is better than a dead lion “because the living possess one trustworthy scrap of knowledge while the dead lack even this.”98 Compounding the negativity denoted by this lack of knowledge are the other items on the list of losses: wisdom, memory, cunning or inventiveness, reward, emotions, work, and any portion in life

97 Gordis, Koheleth, 305. Crenshaw remarks that the male prostitutes are called dogs in Deut 23:18-19 (Crenshaw, “The Shadow of Death in Qoheleth,” 580).
98 Fox, A Time to Tear Down, 292.
at all (9:5-6, 10). In contrast with this annihilation of the individual in death, life, even the life of a ‘dog,’ is preferable.

Certainly this seems to be damning life with faint praise. It is, however, still praise. And this life-positive Tôb-Spruch stands in contrast to the death-positive Tôb-Sprüche discussed in the first part of this chapter. What is it to be? Is life preferable to death, or is death preferable to life? There are at least three possible treatments of these contrasting statements: Qohelet doesn’t mean it when he says that life is preferable; Qohelet doesn’t mean it when he says that death is preferable; and, Qohelet means both equally. But before we get onto those possibilities, first we will look at passages which support the idea that Qohelet felt positive about life.

5.4.2. Affirmations of life in Qohelet

The most striking parallel to the Tôb-Spruch form is the form ‘nothing is better,’ form.99 This form occurs four times in the HB, all four of them in Qohelet (2:24; 3:12, 22; 8:15).100 They all express the enjoyment of life.101 There is ‘nothing better’ than for a person to eat, drink, and enjoy their toil (2:24; 8:15).

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99 Another similarity occurs with the form. See Gershon Brin, “The Significance of the Form ma-tôb,” VT 38/4 (1988): 462-465. This construction is found in Qoh 6:12; 8:3.

100 Graham S. Ogden, “Qoheleth’s Use of the ‘Nothing is Better’ –Form,” JBL 98/3 (1979): 339-350 (339). Ogden notes that the construction – as opposed to the form – is used in Jer 8:15; 14:19, the only other examples of this word combination in the HB. He also notes two passages in Qohelet (5:17; 9:7-10) which express the sentiments we see in the form without actually using that form (Ogden, “‘Nothing is Better,’” 339).

101 Ogden conducts a useful analysis of the form in comparison with the Tôb-Sprüche, and suggests that the form in Qoheleth is a literary development or modification of this mode (the Tôb-Sprüche which compares two actions by way of the infinitive construct, as in Qoh 7:2, 5) of T-S” (Ogden, “‘Nothing is Better,’” 340).
their actions (3:22), or to enjoy themselves and do what is good (3:12). Each of these “draws upon a common fund of verbs (רמאו, שארו, שפתי)”\textsuperscript{102} and seeks to validate the claim that enjoyment comes from God.\textsuperscript{103}

As we can see, introducing the life-positive Tôb-Spruch, as well as various joy statements such as those in the \textsuperscript{10}Ny passages, rather muddy the waters with regard to whether or not Qohelet advocates suicide. On their own, the death-positive (or anti-life) statements are fairly clear, just as, on their own, the life-positive statements are fairly clear.\textsuperscript{104} The death-positive Tôb-Sprüche suggest that life can be a misery and that death is preferable to life; the life positive Tôb-Spruch and the joy statements suggest that life is a joyous thing and that, even if it weren’t, life is preferable to death. However, when one becomes aware that there are both death-positive and life-positive statements in the text a problem arises: which are to be given more weight? \textsuperscript{105}

\textsuperscript{102} Ogden, “‘Nothing is Better,’” 350.
\textsuperscript{103} Ogden, “‘Nothing is Better,’” 350.
\textsuperscript{104} If one does not introduce irony into either set of statements.
\textsuperscript{105} One could however argue the following: enjoyment comes from God, and there is nothing better than these types of enjoyable activities. But what has this to do with the one who has everything but not the ability to be satisfied? If enjoyment is a God-given gift, then the inability to enjoy must result from God’s not giving. Thus the inability to enjoy also comes from God. While enjoyment may well be the greatest good (the \textsuperscript{10}N\textsuperscript{10}Y), not everyone is able to experience it. Eating and drinking and becoming lost in one’s work need not go hand in hand with the ability to enjoy those things. And, if it is better to be stillborn than to have things which are enjoyable but not the ability to enjoy them (6:3), then it is better to be stillborn than to possess the things which are spoken of in the \textsuperscript{10}Ny passages but to lack the ability to enjoy them. The death-positive Tôb-Spruch in 6:3 trumps the objects of enjoyment, when the God-given objects of enjoyment are not given with the God-given ability to enjoy them.
5.5. The relation between the death-positive and life-positive Tôb-Sprüche

The presence of both life-positive and death-positive Tôb-Sprüche presents in one instance what is one of the biggest issues in studies of the book of Qohelet: the issue of Qohelet’s contradictions.

Historically, the problems caused by these contradictions have been ‘solved’ in a variety of ways. Some interpreters attempt to harmonise the contradictions, “which reconciles apparently conflicting statements by showing that they use words differently or deal with different matters.” Some scholars get around the contradictions by claiming that contradictory passages are additions made by a person other that the initial author. Other interpreters claim that Qohelet draws on traditional wisdom quotes which he then undermines, while still other scholars use irony to solve the contradictions. They consider some statements ironic, and others ‘truthful.’ Depending on the bent of the particular exegete, either the statements which are considered negative and or maudlin are said to be ironic, or the statements which are somewhat ‘upbeat’ and life affirming are ironic.

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106 Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions*, 19. Scholars who harmonise the contradictions include Zer-Kavod, Loader, and Hertzberg (see Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions*, 19-23).
107 For example, Barton, McNiele, and Podechard (see Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions*, 23-25).
108 For example, Gordis, Levy, and Whybray (see Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions*, 25-28).
110 In Good’s study, for instance, the joy statements “are the only statements in the book which are taken on face value and not ironically” (Anderson, “Ironic Correlations and Skepticism,” 91, emphasis his). Good writes on 11:7-12:1: “Here, perhaps more clearly than in any other passage, Qoheleth suggests wherein life’s meaning lies: in rejoicing in the years God gives. Those years are full of vanities, incongruities, ironies. But the incongruities to which Qoheleth so sharply points are not incompatible with the joy that is his constant exhortation” (Good, *Irony in the Old Testament*, 194). There is a further difficulty in the use of the category of irony in that these scholars use ‘irony’ to mean different things. This has been noted by Izak J. J. Spangenberg, “Irony in the Book of
The contrast between 9:4’s affirmation of life, such as it is, and various other passages in Qohelet which seem to place death above life exemplifies the difficulty which Qohelet’s contradictions create. Which is to be given more weight? Does death or life have the advantage? Does the claim that one is better alive – and the life-positive joy statements – make void the death positive Tôb-Sprüche? If both are to be given equal weight, what sense can we make of the text?

With regard to the death-negative 9:4 and the death-positive Tôb-Sprüche, it does seem that irony is the solution most put forward by commentators, requiring that one set of statements, either the death positive or the life positive, be nullified. One or the other must be meant ironically. Both positions are evident in commentaries. In light of the current trend to treat the contradictions as equally valued, however, a particular type of irony, complex irony, will be applied to the contradictory life-positive and death-positive statements.

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111 While Fox does not assess the contradictions in Qohelet in light of a supposed use of irony, his work regarding the contradictions has so influenced Qohelet studies that any discussion of the contradictions here would be incomplete without addressing Fox’s assessment of them. As discussed in § 1.3.1.1.1. of the introductory chapter, Fox supposes that “Qohelet’s contradictions state the problems rather than solving them, and the interpreter likewise must leave many of the observations in tension” (Fox, Qohelet and His Contradictions, 11). Any “reading faithful to this book, at least, should try to describe the territory with all its bumps and clefts, for they are not mere flaws, but the essence of the landscape” (Fox, Qohelet and His Contradictions, 28). I hope that the below treatment of the contradictory death-positive and life-affirming statements with complex irony manages to uphold the value of both sets of statements.
5.5.1. Irony in the Tôb-Sprüche

The death-positive 4:1-3 is often taken as ironic. According to Lohfink, 4:2 is “a lament disguised as its opposite, namely the praises of the dead and of those not born.” Krüger reads 4:3 as taking 4:2 in an “ironic turn.” Krüger notes that Qohelet ‘hates life’ in 2:17, and the sentiment of that passage “seems to be confirmed here” in 4:1-3 “even if for quite different reasons,” claiming that Qohelet hated life in 2:17 because he couldn’t fulfil his wishes, while in 4:1-3 because he perceives the oppression of others. 4:1-3 shows “that there can be circumstances in which death is preferable to life.” However, even such conditions “cannot call into question the fundamental preference of life over death.” This, says Krüger, critically corrects the ‘king’s’ ‘hatred of life’ in 2:17. He considers 4:1-3 an *ad absurdum* argument, “following its own logic to its conclusion” with the conclusion being that “in the end . . . ‘a living dog [still] has it better than a dead lion.’”

Seow also considers the better-dead claims in 4:1-3 ironical. The point of 4:1-3, he says, “is that the living still have to witness the injustices of life, whereas the dead have already done that and no longer have to do so.” That the ideal option for humans in 4:3 is never having been born indicates for Seow that this *Tôb-Spruch* “points to the irony of human existence,” in that what is ‘better’ here is not

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113 Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 96.
114 Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 95.
obtainable by humans, and so by existing one already has one’s lot, which is inescapable. Seow argues that what is better “is not to somehow be shielded from life’s painful realities but . . . to enjoy oneself whenever it is possible to do so.”\(^{118}\) Thus Seow not only sees the death-positive statements as ironic, he employs the thoughts of death to prop up life.\(^{119}\)

Only Crenshaw, Murphy, Longman, and Anderson seem to entertain the notion that the better dead statement are not the ironic statements, or that they are not the only ironic statements, with the life positive Tôb-Sprüche and the joy statements possibly being ironic. Crenshaw notes that 9:4’s dead lion seems to counter the view that death is superior to life, but he says that its context “requires that it be understood ironically.”\(^{120}\) Murphy’s use of irony is somewhat different from that of other commentators. He also attributes irony both to the death-positive and to the life-affirming Tôb-Sprüche. The ‘praise’ of the dead has an ironic edge, he says, since death is not normally preferable. Similar irony is present in 9:4-5. “From one point of view it is better not to experience the evil turns of life (4:3); on the other hand, it is better to know something (9:5) even if this is (ironically) only that one must die!”\(^{121}\) Longman writes that Qohelet’s favouring of life over death in 9:4 is “a sarcastic or bitter preference.”\(^{122}\)

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\(^{118}\) Seow, Ecclesiastes, 187.

\(^{119}\) While not strictly an ironic reading, Barton compares 4:1-4 with 9:4 and states that Qohelet’s view that the only happy people were dead ones was “not his settled opinion . . . It was rather a transitory mood, though intense in feeling while it lasted” (Barton, Ecclesiastes, 114).

\(^{120}\) Crenshaw, Ecclesiastes, 106; “The Shadow of Death in Qoheleth,” 581.

\(^{121}\) Murphy, Ecclesiastes, 38. Murphy’s use of ‘ironically’ here does not denote ‘irony’ in the sense of something which is not meant, illustrating Spangenberg’s (“Irony in the Book of Qohelet,” 58) point that commentators use the term ‘irony’ very differently.

\(^{122}\) Longman, Ecclesiastes, 228.
Anderson states that interpreting irony requires consideration of its context. That is, “the context provides the hermeneutical clues that irony is indicated.”

Anderson further claims that the joy statements have in common that they all come in a negative context, and both Hoffman and Spangenberg agree that context is pivotal to understanding irony. A joy statement in a negative context would therefore suggest that the joy statement is meant ironically. Anderson concludes that although there might not be enough evidence to support ironic interpretation of the joy statements, they “come in a suspicious context,” and there is enough doubt about them to endorse a sceptical approach to them.

Both ironic readings of the death-positive Tôb-Sprüche and of the life-positive Tôb-Spruch, and the joy statements are therefore found in studies of the text, and each set of ironic treatments collapses the one side of the contradiction. Simple ironic treatments such as those above are not then the ideal treatment of the contradictions. But there is another way to read irony in the text, through the use of complex irony, which allows a place for both death-positive and life-positive statements.

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124 Anderson, “Ironic Correlations and Skepticism,” 87. These negative contexts are: “the overall negative ethos or context of the book; the negative or deterministic contexts of the preceding and following pericopes enveloping the joy statements; conflating joy and negative statements in the same statement (e.g. 9.9); the negative context of death as the great leveller of all humanity; the negative context of aging and dying (e.g., 11.8-9); and possibly the hevel conclusion of the book (12.8)” (Anderson, “Ironic Correlations and Skepticism,” 87).
126 Anderson, “Ironic Correlations and Skepticism,” 100.
5.5.2. The Tôb-Sprüche and complex irony

Another ironic ‘solution’ to the problem of the contradictions, and one which allows each group of statements to carry equal weight, is found in the concept of complex irony.

Anderson defines complex irony as, “what is said is meant and not meant.” He claims that the “possible ironic correlations in the joy statements may not be identical to, but analogous with, Socratic irony, i.e., complex irony.” Anderson further claims that irony uses many tactics to cloak itself, “and may include the function of being evasive in order to make the hearer/reader investigate the real meaning of what is being said and to discover truth or knowledge (or joke) for oneself.” That is, if irony is at play in Qohelet, it might be so cloaked in order to draw the readers in to discover truths for themselves.

Spangenberg is another scholar who claims that 9:4 is complex irony, both meant and not meant. Qohelet here “pretends to adhere to a viewpoint other than the one he actually holds.” 9:5a he claims is complex irony, as the proverb in 9:4b is “simultaneously true and not true.” When read out of context it seems that Qohelet is saying life is preferable to death, but read in context it is “extremely ironic since those who live know that they will die. In the words of Kurt Galling,
‘In Wirklichkeit ist die Hoffnung des Lebenden – eine Hoffnung zum Tode’ (‘In reality the hope of the living – is a hope unto death’)." Spangenberg claims this complex irony is embedded within a context of cosmic irony in 9:1-10, which deals with the relationship between God and humans.

Seen from the perspective of humans, this is negative; they are the victims of God’s capriciousness. On account of this capriciousness (v. 1) and since just retribution does not exist (vv. 2-3) and also because the place of death is so horrible (vv. 5b-6), Qohelet recommends enjoyment of life (vv. 7-10).

Whether Qohelet is ‘more serious’ about living or dying therefore is not answerable. Possible irony clouds the issue. We must take both sets of Tôb-Sprüche seriously, whilst at the same time acknowledging that either, or both, could be meant ironically. It could be that he actually does mean that life is preferable to death, and also that death is preferable to life. It is my belief that the death-positive and the life-positive Tôb-Sprüche should be understood in light of the concept of complex irony, both meant and not-meant.

In summary, while there are life-positive statements which run counter to the death-positive statements of section one, these positive statements could possibly be ironic. That said, so could the death-positive Tôb-Sprüche. In short, there is no way to know the author’s intent when it comes to either the death-positive or the life-affirming Tôb-Sprüche or to the statements which echo those sentiments.

133 Spangenberg, “Irony in the Book of Qohelet,” 68.
While the use of irony is an important part of Qohelet’s rhetoric of ambiguity, commentators have used it to deny certain aspects of Qohelet’s philosophy while upholding others. It should therefore be used with caution, and exegetes should not apply the tools of irony to Qohelet without first asking themselves what it is precisely they hope to achieve. The only way to honour both Qohelet’s use of contradictions and his use of irony is to allow for a complex irony, a sense in which the contradictory statements are both meant and not meant.

What happens when we treat the death-positive and death-negative Tôb-Sprüche as complexly ironic, both meant and not meant? This will be addressed in the concluding section below.

5.6. Conclusions regarding suicide in Qohelet

When we read in the knowledge of possible complex irony, we must conclude that, though Qohelet’s better-dead statements do not expressly advocate suicide, they, as well as the remainder of the text, do not prohibit the act. Qohelet’s better-dead statements set out specific situations in which a person would be better dead – when that person witnesses or experiences oppression, or when that person cannot enjoy anything, or when a person doesn’t receive a proper burial (though this is posthumous harm). He does not mention the imminent death which prompts all other suicides to action, nor does he mention the prospective humiliation which is present in many of these suicide cases, though both of these elements are present in
the text as a whole, with death being certain (2:14-16; 3:19-20; 7:2; 8:5b-6a; 9:2-3) and possibly imminent (9:12), and humans in the shameful situation of being unable to affect the world (3:14; 7:13).\textsuperscript{134}

However, the life-positive Tôb-Spruch of 9:4, as well as various other joy statements throughout the book, cast doubt on whether Qohelet actually means that death is preferable in these situations. We could easily render the death-positive Tôb-Sprüche void by infusing them with irony, but it is just as easy to nullify the joy statements with irony also. A fair treatment of these contradictions requires that the irony we read in the text to be complex irony.

If we allow for complex irony, each set of statements, both the death-positive and the life-positive, can be read as meant, as well as not meant. That is, Qohelet means what he says when he describes the plight of the oppressed, and states that those who witness oppression or who experience oppression are better dead. But Qohelet also means it when he says that a living dog is better than a dead lion. And within each of these positions, the irony allows for other thoughts to intrude.\textsuperscript{135} So in the better dead Tôb-Sprüche, Qohelet might have the thought that perhaps death as he conceives of it isn’t quite the advantage he would like. And in the life-positive Tôb-Spruch, Qohelet might have the thought that perhaps life at any price isn’t an advantage either. Complex irony therefore allows us to accept the contradictions, and also to envision Qohelet’s thought processes.

\textsuperscript{134} ‘Shameful’ in the sense of one’s being humiliated by one’s ineffectuality.

\textsuperscript{135} This seems to be in line with W. Schmidt’s definition of irony as the art “das Andere aufscheinen zu lassen” (cited in F.J. Backhaus, “Kohelet und die Ironic,” BN 101 [2000]: 29-55 [29]).
Each *Tôb-Spruch* contains something meant and not-meant. Qohelet, faced with certain problems, arrives at an answer, but within the solution is a kernel of another answer. The *Tôb-Sprüche* illustrate Qohelet’s internal processes, his passing ceaselessly from hatred of life to fear of death, to hatred of life again. Thus the reader, when encountering a *Tôb-Spruch*, is able to replicate Qohelet’s thought by way of complex irony: we are offered a solution to the miseries of life but even at the same time we are passed from that solution to another solution, this time a solution to the miseries of death.
6. The Pulse of Death

It is clear from the preceding chapters that Qohelet has much to say about death. Death is natural, it can be beautiful. Qohelet considers that he knows with certainty that one must die, what death entails, and that all must have the same experience of death, yet one cannot know when one must die. Qohelet is alienated by life, so much so that he presents, in various Tôb-Sprüche, what could be an advocation of suicide, yet he flees from the nothingness of his death-concept, clinging to knowledge – even limited knowledge – as that which gives the living the advantage over being dead, only to return yet again to thoughts of death as a release from life. All of these various aspects of Qohelet’s beliefs about death feed into, or can be seen to come out of, an underlying death belief which will be addressed in this chapter, the belief that a wise person is wise in part because they participate in mental and physical acts which centralise death.

This chapter uses 7:1-4 as the entry point into a discussion of the death-based nature of Qohelet’s wisdom.

This passage however will be fractured in order to facilitate discussion of the various aspects of this death wisdom.
In the first section of this chapter, 7:2a-b, 4 will be used to assess the correlation
between wisdom and death.\(^1\) It will be argued that Qohelet’s wisdom is death based,
requiring the מַעֲשֵׂי to actively participate in drawing death into the midst of their
life. These passages describe how a wise person should dwell on death, both by
physically going to places where one might experience death\(^2\) as well as by
‘sending their mind’ ‘toward’ death.

In the second section, 7:2c-d will be used to explore the relation between wisdom,
death, and life. We will see here that Qohelet’s death-based wisdom is life-giving,
not in the sense of endowing immortality, saving one from death or even extending
one’s life, but only in allowing one a certain type of life. In order to come to this
conclusion we will address in some detail the related passage of 7:12b, in which
wisdom is said to be life-giving.

The third section will discuss the characteristics of this wise life. Here we will again
step outside of 7:1-4 briefly, in order to address the pain which is associated in
Qohelet with knowledge and wisdom (1:17-18), but then will return to 7:3 to
explore another characteristic of the wise life in Qohelet, pleasure. As we might
have come to expect in the context of the book of Qohelet, this pleasure is a type of
Schadenfreude. In the remainder of section three we will explore the relation of
הַשְּׁפָר to Qohelet’s death-based wisdom. \(^{3}\), it will be shown, often results from

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\(^{1}\) 7:1, while inextricably connected to the rest of the passage, will be addressed in this chapter only to
situate 7:2-4. 7:1 is discussed in detail in Chapter Five, “Why Not Suicide?” pages 227-231.

\(^{2}\) From the subjective living, of course.
death reflected on the world through Qohelet’s gaze. Moreover, occurs cyclically, consuming everything, then falling away, only to rise and consume again.

6.1. Wisdom and death (7:2a-b, 4)

In 7:2a-b, 4, Qohelet correlates wisdom and death.

Qohelet expressly advocates focusing on the death around us in 7:2a-b, 4. Here Qohelet connects wisdom with this death focus, comparing the acts of a wise person with those of a fool. A wise person in Qohelet will think about death whereas a fool will not. Focusing on death is therefore an important part of Qohelet’s concept of wisdom. This section will work through 7:2a-b, 4, and establish that Qohelet’s use of ‘houses’ in these passages can be both metaphorical and literal, and he is therefore advocating both physically going to a house of mourning, and also thinking on death.

7:2a-b is an example of a Tôb-Spruch, already discussed in the preceding chapter. This passage describes the advantage of various ‘houses’ over against each other. The (in both 7:2a and 7:4a) denotes a place of mourning. In both 7:2a-b and 7:4, the house of mourning is played off against another type of house,

3 Pages 223-225.
that of מְשַׁתָּה, feast or drink, in v. 2b, and of מַשָּׁה, joy, in v. 4b. As has been seen, the תְּבֵית is used in 12:5 to symbolise death. There, the מַשָּׁה refers to the length of time one spends in death as well as the ‘places’ of death, both the place of interment and the ‘space’ where death is. The house of mourning in 7:2a, 4a likely therefore refers not just to a concrete place where a body is stored, or even to a place wherein a funeral or wake is held, but also metaphorically to death.

This possibility is supported by 7:2c, which offers the reason why the house of mourning is to be preferred over the house of feasting: it is the end (פֶּתֶשׁ) of all people. While one could claim literally that a house of mourning is the end of all people (assuming the corpse is kept there before burial), one can also see here in the house of mourning a metaphor for death. The ‘house of feasting’ (v. 2b) and the ‘house of joy’ (v. 4b) correlate with, and contrast, the dual-layered meaning of the ‘house of mourning,’ in that they refer not just to the place where a party is held, but also metaphorically to the normative pleasures of life. Consequently, the verb used in v. 2a-b, קָדֵשׁ, go, must match the literal and metaphoric uses of the various houses. Apart from its literal sense of going or walking to a place where one will mourn, feast or drink, the metaphorical sense of those houses indicates a correlating

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4 While 7:4 is not a Tôb-Spruch, it is clear that the house of mourning is preferable to the house of joy, for the house of mourning is where the ‘heart’ of the wise person goes. This point will be returned to shortly.
5 See Chapter Three, pages 123-124.
6 It may legitimately be claimed that this preference of the house of mourning over the house of feasting, and Qohelet’s placement of celebration below mourning, stands in contrast to the ‘joy statements’ elsewhere in the text (2:24; 3:12, 22; 8:15). These joy statements are discussed in § 5.4.2.
metaphorical meaning for the verb. Qohelet is then advocating a non-physical ‘going’ to these ‘places.’

Such a non-physical journey is supported by the contents of v. 4. In it, Qohelet writes that the heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, while the heart of fools is in the house of joy. As was established previously, the מַחֲתוֹ, heart, serves as the hub of the emotions, volition, and thought. It is not just the body of the wise which is in the ‘house’ of mourning or the body of the foolish which is in the ‘house’ of joy, but their will, their drive, their emotion, or their thoughts. The dwelling of the מַחֲתוֹ is as much about intention as it is mental cogitation. So Qohelet advises the superiority of going physically to places in which one might expect to mourn, as well as avoiding places in which one engages in festivities, but he also advocates an in-dwelling of death, a sending of one’s mind or will toward death, and pursuing with all the force of one’s מַחֲתוֹ the consequences death has for the world and for oneself.

Death, it has been established, is the final destination of all people (7:2c), and it is due to this fact that it is better to go to the house of mourning (7:2a). It is so much better, in fact, that it is the act of a wise person to ‘go’ there (7:4a). This connection between wisdom and the house of mourning is explicit in 7:4a, but such an explicit connection is not present in 7:2a. However, the similarity between 7:2a-b and 7:4 suggests that going to a house of mourning rather than a house of feasting in 7:2a-b

7 Pages 131-133.
is as much the act of a wise person as one’s heart being in a house of mourning rather than a house of joy is the act or characteristic of a wise person in 7:4.

In summary, then, in 7:2a-c, 4 Qohelet describes the action of a wise person. Such a person will not only privilege mourning over feasting or other joyous occasions, the wise person will also ‘send their heart’ toward death. Qohelet offers the reason why a wise person will do this: death is the end of everyone (v. 2c). Further, he makes the curious statement in the final stich of this verse that ‘the living will lay it to heart’ (v. 2d). What this might mean is the subject of the next section.

6.2. Wisdom, death, and life (7:2d)

In 7:2c-d Qohelet writes,

As was seen above, the end of all people in v. 2c is literally the house of mourning (v. 2a) but also death. Thus when Qohelet writes in v. 2d that ‘the living will lay it to heart,’8 the ‘it’ in this English translation refers to this unequivocal fact that all people will die. But what does Qohelet mean by the statement that the living will ‘lay it’ to heart? This section will address v. 2d and ask, what does ‘laying to heart’ (לְלָבַּשׁ) entail, and who precisely is ‘the living’ (יָדִיעָה)? This passage will lead us to 7:12b, where Qohelet explicitly links wisdom and life. It will be argued

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8 NRSV.
that the death-based wisdom Qohelet advocates in 7:2a-b, 4 gives its possessor a certain type of life.

in 7:2d, literally ‘give to heart,’ likely denotes a realisation which results in life-affirming action, for two reasons: similarity to the classical phrase (for example, in Ex 9:21; 1 Sam 25:25; 2 Sam 18:3); and the use of this phrase elsewhere in Qohelet (1:13; 3:11; 7:3; 8:9, 16; 9:2).

It has been suggested that the construction might correspond to the classical (Ex 9:21; 1 Sam 25:25; 2 Sam 18:3), which can be translated ‘heed.’ In all three examples Gordis offers, ‘putting to heart’ is a matter of life or death. In Ex 9:21, those who did not ‘put to heart’, who did not ‘heed’ God’s warning about deadly hail, left their slaves and livestock in the open to perish when the hail came down on them. In 1 Sam 25:25, too, Abigail beseeches David please not to put to his heart (the actions of her boorish husband Nabal, thus averting bloodshed (1 Sam 25:33). In 2 Sam 18:3, David is asked to lead his troops from within the safety of town, for, without David among their number, if David’s soldiers should flee the battle, Absalom’s soldiers would not put to their heart (to pursue them. Thus in classical Hebrew ‘putting to the heart’ seems to denote action which, being taken, saves lives, or not being taken, results in loss of life.

9 Gordis, Koheleth, 268.
In the book of Qohelet, the term ‘give to the heart’ or variations on that term is found in several verses other than here in 7:3 (1:13; 8:9, 16; 9:1; 3:11), and these verses can be broken into two groups: those in which Qohelet writes that he gave his heart (using the DDO) (1:13; 8:9, 16), and those in which Qohelet writes about giving to/in his heart (using a preposition) (9:1; 3:11). While both groups pertain to knowledge or realisation, there seems to be a difference between these two groups, in that giving the heart (DDO) seems to denote pursuit of knowledge, whereas giving to the heart (preposition) seems to be used about thoughts on or knowledge of death.

In 1:13, Qohelet writes that he ‘gave his heart’ (נָתַן בְּלבָּנָפֶם), and in 8:9 he ‘gives his heart’ (יִטְנַו לְבָנָפֶם). In both of these verses the phrase seems to denote a pursuit of knowledge of what is done under the sun. In 8:16 Qohelet ‘gives his heart’ (נָתַן בְּלבָנָפֶם), and again in this verse the phrase describes the search for knowledge or wisdom. Only in 9:1 and 3:11 is the giving not ‘of’ the heart, but ‘to’ or ‘in’ the heart. In 9:1 Qohelet ‘gives to his heart’ (נָתַן לְבוֹלָנֶם), and in this context pertains to knowledge that every person, no matter how wise or righteous, has one fate (9:2; מַאֲכָל הָאָדָם). In 3:11 (יִטְנַו בְּלֵבָנָמֶה) such an act describes the knowledge of death. However, in 3:11 the giving to the heart is an act of divine revelation of knowledge, whereas here in 7:2d it is a human, not a divine, act.

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10 This phrase is the subject of § 3.1.2.
11 In 3:11 however it is God who does the giving, and the recipients are many. See § 3.1.2.
12 It has been argued that 9:1 shows “the expectation of a recompense for good deeds after death” Michel in Krüger, Qoheleth, 167. Krüger however argues against this (Krüger, Qoheleth, 167-169).
Thus in Qohelet when the heart is given it seems to denote the pursuit of knowledge. When Qohelet writes about giving to/in the heart, however, it seems that knowledge pertains to death (3:11; 9:1). This is certainly true of the ‘giving to the heart’ in 7:2d. In that verse there is a clear connection here between death and giving to the heart.

With regard to giving to the heart in 7:2d, therefore, if we can draw both from the ‘putting to the heart’ paradigm put forward by Gordis, as well as from the ‘giving to/in the heart’ subset in Qohelet, we might propose that the giving to the heart in 7:2d pertains to knowledge about death, and knowledge, moreover, which acting upon it will save life, and not acting upon it will lose life.

In light of this analysis of the phrase רֹאֵשׁ לֶבַע, with its attendant elements of life and death, it comes as no surprise that Qohelet writes in 7:2d (surrounded by thoughts about death; 7:2a-c, 4) that it is the living (תֹּחֲנוּן) who give to the heart. But, again, we must ask, who is ‘the living’ who give to the heart? Does this mean all living people? Though Qohelet might wish that all people were so wise as to set their hearts to death, the pragmatist in him would know that this is not so. The living who have their heart set on death cannot be fools, for the foolish will neither go to a place of mourning nor dwell on death nor recognise the wisdom of doing so (v. 4). The ‘living’ therefore cannot refer to all people, for not all people do ‘lay it to heart.’ It seems that the living for Qohelet can only be the wise people, described in 7:2a-b, 4, who go to, and send their hearts to, the house of mourning.
Such a connection between wisdom and life is supported by 7:12b, where Qohelet clearly links wisdom with life. This link between wisdom and life, explicit in 7:12b, can be used to prove conclusively that it is in fact the wise who are ‘the living’ in 7:2d. The type of living wisdom offers is also in question.

In 7:12b Qohelet writes ידֵי הָבָםָה תְהַיָה הָעַל ה. The accentuation in the MT separates הָבָםָה and דְעִית in v. 12b, thus, it is argued, one may not translate ‘the knowledge of wisdom.’ Seow understands v. 12b relatively, translating ‘knowledge is an advantage, and wisdom lets its possessor stay alive.’ Fox however claims הָבָםָה and דְעִית are synonymous, both meaning wisdom, and thus translates, ‘But the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom keeps its possessor alive.’ All that is sure in this line is that Qohelet links wisdom with life.

13 The type of living wisdom offers is also in question, and is the subject of § 6.3.
14 Crenshaw, Ecclesiastes, 138.
15 Fox, A Time to Tear Down, 256.
16 Fox, A Time to Tear Down, 249. This is also the case for NJPS.
17 If wisdom and wealth are equated in 7:12a, therefore, here in 7:12b wisdom wins out over wealth. Understanding the context of 7:12b is particularly difficult. In 7:11a wisdom is said to as good as an inheritance. 7:11a, הָבָםָה מִצְרַע מִלֵּא, has been read as a Tôb-Spruch, and it has also be read as pairing the possession of wisdom and wealth. Thus it has been read, ‘Wisdom is better than a inheritance (יִבְּרָה),’ and ‘Wisdom is better with an inheritance’ (Fox, A Time to Tear Down, 249). For Gordis (Koheleth, 273), wisdom is to be honoured, but it is “efficacious, only when it is allied with means,” but Brown, assuming that this is a Tôb-Spruch, considers the advantage of wisdom over wealth to be ironic, claiming that “Qohelet is not so much elevating wealth as demoting wisdom” (William P. Brown, Ecclesiastes [Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 2002], 78). 7:11a is not a Tôb-Spruch, nor does it suggest that wisdom and wealth should go together. We have seen elsewhere that the Tôb-Spruch formula is written מִצְרַע + A מַלֶּד + B (see § 5.1.1.). In 7:11a however the structure is מִצְרַע + A יִבְּרָה + B. The particle יִבְּרָה usually indicates the joining together of objects, or spatial positioning, or the direction of an action (van der Merwe, Naudé, and Kroeze, A Biblical Hebrew Reference Grammar, 293). 7:11a therefore does not strictly read ‘better A than B,’ but ‘better A with B.’ That is, wisdom is better with possession, property, or inheritance (יִבְּרָה). However, this reading makes little sense in light of the following passage (7:12a) which seems to explain why wisdom and wealth or inheritance can be equated, not why they are good together. Thus, while 7:11a is not a Tôb-Spruch, it seems wisdom and wealth in this passage are not said to be good together either. By some grammatical stretch it might be that יִבְּרָה serves the same function here.
The feminine verb הָגוֹרַת in 7:12b does not mean to grant immortality. In Ps 33:19; Deut 6:24; Ezek 3:18; 13:19 הָגוֹרַת means “to give protection in danger and allow a full lifespan.” It might be that Qohelet is exploiting the expectation that wisdom grants protection (לְצָרָה; 7:12a) and allows one to live to the full extent of one’s life expectancy. But it is clear from several passages in the book that wisdom neither saves one from death nor even extends one’s life (2:13-16; 7:15-20; 8:5-8; 9:11), and also Qohelet’s use of לְצָרָה suggests that it is not used of protection. Thus the verb הָגוֹרַת in 7:12b probably does not carry the same nuance of protection from danger and allowing a full lifespan that it can carry in other HB passages. But if the life wisdom gives is not protection, or immortality, or even, indeed, a full lifespan, what type of life is it? This is the subject of the rest of this chapter.

which נְבָא normally would. But it doesn’t seem necessary to create a Töb-Spruch in 7:11a, for while wisdom and wealth are equated in 7:11 and 7:12a, wisdom’s advantage over wealth is made clear in 7:12b. Some commentators take the הָגוֹרַת in 7:11a to mean ‘as’ (Zimmerli, Kroeber, and Barucq cited in Whitley, *Koheleth*, 64), thus reading ‘wisdom is as good as an inheritance.’ Michel allows for two possibilities, translating both ‘Gut ist Weisheit zusammen mit Erbbesitz’ and ‘ebenso wie Erbbesitz’ (Michel, *Qohelet*, 150). In light of 7:12a reading ‘wisdom is as good as an inheritance’ seems to make the most sense. While 7:12a has been rendered ‘wisdom is as good as an inheritance’ (KJV) a more likely translation might compare a particular quality or outcome of wisdom (that is, הָגוֹרַת) with that quality or outcome of inheritance or wealth (לְצָרָה). The identical quality of both wealth and wisdom is הַנְבָא, shadow. Many commentators however render הִגְרוֹת as protection, defence, or the like. Both Crenshaw (*Ecclesiastes*, 138) and the NAB, for instance, translate ‘protection’; Fox notes that הַנְבָא literally means ‘shadow,’ but claims it is a metaphor for protection (Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 256); KJV translates ‘defence.’ While it is true that shadow, הִגְרוֹת, can mean shade or protection, Qohelet does not use הִגְרוֹת in this way. In 6:12, for instance, הִגְרוֹת is used in conjunction with הַנְבָא to describe the fleeting nature of the days of a person’s life. In line with Qohelet’s use of this word, Seow translates 7:12a, ‘Wisdom is a shadow and money is a shadow’ (Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 249), stating that shadow here, as in 6:12, signifies impermanence. Qohelet therefore is not emphasising the protective power of wisdom or money but their unreliability and their inability to provide permanent protection (Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 250).

18 Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 256
19 While it is true that shadow, הִגְרוֹת, can mean shade or protection, Qohelet does not use הִגְרוֹת in this way. In 6:12, for instance, הִגְרוֹת is used in conjunction with הַנְבָא to describe the fleeting nature of the days of a person’s life.
20 Num 14:9; Isa 30:2, 3; Jer 48:45 (Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 256).
In summary so far, then, wisdom for Qohelet necessitates thinking on death. The wise person, we have seen, dwells on and in death. Qohelet writes that ‘the living’ will ‘give to the heart’ the fact that death is the end of all people, which phrase entails knowledge resulting in action which should be taken to ensure life. ‘The living’ in Qohelet then seem to be those who dwell on death, and this dwelling on death is shown in 7:2a-b, 4 to be the act of a wise person. Thus the living in Qohelet are the wise. This is supported by 7:12b, which explicitly connects wisdom and life with the claim that wisdom gives life to its possessor. What that life entails, however, is not yet clear.

6.3. Characteristic of the wise life

It has been argued above that wisdom for Qohelet entails looking at death, and that people who do this can be called ‘the living’ in that they possess a wisdom which gives them life. What this life entails however is not yet clear. In this section we will explore the characteristics of the wise life, that is, particular emotions or experiences which arise from contemplating death. It will be seen that Qohelet’s death-based wisdom leads to both pain (1:17-18) and pleasure (7:3). Beyond this, a life lived in Qohelet’s death-based wisdom gives rise to קרבן.
6.3.1. Pain

In order to explore this aspect of the wise life it is necessary to step outside of 7:1-4 for a moment, and look to 1:17-18, which is linked to 7:1-4 by way of its wisdom theme. In 1:17-18 Qohelet writes of the sorrow he experiences as arising from his pursuit of knowledge and wisdom.

There are two pairs of ‘things’ Qohelet sets his mind to know in v. 17: wisdom and knowledge; and חלול עז דוד and folly.22 He must conclude that this ‘setting the mind to know’ is והניין רוח, a phrase synonymous with והניין רוח,23 and he offers a reason why this ‘setting the mind’ is והניין רוח in 1:18. In this verse Qohelet writes that in great wisdom is great יסח, and increasing (בעס, participle) knowledge is increasing ממאוב.

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21 Translated ‘madness’ (JPS; NRSV; Crenshaw, Ecclesiastes, 75); ‘inanity’ (Fox, A Time to Tear Down, 173); ‘boastful’ (Whitley, Koheleth, 16).

22 Translators of this line either take the second דוד as a noun (for example, Longman) or as an infinitive construct “with the prefixed preposition on the first serving double duty” (for example, NRSV) (Longman, Ecclesiastes, 84). My own reading is in line with Longman, but in either case Qohelet would still be speaking of the search for wisdom in v. 17 as והניין רוח, and the possession of great wisdom in v. 18 as בעס.

23 It is the setting of the mind which is והניין רוח, and not the things themselves, for the demonstrative pronoun as well as the pronoun are both singular (הוא חלול), not plural as would be expected if referring to more than one object.
The nouns בָּלָהוּ and מָלָאוּ inform each other in this verse.²⁴, pain, can denote either mental (Jer 45:3; 51:8; Pss 38:18; 69:27) or physical (Ex 3:7) pain, and is used of the suffering servant in Isa 53:3, 4.²⁵ Here in Qoh 1:18 where it is grouped with such non-physical phenomena as knowledge, madness, and folly, a physical connotation does not seem likely, and should be taken as ‘mental’ pain.

In this verse is paired with מָלָאוּ, which can mean vexation, irritation, sorrow, or grief. It is used in Prov 21:19, ‘It is better to live in the desert than with a judgmental (ָּלָדְנָה) and מָלָאוּ wife.’ Clearly in this context מָלָאוּ denotes more vexation and irritability than sorrow or grief. But in 1 Sam 1:6, מָלָאוּ is used of Hannah’s feelings in the face of Peninnah’s provoking her over her barrenness. Though the NRSV says that Hannah was ‘irritated’ by this provocation, it is more likely that Peninnah’s provocation of Hannah over her childlessness would cause Hannah sorrow, and thus the NJPS translation ‘miserable’ is more appropriate. In 1 Sam 1:16 Hannah describes her experience as מָלָאוּ, pairing that word with שָׁאִיך, anxiety or trouble.²⁶ Though childlessness in a society which so prized fecundity might cause irritation or vexation, מָלָאוּ in 1 Samuel 1 primarily signifies emotional distress like sorrow or grief.

²⁴ The combination is found also in 2:23.
²⁵ BDB, 456.
²⁶ So BDB, 967.
It is these latter connotations of sorrow or grief which are more likely meant in Qoh 1:18, due not only to the possibility that כカラー may by itself denote sorrow or grief, but also because this word is paralleled with מלחם. We may therefore understand v. 18 to read, ‘for in much wisdom is much sorrow, and increasing knowledge is increasing pain.’ A life lived in Qohelet’s death-based wisdom then is a life of מ疲れ and מלחם.

6.3.2. Pleasure

While it is perhaps not surprising that contemplating death as a part of the wise life might lead to pain, what is surprising is that Qohelet seems to suggest that this contemplation of death by the wise person will also be pleasurable for the wise person.

The death-based nature of wisdom is then not all bad news for the wise person, as in the Tôb-Spruch of 7:3 Qohelet’s dwelling on death seems to bring him a certain amount of happiness. He writes in this verse,

"במר תוכ ממה המקרר ממל וקבר bored ממל י QName lBQlB 7:3a is generally understood as, ‘Sorrow is better than mirth,’ though there are mild variations on this theme. The NRSV, for instance, writes, ‘Sorrow is better than

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laughter’; Seow, ‘Vexation is better than merriment’28; R.B.Y. Scott, ‘‘Better is grief than laughter’’29; Martin Shields, ‘Irritation is better than laughter’30; Fox, ‘Irritation is better than merriment’31; Michel, ‘Besser ist Kummer als Lachen’32; Longman, ‘Anger is better than laughter’33; and the NJPS, ‘Vexation is better than revelry.’

The word שָׁבָל, we have seen, can mean vexation, irritation, sorrow, or grief. Its context within the funereal 7:1-4, as well as its placement in opposition to שָׁאֵל, laughter, suggests it would be better rendered sorrow or grief.34 Seeking knowledge and wisdom is Xωρ Nωμηρ for sorrow (כָּלֶנֶנֶנֶנ) and pain (מַגְּאשֵׁמ) increase proportionally with wisdom and knowledge (1:17-18). However, Qohelet does not in 1:17-18 suggest that one should abandon the search for wisdom and knowledge due to the search being Xωρ Nωμηρ, and he even, in 7:3, notes the superiority of כָּלֶנֶנֶנֶנ, one of the products of that search, over laughter. One might infer here the belief that it is better to know than not to know.35 But Qohelet also explicitly offers a reason, in 7:3, why כָּלֶנֶנֶנ is better than laughter: כָּלֶנֶנ יִשְׁמַע לְבָנָה.

28 Seow, Ecclesiastes, 229.
29 Scott, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, 234.
30 Shields, The End of Wisdom, 175.
31 Fox, A Time to Tear Down, 249; Qohelet and His Contradictions, 225.
32 Michel, Qohelet, 148.
33 Longman, Ecclesiastes, 180.
34 Some commentators, like Ogden, seek to differentiate between types of enjoyment. Ogden suggests that the laughter is “a general term for empty hilarity” (cf. Prov 14:13) distinct from the נוֹמֶה, the “profound enjoyment,” which Qohelet advocates throughout (Ogden, Qohelet, 103).
35 Here one might think of the Tôb-Spruch of 9:4, where knowledge of mortality gives the living the advantage over the dead.
This second clause is given divergent meanings, based on different meanings given to two phrases: יומשכ לאל and ברהע פנים. Broadly speaking, there are two groups of interpretation – the improvement of the mind/heart brought about by a ‘sad face,’ and the good feeling or happiness of the heart through a sad face. The NRSV and Seow translate similarly, ‘for by sadness of countenance the heart is made glad,’ and ‘for in the sadness of countenance the heart will be glad’; Martin Shields translates ‘because a scowl is good for the heart’; Fox, ‘for the heart is improved by a scowl’; R.B.Y. Scott, ‘—it clouds the face but improves the mind; Murphy, ‘for despite a sad face the heart can be joyful’; Crenshaw, ‘For in a sad face the heart is made well’; Michel, ‘denn bei trauriger Miene ist das Herz (Die Einsicht) gut!’; and Longman, ‘for in a troubled face the heart is made well.’

The phrase ברהע פנים in 7:3 is usually understood to mean a sad, not an evil, face, though there are some commentators (see above) who would prefer the rendering ‘scowl.’ There are two biblical accounts which support reading ברהע פנים as a sad or troubled countenance (Gen 40:7; Neh 2:1-3). In Gen 40:7, Joseph asks the Pharaoh’s eunuchs ((rb יָשָׁר), ‘On what account their/your sad faces (רבּוּעַ פָּנִים) today?’ These eunuchs, prisoners of Pharaoh like Joseph, have dreams they

36 Seow, Ecclesiastes, 229.
37 Shields, The End of Wisdom, 175.
38 Fox, A Time to Tear Down, 249; Qohelet and His Contradictions, 225.
39 Scott, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, 234.
40 Murphy, Ecclesiastes, 60.
41 Crenshaw, Ecclesiastes, 132.
42 Michel, Qohelet, 148.
43 Longman, Ecclesiastes, 180.
need interpreted but no one to interpret them (Gen 40:8).⁴⁴ It might be said that the dreams the eunuchs wanted interpreted lay heavy upon them, and thus their expression was more likely to be one of sadness or worry than of anger (or evil). They would be preoccupied and ‘downcast’ (so NJPS). In Neh 2:1-3 the phrase is used three times. In 2:1 Nehemiah describes how he has not before been רֵיחַ (הַמֵּרָה) רֵיחַ רָע (רָע כֵּן מְרֹּה) before the king. In 2:2 the king asks Nehemiah on what account is his face רֵיחַ כְּּכֶנֶּה (רָע כֵּן מְרֹּה). The king, seeing that Nehemiah is not ill (רָאֲשׁוֹנָם), concludes that it must be ‘bad thoughts’ (NJPS; רָע כְּּכֶנֶּה). In Neh 2:3 Nehemiah explains the cause for his face of רֵיחַ כְּּכֶנֶּה, saying מָרַדְתָה לְאַרְגֹּמָמָה מִרְחָבָה, for the city of the graves of his fathers is slain (רָע כְּּכֶנֶּה) and her gates eaten by fire. Nehemiah’s thoughts (רָע כְּּכֶנֶּה), lying with the desecration of his home, have given him his face of רֵיחַ כְּּכֶנֶּה.

From the king’s statement in Neh 2:2 it is clear that a רֵיחַ כְּּכֶנֶּה can stem from illness as well as from ‘bad thoughts.’ But the רֵיחַ כְּּכֶנֶּה in Qoh 7:3 does not stem from illness. Its context within 7:1-4, and Qohelet’s talk of ‘going’ to the house of mourning and of the heart of the wise being in the house of mourning, makes it clear that the רֵיחַ כְּּכֶנֶּה is associated with רָע כְּּכֶנֶּה, ‘bad thoughts’ about one’s own death, just like Nehemiah’s רֵיחַ (לְאַרְגֹּמָמָה מִרְחָבָה) also suggests that this phrase denotes sadness rather than vexation or frustration. Further, Qohelet tends to

use לָעֵין for emotional misery more than for a moral designation.⁴⁵ A לָעֵין therefore seems to denote a sort of deep brooding, a troubled, even anguished, aspect. And in Qoh 7:3 it is an aspect which arises from Qohelet’s practice of dwelling upon death.

The other important phrase in this line, כְּנֵסָה לְבָב, is usually interpreted in one of two senses: either in the sense of making the heart glad, or in the sense of improving the heart. There are two issues to explore with regard to this phrase, the first being what the phrase means, and the second being its relationship to the sad face.

It seems, by way of comparison to its use elsewhere in the HB, that the phrase כְּנֵסָה לְבָב in 7:3 denotes a lift in mood. Elsewhere in the HB (Ruth 3:7; Judg 18:20; 19:6, 9; 1 Kgs 21:7) the phrase כְּנֵסָה לְבָב often describes the satisfaction one feels after a good meal or after imbibing alcohol. In Ruth 3:7 it describes Boaz’s mood after he eats and drinks but before Ruth uncovers his feet. In Judg 18:20 it is used of the feelings of the priest of the house of Micah who, rather than being slaughtered by six hundred men ready for war, is asked instead to accompany them (and the holy objects they have pilfered from that house) and to become their ‘father and priest’

⁴⁵ כְּנֵסָה and רֶעֶשׁ occur 34 times in Qohelet (for a comprehensive list see Jarick, A Comprehensive Bilingual Concordance of the Hebrew and Greek Texts of Ecclesiastes, 268-269). Many of these uses seem to connote misery rather than moral evil. The ‘days of רֶעֶשׁ’ in 12:1 are also more likely miserable days than evil days. Where רֶעֶשׁ is used with מַחֲלָק, sickness, it seems to suggest a type of misery (5:12, 15), so too in 10:13 when it is used in relation to מַחֲלָק, madness. When it is paired with הָעַל מַחֲלָק a reading of misery seems to be more appropriate (2:21; 4:8; 6:2). There are however some כְּנֵסָה/רֶעֶשׁ verses which do seem to describe ‘bad’ actions (8:3, 5, 9, 12).
(Judg 18:19). In the infamous story of the Levite’s concubine it describes the enjoyment of staying overnight at a place where one has indulged in food and drink (Judg 19:6, 9), while in 1 Kgs 21:7 Jezebel urges Ahab to rise, eat bread, and gladden his heart (Koh Ol El Gom Rishab Leb), in response to Ahab’s despondent attitude (Rahm Sorah) described in 21:5. One might see a pattern in these examples. In each case the person to whom the phrase דמשג לב or its equivalent is applied experiences – or is told to try to experience – a lift in their spirit or mood. Given these phrasal parallels it is more likely that דמשג ל in Qoh 7:3 describes an improved mood than it does an improved mind.

The sad face is linked causally to the improved mood. The verb מב, be good, well, glad or pleasing,⁴⁶ could be a Hiphil imperfect⁴⁷ or a Qal imperfect.⁴⁸ If the verb is a Hiphil then the causative relationship between the sad face and the דמשג ל is inherent in the verb. But a causal connection between a sad face and דמשג ל might be inferred even if the verb is not Hiphil but is rather a Qal. Even if we translate this verb in the Qal as ‘it gladdens,’⁴⁹ a cause for the gladdening is still required. Thus the verb itself infers a cause, that which gladdens, which we may deduce to be the subject of the verb, דמשג. So whether the verb be a Hiphil or a

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⁴⁶ BDB, 405.
⁴⁷ So Ogden, Qoheleth, 103.
⁴⁸ BDB, 405; Davidson, Analytical Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon, cccxii.
⁴⁹ An imperfect verb without a vav conversive can present ongoing, incomplete action (van der Merwe, Naudé, and Kroeze, A Biblical Hebrew Reference Grammar, 70).
Qal, the connection between the verb and the subject is the same. It is a causal connection, the sad face necessary to achieve the יִשְׂפֶּר לְבָן.

Our reconstruction of 7:3 is now in two pieces: ‘Sorrow is better than laughter’ and ‘In a sad face the heart is made glad.’ There is however one last factor to take into consideration with regard to 7:3, the meaning of the particle יִק which links 7:3a to 7:3b. It is possible to read the particle as adversative (‘but’), causative (‘for’ or ‘because’), or temporal (‘when’). Even if, however, the connection were adversative or temporal, the meaning of the two parts, 7:3a and 7:3b, would not be materially effected, for the advantage of sorrow over laughter would not be undermined and, moreover, a sad face would still lift the spirits.

For example, even if it were possible to read the יִק as adversative, the sentence would not have any different a meaning than if it were not an adversative יִק. Compare the adversative, ‘Sorrow is better than laughter but a sad face gladdens the heart’ with the causal, ‘Sorrow is better than laughter because a sad face gladdens the heart.’ In the causal reading, clearly it is the resulting glad heart which makes sorrow better than laughter. In the adversative reading, it is still only possible to understand the relation of v. 3a and v. 3b qualitatively. The sad face still equates with sorrow, and so sorrow is still better than laughter due to its resulting glad heart.

Even if we were to take the יִק as temporal the advantage of sorrow over laughter would again be qualified but not undermined. ‘Sorrow is better than laughter when
a sad face gladdens the heart’ clearly shows that the ability – if that is the correct word – to ‘get’ a glad heart from a sad face is required to render sorrow better than laughter. In each of these renderings, then, the advantage of sorrow over laughter is qualified but not undermined, and a clear connection is made between sorrow, a sad face, and a happy heart. The most likely meaning of יִҚ is however a causal one, and 7:3 can therefore be translated, ‘Sorrow is better than laughter, for in a sad face the heart is made glad,’ where the heart’s being made glad refers to a lifting of spirits.

There is a play on expected notions of what will or will not make one happy in this verse. The glad heart of v. 3b parallels the laughter of v. 3a, but their interweaving with both sorrow and a sad face inverts what is usually thought to make one happy. It is not laughter, in fact, which gladdens, but sorrow, and it is not a smile which marks that gladness, but a sad face.

In summary, Qohelet’s acts of focusing upon death results in both pleasure and pain. The wise person experiences pain in that increased knowledge (specifically, increased knowledge about mortality and the effects of that mortality on life) increases sorrow, but it seems also that a sad face can lift the spirits. Pleasure and pain are not the only characteristics of the wise life, however. In many cases, discussed below, יִҚ can be viewed as symptomatic of Qohelet’s death-based wisdom.
6.3.3. חבל

In addition to pleasure and pain, the wise life is a life full of חבל. Though the following will explore the various interpretations of חבל, the primary aim is not to ask what חבל is, but why חבל is.\textsuperscript{50} What is it that makes חבל חבל? It will be argued that Qohelet often uses this word as a symbol of the implications of the death which awaits and which death he, as a wise person must, bring into his life by way of focusing upon it (7:2a-b, 4). חבל and wisdom are therefore linked in Qohelet through contemplation of death. In order to establish this relation between חבל and death, a short analysis of חבל in the HB will now be presented, followed by an analysis of חבל in Qohelet, with particular regard given to those passages which explore the relation between חבל and death. The study will then address the motif of turning in 2:11 and throughout the book, with the case being made that this turning denotes an unpleasant realisation, possibly realisation of mortality. Finally, I will suggest that if one is able to connect the turning motif and the metaphor of going in 7:2a-b, then one can posit חבל as the outcome of the actions of the wise described in 7:1-4.

occurs 73 times in the HB, up to 39 in Qohelet alone,\textsuperscript{51} and has a literal meaning of ‘vapour’ or ‘breath.’\textsuperscript{52} A short survey of its use in the HB other than Qohelet will show that it often refers to things which are ephemeral or insubstantial.

Both Psalms and Wisdom as well as other HB texts use \textit{נֶפֶשׁ} to connote something unreliable. It is used of idols,\textsuperscript{53} for instance, which are also described as empty and ineffective\textsuperscript{54} as well as delusive.\textsuperscript{55} It also describes the unreliability of foreign military aid.\textsuperscript{56} In Psalms and in Wisdom literature, it can also refer to humans and the human lifespan,\textsuperscript{57} human words,\textsuperscript{58} human thoughts,\textsuperscript{59} physical beauty,\textsuperscript{60} and that which is of no lasting consequence, such as wealth, which in Prov 21:6 is a ‘fleeting vapour’ (דַּבֵּל כְּפָר יַעֲצָנוּי מִשָּׁמְיוֹן; Zech 10:2), ‘a shadow’ (צלָל; Ps 39:7), and ‘a passing shadow’ (צלָל מַדְרָך; Ps 144:4).\textsuperscript{61}

\textsuperscript{51} Seow also says it occurs 38 or 39 times (Seow, \textit{Ecclesiastes}, 112; C.L. Seow, “Beyond Mortal Grasp,” 1). Some commentators delete what they consider to be a repeated occurrence in 9:9, and others would emend \textit{לֵךְ} to \textit{נֶפֶשׁ} in 9:2 (Miller, \textit{Symbol and Rhetoric in Ecclesiastes}, 1). Whybray cleverly refrains from giving a specific number, writing instead that “it occurs more than 30 times” (Whybray, \textit{The Good Life in the Old Testament}, 186).

\textsuperscript{52} Seow, \textit{Ecclesiastes}, 112.

\textsuperscript{53} Deut 32:21; 1Kgs 16:13, 26; 2 Kgs 17:15; Jer 2:5; 8:19; 10:15; 14:22; 51:18; Zech 10:2; Jon 2:9; Ps 31:7.

\textsuperscript{54} Isa 30:7; 49:4; Job 9:29; 35:16; Jer 16:19; Ps 94:11.

\textsuperscript{55} Jer 10:15; 16:19; 51:18; Zech 10:2; Ps 62:10.

\textsuperscript{56} Isa 30:7; Lam 4:17.

\textsuperscript{57} Pss 39:5-12; 62:11; 78:33; Job 7:16.

\textsuperscript{58} Job 21:34.

\textsuperscript{59} Ps 94:11. Seow (“Beyond Mortal Grasp,” 4) states that this is “not because they are of no use whatsoever,” but because they are, in comparison to divine “intention, unreliable as vapor, perhaps even illusory.”

\textsuperscript{60} Prov 31:30.

6.3.3.1. Theories regarding the meaning of הלבלבל in Qohelet

Qohelet’s use of הלבלבל reflects its use elsewhere in the HB, but in Qohelet הלבלבל is curiously multifaceted and a stumbling block for commentators.

Perhaps the most well known rendering of הלבלבל in Qohelet is ‘vanity’, after vanitas, the Old Latin gloss of the LXX ματαιοτητας. Many translations are related to this understanding of הלבלבל as ‘vanity’ (NRSV, NAB, NJB), rendering הלבלבל ‘futility’ (NJPS, REB), ‘emptiness’ (NEB), and meaninglessness (NIV). Some scholars translate הלבלבל in Qohelet along the lines of its literal meaning of vapour or breath. D. B. Miller, for instance, translates ‘vapour’ and maintains it is used to symbolise things which have the qualities of vapour, while D.C. Fredericks argues that הלבלבל means ‘breath’ and signifies transience.

The complexity and slipperiness of הלבלבל lends itself to a system of understanding which allows for multiple meanings. Several scholars recognise this. Kurt Galling recognised that to determine the Akzent of הלבלבל one must take into account certain

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65 D.C. Fredericks, Coping with Transience: Ecclesiastes on Brevity in Life (The Biblical Seminar 18; Sheffield: JSOT, 1993). Given the literal meaning of הלבלבל, it is not surprising that it is often paired with פיח, pursuit or desire of wind or breath, in seven places (1:14; 2:11, 17, 26: 4:4, 6; 6:9), and the synonymous ויח, a further three times (1:17; 2:22; 4:16).
contextual indicators.\textsuperscript{66} Miller considers that Qohelet uses לָעְבַּר as a symbol, “an image that holds together a set of meanings that can neither be exhausted nor adequately expressed by any single meaning.”\textsuperscript{67} Miller establishes three ways Qohelet utilises לָעְבַּר: as a referent of insubstantiality, describing “things with little substance,”\textsuperscript{68} to “assess things which are transient and pass along quickly,”\textsuperscript{69} and “as an evaluative term for things in his experience which he finds to be fundamentally foul.”\textsuperscript{70} However, even if Qohelet does employ לָעְבַּר in this way, it is necessary, in order to maintain coherence between לָעְבַּר statements in which the word seems not to be used in the same way, that לָעְבַּר have at its heart some ‘basic’ meaning. To this end Seow writes that, even when לָעְבַּר is used as a simile or metaphor in the wider HB, “its natural referent seems to be still in view,”\textsuperscript{71} and in Qohelet too “evokes the natural sense of the term; the text refers to something that, like breath or shadow, is fleeting.”\textsuperscript{72} Fox, too, thinks לָעְבַּר requires one fundamental quality.\textsuperscript{73}

There is no doubt that לָעְבַּר plays a major part in Qohelet’s thought. Its place at the beginning and the end of the book (1:2 and 12:8) and its uses throughout suggest

\textsuperscript{66} Kurt Galling in Miller, Symbol and Rhetoric in Ecclesiastes, 3.
\textsuperscript{67} Miller, “Qohelet’s Symbolic Use of לָעְבַּר,” 444.
\textsuperscript{68} Miller, Symbol and Rhetoric in Ecclesiastes, 92-95.
\textsuperscript{69} Miller, Symbol and Rhetoric in Ecclesiastes, 95. Italics his.
\textsuperscript{70} Miller, Symbol and Rhetoric in Ecclesiastes, 95.
\textsuperscript{71} Seow, “Beyond Mortal Grasp,” 4.
\textsuperscript{72} Seow, “Beyond Mortal Grasp,” 5.
\textsuperscript{73} He proposes that this quality is absurdity (Fox, A Time to Tear Down, 35). Fox, however, thinks this “single dominant quality” inheres in the world. My own analysis of the advent of לָעְבַּר runs counter to this notion.
the importance of the concept to Qohelet’s message. How it relates to Qohelet’s ‘message’ however is a matter of debate.

According to Diethelm Michel, the book of Qohelet evidences a crisis in wisdom, and with the help of the word הובא Qohelet negates the wisdom thesis that humans could recognise the “legalities” which God had built into the world and that they could attain benefit (כדרות) through that recognition.74 In Michel’s theory Qohelet uses הובא of claims which are alien to traditional wisdom.75 Lohfink however believes that while Qohelet does represent the borders of human realisation, he doesn’t use הובא to mark those borders.76 Lohfink notes that הובא does not have an equal affinity with all of Qohelet’s topics.77 Qohelet, Lohfink argues, uses הובא of situations, events, actions, and things: of the objective, not of the subjective, world.78 He suggests that it is an anthropological term, limited to human acts ‘under the sun.’79 As such, he claims, it is never used of either God or the Totenwelt.80

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75 Diethelm Michel, Untersuchungen zur Eigenart des Buches Qohelet (Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1989), 51.
76 Lohfink, “ Ist Kohelets הובא-Aussage erkenntnistheoretisch gemeint?” 44.
77 Lohfink, “ Ist Kohelets הובא-Aussage erkenntnistheoretisch gemeint?” 41.
79 Lohfink, “ Ist Kohelets הובא-Aussage erkenntnistheoretisch gemeint?” 42.
80 Lohfink, “ Ist Kohelets הובא-Aussage erkenntnistheoretisch gemeint?” 41.
Studies of הובֵל seem to be endlessly complex, as the above survey hints at. Here, however, the meaning of the word or the symbol הובֵל is not the object of the discussion. Rather, the aim of the discussion below is to explore the link between death and הובֵל.

6.3.3.2. Passages linking הובֵל and death

While it is true that death itself is never said to be הובֵל, some of Qohelet’s הובֵל statements are obviously related to his thoughts about death (2:14-15, 17, 19, 21, 26; 6:2; 9:9; 6:12; and more generally 1:2; 12:8; 1:14; 6:4; 11:8, 10\(^81\)). It is certain facts about Qohelet’s concept of death, and in particular the human implications of that concept of death, which are הובֵל. Death therefore plays a large part in the advent of הובֵל in these passages.

In 2:14-15, for instance, Qohelet describes as הובֵל the identical מָרֵע of both the wise person and the fool. מָרֵע, fate, refers in Qohelet only to death.\(^82\) It is not strictly dying which is הובֵל, but specifically that there should be no difference

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81 In these ‘general’ passages Qohelet describes the world and all that happens in it as הובֵל. While in these passages Qohelet does not explicitly refer to death, it is not difficult to see death in his assessment of the world. This will be made clear below.
between the death of the wise person and the death of the fool.83 With regard to 2:14-15, then, Lohfink is technically correct in that לברג does not describe the Totenwelt itself. However, death is the basis of the לברג in this passage, particularly that there is no difference between the death of the wise person and the fool.

This same fate for all is also the reason for לברג in 2:17. In 2:17 ‘what is done under the sun’ causes Qohelet to hate life, and ‘what is done’ is described qualitatively as לברג and ‘chasing wind.’ It does seem that 2:17 can be linked with 2:15-16, where Qohelet describes the one death for both the wise and the foolish, and that both will be forgotten when they are dead. Further, 2:17 can also be linked with the following verse, in which Qohelet writes that he hated all his toil for it must go to another (2:18).84 Thus the hatred of life, and the declamation that all is לברג, is hung between two facts: everybody dies the same and won’t be remembered after death, and all the product of one’s toil goes to another. Death is clearly present in the first fact, but its place in the second can be found in a suppressed premise.

Two premises are present: 1) I toil and gather possessions; and 2) a stranger benefits from them. The suppressed premise in 2:18 (and therefore resulting in the

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83 Qohelet explains just why it is that the identical deaths are לברג in the following verse: neither will be remembered.
84 לברג here (and in vv. 19, 20) represents the material accumulations of toil (so Gordis, Koheleth, 223; Seow, Ecclesiastes, 156).
outcome of_lbh in 2:19) falls between 1) and 2). Qohelet acknowledges elsewhere that one can lose one’s wealth in a bad business venture (_לונ_ נ_כ; 5:13), but that is not the way that the products of toil are transferred in the passage in question. The suppressed premise in this passage seems to be, I will die. Held within this suppressed premise are various ideas about death which Qohelet elsewhere expresses, in particular that there are no possessions in death (5:14-15). The advent of_lbh in 2:19, then, is linked with Qohelet’s death concept.

This reading is supported by two points: Qohelet’s temporal language in 2:18, and his use of the term qlx in 2:21.

Qohelet writes in 2:18 that he must leave his wealth (_לונ_ נ_כ) to one who ‘happens’ after him (_ש_ב). This phrase, countered as it is by Qohelet’s toiling ‘under the sun,’ suggests that the ‘after’ denotes something other than ‘under the sun,’ and thus death.\(^{85}\) But it is not just that one must lose all one’s accumulations from toil, but that one must lose them into the power (_של_ מ; 2:19), that Qohelet calls_lbh. It is the negation of one’s life work at death, as well as the arbitrary nature of the dissemination of that work after death, which is_lbh.

\(^{85}\) The spatio-temporal designation _ש_ב also refers to death in 2:12.
The understanding that death is present in the advent of הבל in 2:19 is further supported by 2:21. In this verse again another person will receive one’s toil. The suppressed premise in this verse, as in 2:18-19, is that one must die. But here in 2:21 there is further evidence that it is death which results in this transferral of the products of toil, and not lack of savvy in business. Qohelet writes in this verse that the person who toils must give their חלק, portion, to the one who hasn’t toiled for it. It is this word, חלק, which suggests that it is death behind the transferral. As seen in Chapter Four, it is often held that Qohelet uses חלק figuratively for “the space allotted for human existence.” It was seen in that chapter that one’s portion includes everything by which the human life is characterised. For another to be given one’s portion, then, suggests that they will possess not just one’s material belongings, but also one’s place in the world. For such a thing to happen, the original occupant of that space would have to vacate it. Thus the use of חלק here is suggestive of death.

Though 2:26 does not mention toil, its context suggests the phrase ניקי ולאסוחך should be taken as a euphemism for toil. ניקי, occupation or task, is connected to two verbs for gathering, מסכן, gather, store, collect, and מסכן, gather, collect. The task to ‘gather and amass’ results in הבל, for the amassed fortune (לאמה למקבץ לאסחך) will be given to the one who pleases God (לאמה למקבץ לאסחך)

86 Galling cited in Seow, Ecclesiastes, 151.
87 Only in Qohelet (2:26; 3:10; 5:2; 8:16 2:23; 1:13; 4:8; 5:13).
Once again, the suppressed premise that one must die (and the inability to retain possessions in death) is central to the advent of הָדַל.\textsuperscript{88}

Again in 6:2 Qohelet describes as הָדַל the state of God giving a person riches, property and wealth, but not the ability to enjoy it (literally, ‘eat’ it; מַאֲכֹל). Instead, a stranger (ץָרִים) will enjoy (מַאֲכֹל) it. Death is implicit in this verse, for the person who cannot enjoy must first die before the צָרִים can partake in their possessions.

In all of the הָדַל passages in 2:18-26, then, as well as in 6:2, מַעֲמָל or its equivalent is הָדַל in part because the possessions amassed in toil will go to another when one dies. Qohelet’s concept of death as consisting in the loss of all things, including possessions, is central to the מַעֲמָל of מַעֲמָל. One might see in Qohelet’s claims about the מַעֲמָל of toil the ‘grave evil’ he speaks of in 5:14-15, that one departs as one came: naked.

\textsuperscript{88} There are two other toil/ הָדַל verses in which death is implicit, though not as strongly as the examples given above (4:4-7, 4). In 4:7-8 again toil and death are linked. Qohelet sees as הָדַל under the sun the person with no ‘companion’ (קַנּוֹם) or immediate relatives (יִשְׂרָאֵלן) but no end to all their toil. This passage suggests that toil, under certain circumstances, can be an acceptable activity. If one has a companion or family who benefit from one’s toil, for instance, toil might not be as הָדַל as it is if one lacks a companion or family. It is when one toils without ceasing, when there is no one to benefit from one’s toil, and one cannot enjoy the fruits of one’s labour, that toil becomes more הָדַל. But, even if one does have a companion or a family, toil must retain some of its הָדַל, for the one who toils will die, and the accumulations of the toil will go to another who has not toiled for it and who might be a fool. Toil then can never be without הָדַל, for one must die. In 4:4 it is הָדַל that all toil and all skilled deeds come from one person’s envy jealousy of another. It is easy enough to read death in this verse. That all skill and toil comes from envy is הָדַל because there is no benefit in that toil or skilled labour. The lack of benefit arises in part due to particular characteristics of Qohelet’s death concept. Toil is הָדַל for the reasons given above: there is no taking it with you, and someone else will benefit from it.
also refers to life which is considered short, or fleeting. In 9:9, Qohelet exhorts his reader to ‘see life with the woman you love all the days of your life that have been granted you under the sun – all your days.’ “Here, the expressions no doubt refer to the limitation of the human life span.” The same is true of 6:12, in which Qohelet notes the impossibility of knowing what is good to do ‘in the few days of one’s life’ which ‘passes like a shadow.’ The phrase ‘life’ in 6:12 then clearly refers to the brevity of life, as ‘days’ does in 9:9. So, despite the subject matter pertaining to the epistemological issue of knowing what will happen in life (that is, under the sun), one might still see in this passage the notion of death rendering life ‘fleeting.’ Life in 6:12 and 9:9 is then because it is delimited by death.

Qohelet paints a picture of the world and all that happens in it as in several places, and in such passages it is not difficult to see death in this assessment. In 1:2 and 12:8, the ‘brackets’ of the book proper, Qohelet writes that . In 1:14 also, Qohelet describes how he sees all that happens under the sun, and it is

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90 In this verse also are found the temporal designators and . Here the ‘after him’ does not denote after his death, but instead what will happen to him in life, hence the designation . It has been taken to refer to death. Gordis (172) translates, ‘Who can tell man what will happen under the sun after he is gone? Seow notes that refers to being alive and so cannot refer to the afterlife: if it did, ‘after them under the sun’ would be an oxymoron (Seow, Ecclesiastes, 234).
91 Seow, Ecclesiastes, 233.
92 Anderson (“Philosophical Considerations,” 293) notes that qualifies , and therefore means ‘‘absolutely everything is hebel.’ ‘Everything’ is without qualification.”
and chasing wind. In these verses, it might be argued, Qohelet would not necessarily describe the world as הָלַם if death did not ‘cancel everything’ in it, that is, if death did not impact on the value of wisdom, wealth, toil, children, and indeed, all of one’s lod. In 6:3, the stillbirth is said to come into הָלַם and go into darkness (6:4). Here we can see the juxtaposition of the הָלַם world and death, which state is not itself הָלַם. In 11:8, 10 also we see that whatever one’s age, הָלַם will be there. All which comes is הָלַם (11:8), and youth and black hair are הָלַם (11:10). These two statements seems to designate all ages of life הָלַם. And the fleeting nature of life is central to its הָלַם-ness.

And so it seems that there are some passages in which הָלַם can be linked to death. These verses, in which הָלַם and death are linked, require some contemplation on death. That is, Qohelet could not speak of the effect death has on various aspects of his existence unless, first, he has a death concept, and second, he applied that death concept to his life. Qohelet must apply his death concept to various aspects of his life in order to gauge the outcome, which outcome he has in these verses labelled הָלַם. The contemplation or application of death in these verses is for the most part implicit. But there is a verse (2:11) in which contemplation clearly gives rise to הָלַם, and this is the subject of the next subsection.
6.3.3.3. Turning toward death and the rise of "lbh

The advent of "lbh seems to be linked to the tendency to think about one’s life. "lbh arises with contemplation. Qohelet uses the motif of turning to describe the act of coming to a realisation, and in each case it seems to be a realisation of something less than positive (2:11, 12, 20; 9:11; 4:1, 7; 7:25).

In 2:11 we see that it is the turning to think which brings about the "lbh. In the preceding passages Qohelet has been describing how he surpassed all in wisdom. Merriment and joy are declared "lbh in 2:1. Qohelet describes how he threw himself into his life. Even within his wisdom he drank (2:3), built up his possessions and riches, until he was wealthier than anyone before him in Jerusalem (2:9). In all this, he says, he did not lose his wisdom (yl hdm( ytmkx P; 2:9). Qohelet withheld nothing from himself, and he enjoyed all his toil (2:10). This enjoyment was his portion (ז"ל). In the following verse, however, Qohelet writes of his turning to all the deeds which his hands had done (וָיָמֵשׁ אֶל בְּרָכְלָם (בַּעֲשָׂר; 2:11) and to all the toil which he had toiled to make and declaring it all רוחוֹ רוחה, "lbh, and of no וּלְרָעִים under the sun.

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93 Toil here probably can be read both as the act of toiling as well as the material gains of that act.
94 Showing in one phrase the two senses of נְפָל: the act of toiling and the material accumulations of toiling.
It seems that it is the turning (יָנוּר) to all these things which brings up the לְבַח.

Before the turning Qohelet had not experienced לְבַח, but in turning he did so. The ‘turning’ therefore seems to be idiomatic of coming to a realisation, or weighing the value of something. Barton writes that Qohelet “turned from the absorption of his active material labors and his sensual pleasures to consider the meaning of them all.”

Other uses of the ‘turning’ motif in the book support such a view. Apart from 2:11, the motif of turning toward something occurs in six other places (2:12, 20; 9:11; 4:1, 7; 7:25). All describe a turning toward something negative, and some of these place the negativity in the context of death (2:12, 20; 9:11).

In 2:12 Qohelet writes that his thoughts turned (יָנוּר) to wisdom, but also to ‘madness’ (יָנוּר לְבוֹלָד) and foolishness, and there seems in this verse to be a suggestion of death, in that Qohelet seems to be speaking of ‘royal’ succession, which usually requires the present ‘king’ to die. In 2:20 Qohelet ‘turned (בָּבֵס)’ to despair (יָנָה),’ and here it is the toil which is toiled which is viewed with despair, Qohelet in the following verse (2:21) stating it is לְבַח and a great evil that one toils to hand it on to someone who did not toil (and so inferring death). This is the case also of 9:11, ‘I turned and saw under the sun,’ where, having turned, Qohelet sees,

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95 Barton, Ecclesiastes, 81.
96 While it is sometimes claimed that יָנוּר and בָּבֵס possess different meanings, “that the former means ‘turn to do,’ the latter ‘turn to see,’” Barton claims that this is not in fact the case (Barton, Ecclesiastes, 95).
for example, that the race is not to the swift, for ‘the time of mischance comes to
them all.’ This time of mischance (בְּחֵץ הָאָזֶן) is sometimes considered to be a
euphemism for the time of death,97 and therefore the turning in 9:11 could relate to
death. In 2:12, 20, and 9:11, therefore, the context seems to be death. There are
three turning verses which do not pertain to death, but are clearly turning to a
negative realisation (4:1, 7; 7:25). In 4:1 Qohelet turns to see all the oppression that
occurs under the sun. In 4:7, he says he ‘turned and I saw לָבוֹשׂ under the sun,’
while in 7:25 the turning is to know and to spy out and seek wisdom and נַעֲרָה,
and to know evil foolishness and foolish madness.

Thus Qohelet seems to use the turning motif in the context of a discovery or
realisation, and this discover or realisation seems to be something unpleasant or
unpalatable. This well suits its use in 2:11, where Qohelet describes turning from all
his toil – toil, moreover, in which he took great pleasure – to discover that
everything is לָבוֹשׂ.

If we are able to draw a connection between 2:11 and 5:18-19 by way of the motif
of toil, we might gain insight into what Qohelet loses in the turning, and what he
realises in its place. In 5:18-19 Qohelet describes the person who is granted the
ability to enjoy their wealth and their toil. Such a person is kept busy with the joy in
their heart, and consequently will not remember the evil or misery in the days of

97 So NJPS; Ginsberg cited in Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions*, 261. The use of the verb הָרַע הָרַע, related to הָרַע, in Qohelet used only of death (von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, 228) also supports reading the ‘time of mischance’ as a euphemism for death.
their life (לֹא הָרוֹתָה יֳוָרָה אֲחָדִים חָיִים). It is possible then to be pleasantly lost in one’s toil, and this seems very like what Qohelet was experiencing in chapter 2, which enjoyment he describes as his ‘portion’ in all his toil. We might postulate that in this pleasant toiling Qohelet did not remember the misery in all the days of his life. However, Qohelet then ‘turns,’ and in turning sees that everything is בּוֹלט, רוות, and of no נָדוּד under the sun. It is possible then that these constitute the misery of life which the fortunate person of 5:18-19 is able to forget.

It could also be that the turning in 2:11 which caused Qohelet to lose the pleasure in his toil and to realise all is בּוֹלט, and the going to the house of mourning in 7:2a, can be equated. In the discussion of 7:2a-b, 4 above it was seen that the ‘going’ and sending one’s heart is not just a physical movement toward a house of morning, but is also likely a non-physical, a ‘mental’ dwelling on the facts of Qohelet’s death concept. Further, it was seen that this dwelling on death gives rise to בּוֹלט. Qohelet’s ‘going’ gives rise to בּוֹלט in the verses addressed above, as does Qohelet’s ‘turning’ in 2:11. If the going and the turning can be equated, then it can be argued that the turning in 2:11 is a turning toward death. The loss of pleasure and the בּוֹלט Qohelet experiences as a result would then be a symptom of his death-concept and, moreover, a symptom of his wisdom.
6.3.3.4. Conclusions regarding the relation of death and 

In summary, wisdom entails looking at death, and some arises from contemplation of death. Wisdom and are therefore linked through the contemplation of death. It seems that often arises at least in part – and sometimes directly – from the concept Qohelet holds of death. If death were not a space in which all possessions are lost, then the drive to accumulate them during life might not be . More directly, that there is no difference between the death of a wise person or a fool, between the righteous person or the wicked, and that all must go to one place, is . The here arises immediately from Qohelet’s notion of death as the same ‘experience’ for all people. appears to be death drawn into life.

The drawing in of death requires intention. One must send one’s mind toward one’s death. But there is another necessary step to , and that is contemplating one’s surroundings. In 2:3-10 and 5:18-19 we see that it is possible to lose oneself in one’s toil, in one’s works or actions, to enjoy oneself, and to forget the dark days one’s life. However, though one might be lost in one’s work, in enjoyment, in forgetfulness, one stops, turns to one’s surroundings, and in the ‘turning’ to reflect one opens a space for .
6.4. Conclusions regarding death, הָבֵל, and wisdom

The above has been an attempt to tackle the place of wisdom in Qohelet’s death concept. It was seen that Qohelet’s focus on the death around him has wide-ranging implications. Qohelet offers a fresh interpretation of what it means to be wise, and it is a wisdom based on the observation of and cogitation upon death (7:2a-b, 4). Not only does Qohelet redefine wisdom as dependent on dwelling upon death, and not only do his meditations on death create a life of anguish (חננאל; 1:18),

98 he also seems sometimes to enjoy these forays into his own morbidity (7:3). Symptomatic of the wise life also is הָבֵל, which in several verses is linked to death (1:2, 14; 2:14-15, 17, 19, 21, 26; 6:2, 4, 12; 9:9; 11:8; 12:8).

In those instances where death is the cause of הָבֵל, at least, הָבֵל does not exist in the world outside of the individual. Though it is applicable to all things, הָבֵל does not inhere in the things to which it is applied. Rather, הָבֵל seems to inhere in the one who, like Qohelet, meditates on death, and applies the implications to the world around him. הָבֵל in the perceivers, not in the perceived. הָבֵל does not inhere in the world. It inhere in Qohelet.

99 In this way הָבֵל in the instances above might be understood as the result of a process, of a series of thoughts and of actions,

98 One might think here of the saying, “Socrates said, ‘The unexamined life is not worth living.’ My revision is ‘But the examined life makes you wish you were dead’” (Saul Bellows cited in Brown, “Whatever Your Hand Finds to Do,” 271).

99 Contra Fox (A Time to Tear Down, 35): “Qohelet’s thematic declaration that everything is hebel and the formulaic character of the hebel-judgments show that for Qohelet there is a single dominant quality in the world and that this quality inhere in the particular הָבֵל that he identifies.”
in which death is cast on the world through Qohelet’s gaze. When Qohelet writes therefore, ‘everything is לָבֶן’ he is saying ‘everything I see is לָבֶן (because I will die).’

While לָבֶן is not explicitly present in 7:1-4, it is nevertheless present in all that Qohelet writes there. The linking of wisdom with death in those verses, and the linking of death with לָבֶן in other verses, allows us to suggest that, where wisdom and death are correlated, לָבֶן is not far behind. If one were to link the going and the sending in 7:2a-b, 4 with the turning in 2:11, as has been argued for above, one might again read לָבֶן as the inevitable outcome of 7:2a-b, 4.
7. Conclusions

The method used throughout this thesis, the thanatological method, joined with an assumed textual philosophicality, has led to a particular treatment of the text. This treatment has entailed entering the text through death-explicit passages but, having entered the text, and in order to explore those entry passages, making links to other passages by way of semantic or thematic parallels.

The entry point for Chapter Two was the Catalogue of Times, 3:1-8, and specifically the death-related items of the Catalogue. This passage was connected to other passages in the book by way of both thematic and semantic links. The use of מים in 3:1-8 was linked with other uses of מים in the book, as was the use of נצח in 3:1. The circularity inherent in מים and נצח in 3:1 was linked with the circular nature imagery in Qohelet 1, and a thematic parallel was drawn between birth and death in 3:2 and going and coming in 1:4.

The entry point for Chapter Three was 3:11. The main foci of the chapter were two words found in 3:11: מנה and מנה. Each of these words were studied in each place they are found in the text, and a semantic field was developed for each of the words as a result of these studies. The analysis of מנה as well as the phrase מנה ילל in 3:11 led to 8:17.
The entry passage for Chapter Four was 9:5-6, 10. The ‘list of losses’ incurred in death was studied here, with each item on the list studied in light of its use elsewhere in the text. The image of death created in this passage led to the poem on aging and death in 11:7-12:8, and in particular to 12:2. This analysis of Qohelet’s death-concept then led to an assessment of the passages which seemed to contrast the death concept put forth in the initial entry passage.

The entry passages for Chapter Five were a series of death-positive Tôb-Sprüche (4:2, 3; 6:3; 7:1). These passages naturally led to the sole life-positive Tôb-Spruch (9:4) which stands in contrast to them, and this verse in turn led to the so-called ‘joy statements’ of 2:24, 3:12, 22, and 8:15, due to the high value which is seemingly placed on enjoyment of life.

7:1-4 was the entry passage for Chapter Six. A link between wisdom and life in that passage initially led to 7:12, in which wisdom and life are also linked. Beyond this, the issue of what sort of life Qohelet’s wisdom entailed led to 1:17-18, back to 7:3, and then to a discussion of passages in which death and ﷲ are related (1:2, 14; 2:14-15, 17, 19, 21, 26; 6:2, 4, 12; 9:9; 11:8; 12:8). A link was then made between the advent of ﷲ and the motif of turning in 2:11. This verse was then linked to 5:18-19 by way of the motif of toil.

It must be acknowledged that the understanding of Qohelet’s death-concept which has arisen in this way is only one possible reading. I dare say if I had taken the entry
passages in their context another understanding would have arisen instead. However, this approach of allowing thematic or semantic links to lead me from the entry passage to other passages within the text, coupled with the philosophical treatment of the text, has led to some significant findings and has lent itself to the building of a number of philosophies of death. We may describe the philosophies of death developed in this thesis as: aesthetic; epistemological; ‘phenomenological’; ethical; and, overall, a death-based philosophy. Below is a summary of each of these philosophies, along with a discussion of the place of each of these philosophies among previous studies of Qohelet.

**Aesthetics**

In Chapter Two, “Nature and the Death Aesthetic,” the Catalogue of Times (3:2-8) served as the entry point into a discussion on the place of death in the natural world. It was shown that one could argue from the Catalogue that not just ‘natural’ death is natural, but that any sort of death is natural, including violent death and death in war (vv. 2, 3, 8). This was done by way of analysis of the temporal words תָּמִין time, and יָמִין season, found in 3:1. It was argued that the seasonal recurrence found in יָמִין lent that nuance to תָּמִין, so that the times of the events in the Catalogue were also shown to be seasonal or recurrent. An analysis of the poem on nature in Qohelet 1 supported the view that this seasonality or cyclicity marked the events

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1 ‘Phenomenological’ is written in inverted commas here to acknowledge that this is a modern field of philosophy, arguably originating in the eighteenth century. However, all that is meant by this term here is that Qohelet writes of death as the object of his gaze.
in the Catalogue as events in nature. Beyond this, however, it was argued that הָפִּי in the Catalogue in line with many uses (though not all) of הָפִּי in the book is infused with a sense of appropriateness, and when such events occurred in their appropriate time they can be said to be beautiful (כֶּלֶת; 3:11). The beauty of appropriately occurring events was linked with pleasure, and therefore, finally, it was argued that appropriately occurring events, being beautiful, could also be pleasurable.

Thus there is in Qohelet’s death concept a death aesthetic, in which any naturally occurring death (which is to say, any death at all), when it occurs in its appropriate time, is beautiful.

Some previous studies of the word הָפִּי in Qohelet, and in particular the idea that ‘everything is הָפִּי in its time’ (3:11), have denied that this could be an aesthetic.² The text however clearly lends itself to an aesthetic reading. Those who accept that this phrase does actually say that everything is beautiful in its (appropriate) time have failed to draw out the implications with regard to death. This study therefore has both challenged the notion that there is no aesthetic at work here and drawn out the implications of this aesthetic, notably with regard to death.

² Krüger for instance notes a connection between הָפִּי here and the judgment of the “original works of creation” as בַּרְחוֹמָה in Genesis 1 (Krüger, Qoheleth, 85). Seow writes, “it is not an aesthetic judgment, as the common translation ‘beautiful’ may suggest (so KJV, RSV)” (Seow, Ecclesiastes, 162). Clearly, exegetes who render the word ‘appropriate’ (such as Barton, Ecclesiastes, 101; Fox, Qohelet and His Contradictions, 192) deny an aesthetic. Ogden however notes that הָפִּי can be either beauty or goodness, and so does not deny a possible aesthetic (Ogden, Qoheleth, 54). Crenshaw also opens the way to an aesthetic in that he notes that “an action performed at the right time is appropriate, hence lovely to behold (Crenshaw, Ecclesiastes, 97). Neither Ogden nor Crenshaw however make much of this possibility.
Chapter Three, “The Knowledge of Limits and the Limits of Knowledge,” was concerned mainly with three things: the words מִלְחָה and חֲלָם, and the relation of 3:11b with 3:11c-d. Through the word study of מִלְחָה we discovered that Qohelet employs that term to mark out spaces or times in which humans have no effect and in which a person does not exist, either before birth or after death (though inclusive of life, also). This מִלְחָה is said to be ‘given to our heart,’ a phrase which was shown to denote revelation of knowledge. In contrast to this knowledge in 3:11b stands 3:11c-d. The word study of חֲלָם showed that Qohelet sometimes uses the word to refer to knowledge, and sometimes to understanding, which in the book is a type of wisdom which no person can attain (7:23; 8:17). Qohelet in 3:11 contrasts the certain knowledge of mortality (v. 11b) with the inability to attain understanding of that which occurs in the world in our life time (v. 11c-d).

There is then in the book of Qohelet a kind of epistemology which has death at its heart. While Qohelet claims to know some things which are experientially unverifiable, while acknowledging that other things are not knowable, his use of the phrase חֲלָם מִלְחָה suggests that knowledge of our own mortality, and the limitations of our existence, is a direct revelation of knowledge from God.
Previous studies of 3:11 have noted the touch of death about מיחוד, the study undertaken here of this word has advanced this understanding and grounded it in detailed argumentation which bears out the death-nuance noted in previous studies. Also, this chapter, and Chapter Two above, have advanced research on concepts of time (specifically, with regard to מיחוד and מיחוד) in Qohelet. There is much work still to be done, however, and this is a possible area of future research.

Phenomenology

In Chapter Four, “What it is to be Dead,” it was seen that death in Qohelet can only ever be the object of one’s gaze. The ‘list of losses’ incurred in death (9:5-6, 10) was used to create a thought experiment which illustrated that Qohelet’s idea of the subjective experience of death consisted in absolute nothingness, a nothingness moreover in which both the dead individual and the entire world ceased to be. Qohelet’s morbid solipsism is imaged in the poem on aging and death in 11:9-12:7, and especially in 12:2, as a reversal of creation. Contrasted to this idea of an individual’s death being the death of the entire world is the view that death is only the removal of the individual from the world, which might be called death from the subjective living.

However, both of these views arise from within the subjective living, and so we might conclude that, just as there can be no experience of being dead, so too can
death only ever be the object of our gaze. Within Qohelet’s death concept, therefore, we can argue that there is a phenomenology of death.

Previous studies have noted both the total annihilation of the individual in death, as well as Qohelet’s lifting of the individual’s death to a cosmic level in 12:2, but the study carried out here of both 9:5-6, 10 and the poem on aging and death has made the link between these two passages clearer. The treatment of 9:5-6, 10 in particular is new to studies of Qohelet in that I have used it as a type of thought experiment. Further, I have drawn out the implications of Qohelet’s death concept here, noting his morbid solipsism, as well as the inability to experience one’s own death, both of which have not, to my knowledge, been mentioned in previous studies.

Ethics

In Chapter Five, “Why Not Suicide?,” Qohelet’s death-positive Tôb-Sprüche, or ‘Better Proverbs,’ were used to develop an ethics of suicide. Under what conditions, it was asked, is it appropriate to seek death? If the death-positive Tôb-Sprüche can be used in this way, they set out situations in which a person would be better dead: when a person witnesses or experiences oppression; when a person cannot enjoy anything; and, when a person doesn’t receive a proper burial. However, this chapter also addressed the single death-negative/life-positive Tôb-Spruch, in which life is said to be always preferable to death.
Thus, while there does seem to be an ethics of suicide in the book, in the sense that the Tôb-Sprüche can legitimately be read to offer a system of rational suicide, the passages which go toward this ethic must be held in tension with the single life-positive Tôb-Spruch, and the various joy statements. Complex irony, however, both requires and allows that the death-positive Tôb-Sprüche be taken seriously as possibly advocating suicide under certain circumstances.

Numerous exegetes have noted that some passages in Qohelet, including the Tôb-Sprüche, possibly describe Qohelet’s hatred of life, and some have even noted that this hatred of life in places, such as the Tôb-Sprüche, seems to result in the claim that death is better than life. For the most part, however, the claim that Qohelet could advocate suicide has been denied. The approach taken here contrasts with this. Through the use of complex irony, it has been seen that it is a possibility that the Tôb-Sprüche do advocate suicide.

The nature of the philosophy itself

All of the above philosophies can be said to feed into the death-based nature of Qohelet’s philosophy. In this aspect of Qohelet’s philosophy of death it is necessary for the wise person (the philosopher) to think and to act upon the death around them. The wise person/philosopher must dwell upon death (7:1-4), and this was shown to have an impact on the philosopher’s life. Dwelling on death was shown to be linked to the rise of יִתְנָשָׁה. Moreover, the focus on death also brought about suffering (1:18),
but, in addition to suffering, could bring about pleasure (7:3). Life for Qohelet, properly lived, must be considered, and such consideration stems from acknowledgment of life’s end. The considered life is a pain-filled life, where relief comes in moments of forgetfulness only to be swallowed again by wisdom.

In the book of Qohelet therefore we are offered a new type of wisdom, one which has its roots in death. There can be no wisdom for Qohelet without consideration of death, and ‘life’ is said to stem from this consideration. Finally, then, Qohelet’s wisdom conforms to the requirement of ancient philosophy, in that it aims at a particular type of life. That life, however, stems directly from one’s encounters with death.

The link between לַבְּבוֹ and death has previously been noted, as has the link between wisdom and death, but this thesis has drawn these pairings together, and in doing so has constructed a death-wisdom in which לַבְּבָה is symptomatic of wisdom. To my knowledge previous studies have not discussed the type of life wisdom gives its possessor. This thesis, in contrast, has drawn out the implications of Qohelet’s wise life, not just as regards לַבְּבָה, but also regarding the pleasure and the pain that the wise life arguably entails.

In summary, my approach has yielded certain insights into the text, and has advanced certain positions which have been previously noted. This is one more interpretation of the text to throw into the mix. If my method had required reading
each passage in its own particular context a different understanding of Qohelet’s death concepts would have arisen. These different possibilities speak to the nature of wisdom literature in general, but also to the book of Qohelet in particular. To return to my imperfect analogy of the mirror ball, my own interpretation of this text is one more speck of light on the wall.
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