

## Death and Evanescence in the Book of Ecclesiastes

An Interpretation of Eccl 2:13–17 and 3:16–22

Melanie Peetz\*

### Abstract

The Book of Ecclesiastes talks about human death and evanescence candidly and powerfully—more so than almost any other book in the Bible. Qoheleth (Greek Ecclesiastes), a wisdom teacher and the central character in this book, takes death seriously. For him, it represents the ultimate boundary to human life, although he does not claim that there is nothing after it. Still, for him, death is as unavoidable as it is final. Therefore, he argues to treat life as a one-time opportunity, accept life's goods as a gift from God, and enjoy them.

**Keyword:** death, evanescence, vanitas, vapor, Qohelet, wisdom, happiness, joy, God

### Introduction

**T**his contribution addresses death in the Book of Ecclesiastes in honor of St. Jerome, commemorating the anniversary of his death. Not only did St. Jerome translate Ecclesiastes into Latin, in 389 CE, in Bethlehem, he also authored a commentary on this Biblical book.<sup>1</sup> Both the writings

1. A commentary on this commentary is provided by Birnbaum, *Koheletkommentar des Hieronymus* (2014).

\*Faculdade de Filosofia e Teologia St. Georgen, Frankfurt, Alemanha.

Texto recebido em

19.10.2020

Aprovado em

16.12.2020

Ano XXVIII - Nº 97

Set - Dez 2020



PUC-SP

Programa de Estudos  
Pós Graduação em  
Teologia - PUC/SP

of St. Jerome and the book of Ecclesiastes itself shaped the so-called *vanitas* motive, which massively influenced the fine arts in the Baroque era.<sup>2</sup> In his Latin translation of Ecclesiastes, St. Jerome rendered the Hebrew word הַבֵּל (= “vapor”, “breath”, “evanescence”) in Eccl 1:2 and others as “vanitas”. One painting, for instance, which testifies the connection between St. Jerome and the *vanitas* motive from Ecclesiastes impressively, is “St. Jerome in His Study” in 1521 by Joss van Cleeve. In this painting, the church father Jerome pours over the Gospel of Matthew and lets his left index wander across a skull. This is a common symbol of the *vanitas* motive, just like the burned down candle and the running hour-glass, which are featured in the painting as well.<sup>3</sup>

The *vanitas* motive did not only fascinate the Baroque fine arts and poetry.<sup>4</sup> The radical statements on death and evanescence in the Book of Ecclesiastes provoke readers to this day. Without reserve the wisdom teacher Qoheleth talks about the end of human life and human mortality. All the while, he questions and relativizes traditional concepts and teachings of his time, for instance, that the wise have an advantage over fools or that (wise and just) humans outlive their death spiritually and interminably in the memory of others (2:14, 16; 9:5). Finally, Qoheleth equates wise people with fools and, even more generally and shockingly, humans with animals (3:19).

After all, who is this Qoheleth? What is important: A certain Qoheleth (Hebrew) or Ecclesiastes (Greek) has lent the book its name, but this person did not write it! Although the words and teachings of Qoheleth constitute almost the entire book, they are presented by a narrator and/or author whose own voice becomes only discernible at the beginning (1:1–2; [1:3–11]<sup>5</sup>), in the middle (7:27) and at the end (12:8–12).<sup>6</sup> The heading in 1:1 presents the character

2. More on this in Birnbaum, *Prediger Salomo* (2018), 276-277 and Köhlmoos, *Kohelet* (2015), 24-26.

3. <https://blog.staedelmuseum.de/bild-des-monats-der-heilige-hieronymus-im-studierzimmer-von-albrecht-durer/>

4. One instance is a renowned German sonnet by Andreas Gryphius. It was written in 1637, during the Thirty Years' War, and bears the title „Es ist alles eitel“ (All is vanity), which of course refers to Eccl 1:2.

5. It is not certain if 1:3–11 are Qoheleth's own words, quoted by the author, or if these verses represent the author's own voice.

6. Lohfink, *Kohelet* (1999), 6.

“Qoheleth” as “son of David, king in Jerusalem”. The author quotes Qoheleth in 1:12, where Qoheleth presents himself as king over Israel in Jerusalem. There were only two kings who reigned “over (all) Israel from Jerusalem: David and Solomon”<sup>7</sup>. Those who know the Scriptures well will immediately conclude that the book heading refers to Solomon. When Qoheleth introduces himself as wise in 1:12–18, he further corroborates this association with the wise king Solomon (see also 2:15).<sup>8</sup>

However, modern biblical research considers it literary fiction that Qoheleth and the wise king Solomon should be one and the same.<sup>9</sup> In 1:12–2:26<sup>10</sup>, the character “Qoheleth” takes on the role of a wise king. He then proceeds to demonstrate the human fate by using the example of his own royal existence. In this royal travesty, Qoheleth shows: Nobody can escape death, not even wise ones or kings (2:14–16).

That Qoheleth’s words should date back to the 10<sup>th</sup> century BCE and stem from the historic king Solomon is doubtful, not only concerning their content but also because of their formal features. Qoheleth’s musings—as presented by the author—better fit into the Hellenistic period. There is a consensus among researchers that the book dates to a time between 250 and 190 BCE, when Judah was a Greek province under Ptolemaic rule.<sup>11</sup>

Whether Qoheleth was a historical person or not is a matter of much scholarly debate. It is not to be ruled out that the book’s author conceived the character “Qoheleth” as a fictitious person. In the epilogue, however, the narrator presents Qoheleth as a real wisdom teacher who actually existed and composed sayings that are collected in the book at hand (12:9). Therefore, it is possible that there

7. Birnbaum/Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet* (2012), 65.

8. King Solomon is pictured as an extraordinarily wise man in 1 Kings 3; 5:1–14.

9. Lohfink, *Kohelet* (1999), 5: “Kohelet versetzt sich fiktiv in die höchste menschliche Möglichkeit.” (Qoheleth fictitiously takes on the highest possible human existence.) For Qoheleth’s identity, see Pirker, Sukkot (2012), 18–19.

10. Scholars discuss in which verse the so-called royal travesty ends. Agreeing with Schoors, *Ecclesiastes* (2013), 97–99, and others I assume it ends in 2:26. Arguments for this ending are provided in Schwienhorst-Schönberger, Glück (1996), 80–87.

11. More about the dating and the historical background i.e. in Sitzler, Tod (2020), 141–152 or in Schoors, *Ecclesiastes* (2013), 2–9.

was a wisdom teacher in the 3rd century BCE who lived in Jerusalem under the alias Qoheleth (= collector).<sup>12</sup> However, there is no definite proof of that. After all, the author could have invented Qoheleth as a fictitious character in 12:9. Fact or fiction, “Qoheleth” is a literary character whose voice is heard in the biblical Book of Ecclesiastes.<sup>13</sup> In all that follows the name “Qoheleth” refers to the literary character. The question if Qoheleth was a real living person, I will not presume to answer.

The Book of Ecclesiastes belongs to wisdom literature.<sup>14</sup> This is evident not only because of its formal features<sup>15</sup> but also because of its content. Essentially, Hebrew wisdom literature deals with the question of how to lead a successful life.<sup>16</sup> This holds true for Ecclesiastes as well. This book discusses existential questions, especially the one of evanescence.

When it comes to it, Qoheleth seems to reject any notion of life after death. For instance, in 9:5–6 he says: “For the living know that they will die, but the dead do not know one thing. They have no more reward, for the memory of them is forgotten. Their love, their hate, and their zeal have long since vanished. Never again will they have any share in all that is done under the sun.”

This article will treat the concepts of death more in-depth as they come up in Ecclesiastes. What position does Qoheleth take when it comes to death? Is there any hope for humans, or is death the end of everything?

For the first time, the topic of “dying” is explicitly addressed in 2:13–17. Both linguistically and thematically, this text is closely interlaced with 3:16–22. The latter text takes up the notion of human mortality from the first but renders them even more radical. Therefore, chapters two and three will scrutinize these two passages in more exegetical detail. Chapter four then reflects on how Qoheleth’s thoughts in 2:13–17 and 3:16–22 relate to other notions about death

12. Lohfink, *Kohelet* (1999), 11-12.

13. Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Lehre vom absoluten Tod* (2003), 207 FN 1.

14. Lohfink, *Kohelet* (1999), 5: “Es gibt sich als Lehrschrift und ordnet sich so in die ‘Weisheitsliteratur’ ein.” ([The book of Ecclesiastes] presents itself as a teaching treatise putting itself under the umbrella of ‘wisdom literature’.)

15. More about the wisdom features of Ecclesiastes e.g. in Witte, *Prediger* (2006), 3.2.

16. See e. g. Hausmann, *Weisheit* (2009), 1.1.

in the Book of Ecclesiastes.

Finally, chapter five will systematically present what position Qoheleth holds with regard to death. Before delving more deeply into Eccl 2:13–17 and 3:16–22, chapter one will briefly put these passages into the context of the entire Book of Ecclesiastes.

## 1. The Structure and Thought Development of Ecclesiastes

The structure of the book of Ecclesiastes is a matter of much scholarly debate. Researchers have suggested several structures that differ from each other.<sup>17</sup> Some even contest the notion that the book has any structure at all.<sup>18</sup> It has been suggested to divide the book into four parts, in analogy to a classic ancient oration (*diatribe*).<sup>19</sup> This has found a certain echo among researchers,<sup>20</sup> especially with Norbert Lohfink<sup>21</sup> and Ludger Schwienhorst-Schönberger.<sup>22</sup> According to Norbert Lohfink the build-up of Ecclesiastes is as follows:<sup>23</sup>

The first part (A) comprises 1:12–3:15. In the classic structure of ancient rhetorics, it corresponds to the *propositio*, the initial presentation of the matter: Qoheleth reflects very generally about human life as such (1:12-2:23). For this, he takes on the role of a wise king to conduct a thought experiment with the following result: Possessions, wisdom, power, and desire bring neither happiness—in Hebrew טוב—nor advantages. In the face of death, everything is ephemeral and vain. His reflections on the human condition then evolve into more

17. There is an overview of the different theories on the structure of Ecclesiastes in Sitzler, Tod (2019), 106–140 and in Schoors, Ecclesiastes (2013), 9-19.

18. Schwienhorst-Schönberger, Kohelet (2004), 46–47, argues, that there are basically two lines of research on this topic: One tries to reveal the artful structure of the book. The other eyes these attempts skeptically. See also in Müllner, Herz (2006), 73-74.

19. More about the diatribe e. g. in Schwienhorst-Schönberger, Das Buch Kohelet (2016), 467–476.

20. Lohfink, Kohelet (1999), 10; Schwienhorst-Schönberger, Kohelet (2004), 52; Birnbaum/Schwienhorst-Schönberger, Kohelet (2012), 16; Hieke, Freude (2012), 171–174.

21. Lohfink, Kohelet (1999), 10.

22. Schwienhorst-Schönberger, Kohelet (2004), 51–52, and Birnbaum/Schwienhorst-Schönberger, Kohelet (2012), 16, as well as id., Das Buch Kohelet (2016), 467–476.

23. The names for the four parts used in this article—*propositio*, *explicatio*, *refutatio*, and *applicatio*—are borrowed from Schwienhorst-Schönberger, Kohelet (2004), 52. Lohfink, Kohelet (1999), 10, uses the following names: narrative introduction, explication (“Vertiefung”), *refutatio*, and *applicatio*. In this article, the four parts are delimited as in Lohfink, Kohelet (1999), 10.

general thoughts about God and time (2:24–3:15): Only those who understand and accept that happiness is a gift from God can enjoy the happiness that comes from their possessions within the time frame set for them by God—and be truly happy.

The second part (B) consists of 3:16–6:10. It delves deeper into the topic of the *propositio*, just like the *explicatio* in ancient rhetorics. Qoheleth enlarges upon his thoughts from 1:12–3:15, focusing now on the social experiences and evils of his time (e. g. in 3:16–17; 4:1, 4; 5:7–8). He describes injustice, exploitation, and fierce competition. He muses on poverty and wealth, too. Into this train of thought, he embeds a critical reflection on religious behavior (4:17–5:6). He also returns to what he said about happiness in the first part (2:1, 3, 24; 3:12–13) and trumps it by saying that happiness is beautiful (3:22; 4:3; 5:17). The second part is framed by 3:16–22 and 6:3–10, two passages that imply that everybody has to die. They are connected by the phrase that “all go to **one** place” (3:20 and 6:6). What is striking: The last passage of the second part (6:3–10) is also connected to 2:13–17. The verse 2:13 says that “there is an advantage (יתרון) to wisdom (להכמה) over (מין) folly (הסכלות).” Linguistically, this closely resembles 6:8, which asks: “What advantage has (יתר) the wise (להכב) over (מין) the fool (הכסל)?”

The third part (C) encompasses 6:11–9:6. In ancient rhetorics it corresponds to the *refutatio*, the defense. What has been introduced in the first part and enlarged upon in the second is now defended in the third. Departing from his own observations, Qoheleth questions traditional wisdom thinking. Qoheleth reports experiences that contradict the traditional teaching of correspondence between one’s deeds and one’s fate (“Tun-Ergehen-Zusammenhang”). He shows that it is not always true that good deeds bring happiness and bad deeds unhappiness. It so happens that righteous people sometimes perish miserably while wicked ones live a long life despite their malice (7:15; see also 8:10, 14).<sup>24</sup> Even wisdom cannot save human beings from all of life’s evils (8:5–8).<sup>25</sup> Qoheleth concludes that also the righteous and the wise are entirely under the auspices of God (9:1).

24. More on this in Schellenberg, *Kohelet* (2013), 114-115.

25. Hieke, *Freude* (2012), 175.

In the end, all humans will share the same fate—no matter how they have lived and acted (9:2): They all will have to join the dead one day (9:2–6). So, the third part ends with musings about death, just as the second. Additionally, remarks on happiness are embedded (7:14; 8:15). One more time Qoheleth concludes that there is no happiness for humans except if they eat, drink, and—amidst their toil—enjoy the days of their lives given to them by God (8:15; also 5:17; 3:12–13). What is striking: There is a close connection between the final sentences of the third part in 9:1–6 and the passages 2:13–17 and 3:16–22. On the one hand, they are linked together thematically through the motive of “a common fate” (9:2 and 2:14–15; 3:19) as well as through the motive of finite human cognition (9:1 and 3:22). On the other hand, they are interlaced linguistically by the words “righteous” and “wise” (9:1 and 2:13–16; 3:16–17) as well as by the words “memory”, “remember”, and “forget” (9:5 and 2:16).

The fourth part (D) comprises 9:7–12:7. In ancient rhetorics, this part equals the *applicatio*, the application. Qoheleth now arrives at the practical conclusions of his teachings.<sup>26</sup> He encourages happiness (9:7–9; 11:9–12:7) and bold action (9:10; 11:4–8).<sup>27</sup> Life is there to enjoy it and to make the best out of it during the days given by God. Qoheleth’s statements are clear cut: What is to be done here and now needs to be done, especially in the face of death and evanescence. That way, Qoheleth rejects any wisdom ideal that does not result in cheerful action.<sup>28</sup> Finally, the last part ends with musings about death, just as the second and third (especially 12:5–7).

Three concentric frames surround the four parts of the book. The heading in 1:1 and both book endings in 12:9–11 and 12:12–13 constitute the outer frame. Qoheleth appears in the third person singular in both of these framing pieces. The book’s motto is repeated verbatim in 1:2 and in 12:8, thus constituting the inner frame: “Vapor, vapor, said Qoheleth, everything is vapor.” A second inner frame consists of the cosmological poem in 1:4–11 and of the poem about hap-

26. Birnbaum/Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet* (2012), 17.

27. Lohfink, *Kohelet* (1999), 68, offers the astute observation that there is an outer and an inner frame: The topic “joy of living” constitutes the outer frame of the fourth part (9:7–9 and 11:9–12:7), the topic “bold action” the inner frame (9:10 and 11:4–8).

28. Birnbaum/Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet* (2012), 17.

piness, old age, and death in 11:9–12:7. The cosmological poem in 1:4–11, on the one hand, prepares the topic of death (1:4, 11) and reflects on the finiteness of human beings, who are unable to oversee either cosmos or time (1:8–10). It already contains the entire program of the book in a nutshell. The other poem about happiness, old age, and death, on the other hand, spells out the consequences of these reflections: Humans should be happy and light-hearted while acknowledging their creator God, exactly because illness, old age, and death are inescapable.

What is noteworthy: Only occasionally does the Book of Ecclesiastes explicitly mention “dying” or “death”. The first time is as late as 2:16 (also in 3:1, 19; 4:2; 7:1, 26; 8:8; 9:3, 5; 10:1). More often, it uses metaphors and euphemisms to talk about evanescence. A pervading keyword is “vapor”, *הֶבֶל* in Hebrew. All in all, it occurs 38 times.<sup>29</sup> In a metaphorical sense, “vapor” denotes vanity and evanescence (= *vanitas*). Another example are the euphemisms “a generation goes” (1:4) or “all go to one place” (3:20; 6:6). They express that in the end, everyone has to leave life behind.

While the topics of death and evanescence are quite dominant, the book is just as concerned with the topic of happiness (*טוב*) and joy. Three times, it repeats almost verbatim that the happiness of humans consists of enjoying the bliss that possessions might bring during the days that God bestows upon them (3:12–13; 5:17; 8:15). In total, there are seven passages debating bliss, happiness, and the joys of life (2:24–25; 3:12–13; 3:22; 5:17–19; 8:15; 9:7–10; 11:9–10).<sup>30</sup> The following chapters examine how the Book of Ecclesiastes connects joy, happiness, evanescence, and death.

## 2. The Fate of the Wise and the Foolish in Eccl 2:13–17

The passage 2:13–17 belongs to the first part (A) of the book, which means that it still introduces to Qoheleth’s teachings. It centers around the question if wisdom excels folly (2:13). For the first time, Qoheleth talks about “**one** fate that

29. Birnbaum/Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet* (2012), 47.

30. Fischer, *Lebendfreude* (1999), 87-92; Hieke, *Freude* (2012), 178; Willmes, *Lehren* (2018), 377.



befalls everyone” (2:14, 15; also 3:19; 9:2) and about the eventual need to die (2:16; also 3:19).

## 2.2 Translation

2:13a	And I, I saw	וְרָאִיתִי אָנִי
	that wisdom has an advantage over folly,	שִׁישׁ יִתְרוֹן לְחִכְמָה מִן־הַסְּכָלוֹת
b	just as there is an advantage of light over darkness.	כִּי־תְרוֹן הָאוֹר מִן־הַחֹשֶׁךְ
14a	The wise (have) eyes in their head.	הַחֲכָמִים עֵינָיו בְּרֹאשׁוֹ
	The fools wander in darkness.	וְהַסְּכִילִים בַּחֹשֶׁךְ הוֹלְךִים
b	But I, even I realized	וַיִּדְעֵתִי גַם־אֲנִי
	that <b>one</b> fate befalls everyone.	שִׁמְקָרָה אֶחָד יִקְרָה אֶת־כָּלֶם
15a	And I, I said in my heart:	וְאָמַרְתִּי אָנִי בְּלִבִּי
	Just as the fate of the fool, me, me too (it) will befall.	כַּמְקָרָה הַסְּכִיל גַם־אֲנִי יִקְרָנִי
	But why have I, I become so advantageously wise?	וְלָמָּה חֲכַמְתִּי אָנִי אֲזִ יוֹתֵר
b	And I talked in my heart that this too is vapor.	וַדַּבַּרְתִּי בְּלִבִּי שֶׁגַם־זֶה הַבָּל
16a	For there is no remembrance of the wise	כִּי אֵין זְכוֹרֹן לְחֲכָמִים
	just as of the fool forever,	עַם־הַסְּכִיל לְעוֹלָם
b	because already in the days to come everything is forgotten.	בְּשִׁפְכָר הַיָּמִים הַבָּאִים הַכֹּל נִשְׁכַּח
	How the wise must die just like the fools.	וְאֵיךְ יָמוּת הַחֲכָמִים עַם־הַסְּכִילִים
17a	So I hated life,	וְשָׂנֵאתִי אֶת־הַחַיִּים
	because evil (were) the deeds on me	כִּי רַע עָלַי הַמַּעֲשֵׂה
	that are being done under sun.	שֶׁנִּעְשָׂה תַּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ
b	Truly, all of this is vapor and vain ambition.	כִּי־הַכֹּל הַבָּל וְרֵעוּת רוּחַ

## 2.2 Delimitation and Context

The verses 2:13–17 are consistent due to the contrasting word pairs “wisdom” vs. “folly” or “the wise” vs. “the fools”. Every verse contains them at least

once, except for v. 17. This, in turn, ends with the idiom: “Truly, all of this is vapor and vain ambition”, thus concluding the deliberations of 2:13–17. This refrain-like idiom returns several times in Ecclesiastes (1:14; 2:11; 4:4; 4:16; 6:9). Obviously, it is meant to structure or close a train of thought.

Finally, 2:13–17 is part of a larger unit, which also comprises 2:12 and 2:18–23. Both 2:13–17 and 2:18–23 enlarge upon topics that 2:12 summarizes, like in a heading<sup>31</sup>: “12a And I, I turned around to see wisdom, stupidity, and folly. 12b For what are humans that come after the king they have already made (= enthroned?)?” The terms “wisdom” and “folly” in 12a allude to the topic of 2:13–17. 12b prepares the topic of 2:18–23, which is the issue of succession.

The larger unit 2:12–2:23 is part of the royal travesty of 1:12–2:26. In 1:12–2:11, Qoheleth demonstrates that wisdom, possessions, wealth, and power entail neither advantages nor happiness. In 2:12–2:23, he takes one step backward and makes clear why every human business under the sun is vain and ephemeral. In 2:13–17, he turns to wisdom in 2:18–23<sup>32</sup> to possession.

## 2.3 Structure

Statements in the first person singular provide the structure for the deliberations on wisdom and folly in 2:13–17: “And I, I saw ...” (וַיִּרְאֶינִי אֲנִי; 13a), “But I, even I realized ...” (וַיִּדְעָתִי גַם־אֲנִי; 14b), “And I, I said in my heart ...” (וַיֹּאמַרְתִּי אֲנִי בְלִבִּי; 15a), “And I talked in my heart ...” (וַיְדַבַּרְתִּי בְלִבִּי; 15b), “So I hated life ...” (וַשְׂנֹאתִי אֶת־הַחַיִּים; 17a). The passage is thus divided into five delimitable lines of thought: 13–14a; 14b; 15a; 15b–16; 17.

In terms of its content, 14b and 15a are closely intertwined. Linguistically this connection is expressed through the verb קרה (“meet”). The Hebrew noun מקרה (“fate”) goes back to the same root קרה. “But I, even I realized that **one** fate befalls everyone.” (14b) “And I, I said in my heart: Just as the fate of the fool, me, me too (it) will befall.” (15a)

31. Birnbaum/Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet* (2012), 83-84.

32. More on the connection of 2:13–17 and 2:18–23 in Lohfink, *Technik* (1986), 32-32.

## 2.4 Interpretation

Qoheleth's first demonstration of his thinking reminds of traditional wisdom teachings based on the Hebrew Bible<sup>33</sup>: "I, I saw that wisdom has an advantage over folly ..." (13a). What follows is a comparison which is built parallel to the first statement and which underlines its obviousness: "... just as there is an advantage of light over darkness." (13b) "Wisdom" parallels "light", and "folly" "darkness". The comparison leads Qoheleth to the following conclusion:<sup>34</sup> "The wise (have) eyes in their head. The fools wander in darkness." The "eyes in their head" correspond to the light of 13b. Therefore, they connect to the wise and/or wisdom. In the same measure, 14a quotes verbatim the "darkness" from 13b and juxtaposes it with fools. The metaphor of the advantage (the benefit) would then mean the following: The wise see (have insight) and thus gain orientation. The fools are blind (without insight) and remain disoriented.<sup>35</sup>

Avid Bible readers who are acquainted with this concept of the wise and the fools, might associate this with another contrast: the one of life and death (e. g. Job 3:4-6; 3:16, 20; Ps 88:13).<sup>36</sup> Wise people who see and have insight have the advantage that they will succeed in their lives. Wisdom leads to life; at least that is what traditional wisdom teachings in the Hebrew Bible promise.<sup>37</sup> Prov 13:14, for example, says: "The instructions (the Torah) of the wise are a source of life to avoid the snares of death." Wisdom, light, and life stand on one side, folly, darkness, and death on the other.

Qoheleth does not stop at this thought. Instead, he draws attention to another observation that sheds a different light on the traditional view and instills some kind of shock:<sup>38</sup> "But I, even I realized that **one** fate befalls everyone. And I, I

33. See e. g. Prov 5:7-13; 6:23; 8:32-36; 9:18; 10:8, 10; 15:21; 26:11; Ps 119:104-105; Job 12:12; in regard to the just and wicked see Prov 4:18-19; 12:2-4; more on this in Maier, *Torheit* (2007), 2.3 and Schellenberg, *Kohelet* (2013), 63, 30.

34. Birnbaum/Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet* (2012), 86-87.

35. Köhlmoos, *Kohelet* (2015), 107.

36. More on "light" and "darkness" as images for "life" and "death" in the Bible in Schwienhorst-Schönberger *Kohelet* (2004), 224-225 and in Schellenberg, *Kohelet* (2013), 63.

37. Birnbaum/Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet* (2012), 86-87.

38. Schellenberg, *Mensch* (2011), 317, coins the term "Schockeffekt", but with regard to the equality of humans and animals in 3:19. The first shock however is instilled by the insight that the wise and the fools share the same fate.

said in my heart: Just as the fate of the fool, me, me too (it) will befall” (14b–15a). This passage does not reveal yet what Qoheleth means when he speaks of a fate that befalls everyone (both wise and fools). However, the insight that the wise and the fools share **one** fate prompts Qoheleth to question his pursuit of wisdom: “But why have I, I become so advantageously wise?” (15a) Qoheleth’s former musings show that this is a rhetorical question. The answer is obvious: For nothing! This question resonates with self-deprecating humor.<sup>39</sup> In vain did he pursue wisdom. This again leads him to the conclusion: “And I talked in my heart that this too is vapor” (15b). The “too” (Hebrew **גַּם**) seems to refer to 2:11,<sup>40</sup> where Qoheleth ascertains: works, possessions, and wealth are nothing but vapor and vain ambition. Now, he is getting even more radical: Even wisdom is a vain good that cannot be trusted (see also 1:16–17). Finally, in 2:16, it becomes clear why wisdom is vain and ephemeral: “... 16b How the wise must die just like the fools.”

In 2:14–16 Qoheleth focuses on “the liminal situation of having to die”, as Norbert Lohfink aptly put it.<sup>41</sup> As soon as the need to eventually die is taken into the equation, there is no difference between wisdom and folly, between light and darkness anymore. As long as humans are alive, they surely have an advantage if they are wise because this helps them find orientation.<sup>42</sup> In 1:18, Qoheleth had already alluded that wisdom is a relative value by saying: “...in much wisdom (is) much grief, and who increases knowledge, increases pain.” Now he makes clear: At the latest, when death comes into play, the benefit of the wise disappears. Death makes all humans equal.<sup>43</sup> The wise must die just like the fool. This is the first time that Ecclesiastes explicitly talks of “dying”. However, even before that point the topic of evanescence and vanity is taken up several times through the metaphors “vapor” and “vain ambition” (1:2, 14, 17; 2:11) as well as through the euphemistic phrase of “a generation (that) goes” (1:4).

39. Birnbaum/Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet* (2012), 87.

40. Birnbaum/Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet* (2012), 87.

41. Lohfink, *Kohelet* (1999), 28: “die Grenzsituation des Sterbenmüssens”.

42. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes* (1992), 22, rightly points out that although Qoheleth relativizes the advantage of the wise because of death, he does not deny “all value of Wisdom”; see also Zimmer, *Lebensglück* (1999), 105–111.

43. Schellenberg, *Mensch* (2011), 317.

Before Qoheleth explicitly mentions the topic of dying in 2:16b, he refutes a possible objection from a traditional perspective<sup>44</sup> by saying: “For there is no remembrance of the wise just as of the fool forever, because already in the days to come everything is forgotten.” (16a) Wisdom theology in the Hebrew Bible and in Jewish ancient scriptures supposes that humans may live on by being remembered by others. Thus, Ben Sira, another Jewish wisdom book, promises in 37:26: “Those who are wise among their people will inherit honor and their name will live on forever”. So, remembrance is suggested to save people from eternal extinction (see also Deut 25:5–6; Prov 10:7; Ps 109:13). Qoheleth rejects this argument as well. Because sometime in the near or distant future every person will be forgotten irrespective of their wisdom or folly (also 1:11; 8:10). With this Qoheleth destroys any hope of an ideal life after death: Those who try to give others an eternal life by remembering them are eventually bound to fail.

By adding death to the equation, Qoheleth exposes traditional teachings from the Hebrew Bible as a relative value (the advantage of the wise over fools) or even as an illusion (the eternal life of [wise] people through their remembrance). This insight throws Qoheleth into despair: “So I hated life, because evil (were) the deeds on me that are being done under sun. Truly, all of this is vapor and vain ambition” (2:17).

In the Hebrew Bible, wisdom addresses the question of how one can succeed in leading a good life. That is why it is so paradoxical that Qoheleth’s musings on wisdom would lead him to a negative perspective on life, even claiming that human deeds were evil. In such a light, human life becomes absurd.

### **3. The Fate of Humans and Animals in Eccl 3:16–22**

Nevertheless, Qoheleth does not stop at the thought that human deeds are evil. In the second part of Ecclesiastes (B) Qoheleth continues unfolding his teachings. Once more, he discusses the topic of the incumbent fate of death in 3:16–22. He takes the issue of the vanity of human life to the extreme. However, this time he comes to a different conclusion.

---

44. Schwienhorst-Schönberger, Kohelet (2004), 225–226.

### 3.1 Translation

3:16	And moreover, I saw under the sun:	וְעוֹד רָאִיתִי תַחַת הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ
	(to) the place of judgment there (goes) wickedness,	מְקוֹם הַמִּשְׁפָּט שָׁמָּה הָרָשָׁע
	(to) the place of justice there (goes) wickedness.	וּמְקוֹם הַצְדִּיק שָׁמָּה הָרָשָׁע
17	I, I said in my heart:	אָמַרְתִּי אֲנִי בְלִבִּי
	The just and the wicked	אֶת־הַצְדִּיק וְאֶת־הָרָשָׁע
	will be judged by God.	יִשְׁפֹּט הָאֱלֹהִים
	Because (there is) a time for every matter and because of every deed	כִּי־עֵת לְכָל־חֶפֶץ וְעַל כָּל־הַמַּעֲשֵׂה
	there.	שָׁם
18	I, I said in my heart:	אָמַרְתִּי אֲנִי בְלִבִּי
	As for the matter of human children <sup>45</sup>	עַל־דַּבְרַת בְּנֵי הָאָדָם
	that God has singled them out to see	לְכַרְם הָאֱלֹהִים וְלִרְאוֹת
	that they (are) animals they for themselves.	שָׁהֵם־בְּהֵמָה הֵמָּה לָהֶם
19	For the fate of human children	כִּי מִקְרָה בְּנֵי־הָאָדָם
	and the fate of animals— (it is) <b>one</b> fate for them.	וּמִקְרָה הַבְּהֵמָה וּמִקְרָה אֶחָד לָהֶם
	Like this death like that death.	כְּמוֹת זֶה כֵּן מוֹת זֶה
	<b>One</b> breath for all of them.	וְרוּחַ אֶחָד לְכָל
	An advantage of humans over animals there is not,	וּמוֹתֵר הָאָדָם מִן־הַבְּהֵמָה אֵין
	because everything is vapor.	כִּי הַכֹּל הֶבֶל
20	All go to <b>one</b> place.	הַכֹּל הוֹלֵךְ אֶל־מְקוֹם אֶחָד
(20)	All has come from dust	הַכֹּל הֵינָה מִן־הָעֶפֶר
	and all returns to dust.	וְהַכֹּל שׁוֹב אֶל־הָעֶפֶר
21	Who knows if the breath of human children	מִי יוֹדֵעַ רוּחַ בְּנֵי הָאָדָם
	rises upward,	הָעֹלָה הִיא לְמַעְלָה
	but the breath of animals	וְרוּחַ הַבְּהֵמָה
	descends downward to the earth?	הַיֵּרֶדֶת הִיא לְמַטָּה לָאָרֶץ
22	Then I saw that there is no happiness	וְרָאִיתִי כִּי אֵין טוֹב

45. The Hebrew text uses the term “human children”. The context, however, suggests that Qoheleth refers to all human beings. More on this debate in Wolfe, Qoheleth (2020), 57–58.

other than that humans enjoy what they do.	מֵאַשֶׁר יִשְׂמַח הָאָדָם בְּמַעֲשָׁיו
Yes, that is their portion!	כִּי־הוּא תְּלָקוֹ
For who can bring him to see	כִּי מִי יְבִיאֵנּוּ לְרֵאוֹת
what will be after them?	בְּמָה שְׂיִהְיֶה אַחֲרָיו

### 3.2 Delimitation and Structure

The passage 3:16–22 introduces the second part (B) in 3:16–6:10. The preceding passage 3:1–15 talks about time and God very generally and on a basic level. It ends with a conclusion in 3:14–15, which starts with “I realized that ...” Now, in 3:16, Qoheleth adds another observation. He introduces it with “and moreover (עוד) I saw ...”. 3:22 concludes the first train of thought of the second part (3:16–21) by drawing a quintessence.

Again, several statements in the first person singular provide the structure of 3:16–22, just like in 2:13–17: “And moreover I saw ...” (וְעוֹד רָאִיתִי in 3:16); “I, I said in my heart ...” (אֲמַרְתִּי אֲנִי בְּלִבִּי in 17); “I, I said in my heart ...” (אֲמַרְתִּי) (אֲנִי בְּלִבִּי in 18–21); “Then I saw ...” (וְרָאִיתִי in 22). Two statements starting with וראיתי (I saw) provide a framework to the passage. Given that the two statements in the middle start with אמרתי (I said), this results in a chiasm (A B B`A`<sup>46</sup>).

Another two-fold structure supersedes this four-fold structure. Some Hebrew roots of words appear repeatedly in the first two statements (A+B), intertwining both parts linguistically: רשע (“wickedness/wicked”); שפט (“judgment/judge”); צדק (“justice/just”); שמה, שם (“there”). 3:18 presents a cut. Verses 3:18–21 do not center on the opposition of “justice/just” and “wickedness/wicked” any more. Instead, the words “humans/human children” and “animals” become the dominant ones. Both paragraphs 3:16–17 and 3:18–22 are interlaced by the word “God”<sup>47</sup> which occurs in the last verse of the first paragraph (3:17) and in the first verse of the second (3:18). The word מקום (“place”; 3:16, 20) appears in both paragraphs as well.<sup>48</sup> These recurring terminologies link both paragraphs together, in addition to the general chiasmic structure mentioned above.

46. Lux, *Tod und Gerechtigkeit* (2009), 47; also in: Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet* (2004), 279.

47. Sitzler, *Tor* (2020), 154.

48. This is observed by Köhlmoos (2015), 130.

### 3.3 Interpretation

First, Qoheleth acknowledges in 3:16 that the places of judgment and justice are pervaded by wickedness. Qoheleth thus accuses the judiciary of ruling and acting unjustly.<sup>49</sup> He then talks about the actors that bring justice and injustice.<sup>50</sup> He concludes that God will judge both the just and the wicked (3:17). This, in turn, leads him to think that God has singled out every human person—irrespective of their being just or wicked—to recognize that they are nothing more than animals. 3:18 reads: “As for the matter of human children that God has singled them out to see that they (are) animals they for themselves.” The solemn introduction “As for the matter of human children ...” raises expectations. The matching term ברר (“single out”) catches the attention of the audience even more. It has a positive connotation and means that someone or something is elected or elevated<sup>51</sup> (e. g. 1 Chr 7:40).<sup>52</sup> Thus 3:18 refers to the special status of humans. However, Qoheleth immediately makes this special status an absurd one. According to him, humans have an advantage over animals “only” insofar as they recognize (verbatim: “see”)<sup>53</sup> that they equal animals,<sup>54</sup> meaning that they have neither an advantage nor a special status in comparison to animals.

The equality of humans and animals stems from their common mortal fate, Qoheleth reasons in 3:19: “For the fate of human children and the fate of animals—(it is) **one** fate for them. Like this death like that death.” When Qoheleth talks about “**one** fate” he evokes 2:14–15 where he puts the wise on a par with

49. There is another possible interpretation of this verse: Wickedness will come to the place of judgment and to the place of justice, meaning that wickedness itself will be judged, thus e.g. Schellenberg, *Kohelet* (2013), 79. In the second part of Ecclesiastes however, Qoheleth sheds light on the evils of his time, like the suppression of the poor and the deprivation of legal rights and justice (4:1; 5:7–8). Therefore, it is more likely that 3:16 complains about the injustices of the judiciary. 50. Sitzler, *Tod* (2020), 153.

51. The Hebrew verb ברר has the meaning “to proof” as well; see e.g. Lux, *Tod und Gerechtigkeit* (2009), 51 and Willmes, *Schicksal* (2000), 127. However, in the context of 3:18–22, the meaning “to single out”/ “to select” is most likely.

52. Birnbaum/Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet* (2012), 119.

53. MT reads לְרִאֹת (‘‘to see’’). The subject of the infinitive is not obvious. However, it make sense to assume that ‘‘human children’’ is subject of the infinitive. LXX reflects לְהִרְאוֹת (‘‘to let see’’). In this case most likely ‘‘God’’ is subject of the infinitive (‘‘to let [them] see’’); more on this debate in Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet* (2004); 277; Murphy, *Ecclesiastes* (1992), 30; Lauha, *Kohelet* (1978), 75.

54. Birnbaum/Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet* (2012), 119.



fools. His assertion in 3:18 is even more shocking. Humans in general—be they wise or foolish, just or wicked—are as ordinary as animals, vain and ephemeral. After all they are nothing but הַבַּל, vapor (see also 9:2).

Qoheleth reasons in 3:19–20 that humans and animals share the same fate, which is death because they are of the same essence: “**One** breath for all of them. An advantage of humans over animals there is not, because everything is vapor. All go to **one** place. All has come from dust, and all returns to dust.” Obviously, Qoheleth bases these sentences on the concept that humans consist of dust and breath, the same as in Gen 2. In Gen 2:7, humans are created in a double process: First, God forms a human being from the dust of the ground, then he breathes breath of life in it. Admittedly, Gen 2:7 reads נִשְׁמַת חַיִּים (= “breath of life”) instead of רוּחַ (= “breath”). Nonetheless, נִשְׁמַת חַיִּים seems to correspond to רוּחַ. According to Gen 2:19, God creates all animals from the ground as well, but in Gen 2:19 it is not explicitly mentioned that God bequeaths them with breath of life (נִשְׁמַת חַיִּים). Qoheleth, however, seems to presuppose in 3:19–20 that animals have it, as well<sup>55</sup> (see also Gen 7:15, where they clearly have “breath of life” [רוּחַ חַיִּים]; see also Ps 104:29–30). Gen 3:19 then announces that humans will return to the ground because they are taken from the dust and to dust they will return. So, Qoheleth assumes that the material body of both humans and animals will disintegrate into dust. It returns to where it has been taken. However, what happens to the breath of humans and animals? Qoheleth does not answer this question!

In 3:21, Qoheleth seems to question another common assumption of his time, departing from the notion that humans and animals share the same essence:<sup>56</sup> “Who knows if the breath of human children rises upward, but the breath of animals descends downward to the earth?” (21). It is not clear where this idea of an ascent and descent stems from and what it means. The ascent is likely to imply an ascent into a divine sphere. Perhaps Qoheleth alludes to beliefs of his Hellenistic environment according to which the soul is immortal and ascends after death.<sup>57</sup> Cicero’s works, for instance, detail the idea that the soul moves upward like air,

55. Hieke, Freude (2012), 86.

56. More on that e. g. in Lux, Tod und Gerechtigkeit (2009), 55–56.

57. Lohfink, Kohelet (1999), 35.

or vapor, or fluid once it has left the body.<sup>58</sup>

Wherever the notion of ascending breath comes from, Qoheleth seems to contradict a theory according to which humans and animals follow different paths after death. He expresses his doubts with the condescending question “Who knows ...?”. His skepticism does not so much aim at the notion that the breath of human beings ascends after death. It is rather directed at the assumption that after death, humans and animals do not share the same fate.<sup>59</sup> After all, the phrase “Who knows ...” refers to both parts of 3:21. According to Qoheleth, humans and animals have one and the same breath, and they go to one and the same place (see 3:20). He does not differentiate between them. It would be plausible if in 3:20–21 Qoheleth reacted to actual opinions held by his contemporaries who hope for life in heaven after death as far as they are concerned but expect animals to enter the netherworld.<sup>60</sup>

His thoughts make Qoheleth realize: “Then I saw that there is no happiness other than that humans enjoy what they do. Yes, that is their portion! For who can bring them to see what will be after them?” (3:22). In 2:17, Qoheleth had hated life because of the equality of the wise and the fools. He had conceived of deeds as something evil. Now, he is suddenly talking about happiness and joy. There is an explanation for this mood swing: In 2:13–17, Qoheleth’s reflections on wisdom crashed everything that had made sense to him before. By revealing that there is no permanent benefit for wise over fools, he lost his purpose of life and he sank into despair.

Now 3:16–22 shows that Qoheleth’s attitude has changed. The reason for this change is: In the first part of the book, Qohelet does not stop at the conclusion to scorn life. In 2:18–23 he pushes the boundaries of his thoughts even further. He can finally detach himself from the assumption that he can produce happiness all by himself by accumulating wisdom, possessions, and desire (2:24a). He recognizes that everything is in God’s hand (2:24b-26) and that there is a time

---

58. Birnbaum/Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet* (2012), 121.

59. In agreement with Fischer, *Apokalyptik* (1998), 339–356 and Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Lehre vom absoluten Tod* (2003), 215.

60. Krüger, *Leben und Tod* (2009), 63 FN 5.

for everything (3:1–8). Only those who can accept and understand happiness as a gift from God will be able to enjoy the happiness that stems from their possessions during the time given to them by God (2:24; 3:12).

On the one hand, Qoheleth comes to even more radical conclusions as to the topic of death in 3:16–21. On the other hand, he reaches a different conclusion because of his reflecting on God and time in 2:24–3:15.

Given the fact that nothing can be said beyond death— (3:22; see also 2:12, 18), Qoheleth decides to dedicate himself entirely to this life. After all, it is in his capabilities to make sense of it and to grow with it. Life dictates humans a limited time span (3:1–8). It is their responsibility to use it well.<sup>61</sup>

3:16–22 ends on a positive, life-affirming note, in contrast to 2:13–17. Life is immensely valuable despite—no, because of—death. Qoheleth's thinking results in an invitation to enjoy life.

#### 4. Eccl 2:13–17 and 3:16–22 in the Context of the Book

Qoheleth's reflections in 2:13–17 and 3:16–22 might induce to assume that he denies any kind of life after death. However, Qoheleth does not yet conclude his thoughts on death and evanescence in 3:22. In the course of his ongoing reflections, he gives more examples and diversifies his statements on death and evanescence from 2:13–17 and 3:16–22 (especially in 6:3–9 and 9:1–6). The text that takes up a thought from 3:16–22 and develops it further is the poem about happiness, old age, and death in 11:9–12:7.

This poem constitutes the end of the fourth part and of the book in its entirety. This position justifies the assumption that the poem plays quite an important role.<sup>62</sup> In it, Qoheleth calls upon a young man<sup>63</sup> to be happy and light-hearted in the face of illness and death (11:9) and to acknowledge their creator (12:1). In 12:7, he picks up from where he left off in 3:19–21. There he had explained that both humans and animals consist of breath and dust. As both come from dust, both will return to dust. However, what happens to the breath of humans and

61. More on 3:22 in Willmes, Lehen (2018), 378.

62. More in Spieckermann, *Jugend–Alter–Tod* (2020), 195.

63. 11:8 says more generally that humans (אָדָם) should enjoy all the days of their lives.

animals, Qoheleth had not said yet at that point. His rhetorical question in 3:21 merely puts into doubt that the breath of humans and animals takes two different routes: “Who knows if the breath of human children rises upward, but the breath of animals descends downward to the earth?”<sup>64</sup>

In his poem on happiness, old age, and death, Qoheleth picks up these loose ends: “Remember your creator in the days of your youth until the days of evil come and the years approach in which you say: I do not find any pleasure in them! [... Until] the dust returns to the earth as what it used to be and the breath returns to God, who has given it” (12:1–7). Again, Qoheleth assumes that humans consist of two components, dust, and breath, departing from the anthropological concept depicted in Gen 2 and underlying 3:19–21.<sup>65</sup> However, in contrast to 3:19–21, he now unfolds what happens to the breath after death. While the material body of humans disintegrates into dust and returns to where it was originally taken from, the breath equally returns to where it came from (Gen 2:7)—to God. Neither 3:19–21 nor 12:7 detail what exactly the breath of humans denotes. The Hebrew word for breath (רוח) has multiple meanings. Breath (רוח) can denote “wind”, “spirit”, “power”, and “vitality”. Thus, the term belongs to the semantic field of “breath”, “spirit”, and “life”. According to Gen 1:2, the divine spirit, רוח, is moving above the waters before the start of creation. The Hebrew Bible consistently traces the רוח back to God. It gives life (see e.g. Ps 104:27–30) and is a power that enables someone to fulfill certain commissions (see e.g. Jg 3:10; 11:29). רוח denotes the principle of life that depends on God.<sup>66</sup>

64. Some biblical scholars consider 12:7 a secondary gloss because it would contradict 3:21, e.g. Michel, *Qohelet* (1988), 167. In my opinion, however, this verse does not really contradict 3:21. The latter verse does not deny the ascent of the breath, but rather aims at the question whether the breath of humans and the breath of animals take different routes, in agreement with Krüger, *Kohelet*, (2000), 356.

65. More on this in Hieke, *Freude* (2012), 185–187.

66. More on this notion of רוח in Tengström, 396–399, (2020) רוח and Schüngel-Straumann, *Geist* (2009).

This *רוח* is given by God, and it remains on by returning to God.<sup>67</sup>

## 5. Conclusion and Prospects

The following paragraphs summarize the results of the analysis under four key points and scrutinize them for further findings.

### Death as the Ultimate Boundary

What has become clear is firstly this: Qoheleth considers death the ultimate boundary<sup>68</sup>. According to him, each individual life has a fixed framework. Every human life is limited by birth and by death: “A generation goes, and a generation comes”, and “(There is) a time to give birth and a time to die”, says Qoheleth in 1:4 and 3:2. Humans will not forever have their share in what is under the sun (9:6), because their lives are limited. What follows from Qoheleth’s statements is this: It would be an illusion to believe in a life after death in the sense that it merely prolongs life on earth. Humans as beings that consist of dust and breath do no longer exist after death (3:19–20; 12:7). Even the belief that the just and the wise will live on in the memories of others is bound to fail because sooner or later everything will be forgotten (1:11; 2:16; 9:5; see also 8:10).

### Life as a One-Time Opportunity

Secondly, if humans accept death as the ultimate boundary, they may as well gain a new perspective on life (3:22). It is true that death ends their lives irrevocably, but it also allows them to seize every day as a one-time opportunity. While they live, humans have access to possessions, wealth, and wisdom (e.g. 5:18; 6:2; 7:11; 9:9). After death, all of this becomes inaccessible to them—even

67. What is remarkable: The poem on happiness, old age, and death in 12:5 talks about a “house of eternity” to which humans go. The phrase *בית עולם* (= house of eternity) is likely to refer to 3:11, in which God is claimed to have given eternity, Hebrew *עולם*, into the hearts of human children. More about the difficult interpretation of these statements, which are unique in the context of the Hebrew Bible, in Spieckermann *Jugend–Alter–Tod* (2020), 207–208. See also the interpretation of *בית עולם* (= house of eternity) in Hieke, *Freude* (2012), 184–185.

68. Kutschera, *Leben* (1997), 364, speaks of a “definitive death” (“definitive Tod”).

wisdom. The dead have no share in life on earth (9:5–6). Qoheleth opts for accepting the boundaries of the individual life as God-given and for acknowledging possessions, wealth, and wisdom as gifts from God (e.g. 2:24), which are to be enjoyed within the framework of life (e.g. 3:12–13). Humans should seize their finiteness as an opportunity, a one-time opportunity, to make the best of their lives within the framework set for them.<sup>69</sup> With this attitude, Qoheleth encourages his audience to enjoy life. At the same time his invitation to be happy, to eat, and to drink, should not be misunderstood as a call to a hedonistic lifestyle to the detriment of others. For Qoheleth also complains about the social evils of his time, as for instance injustices at court (3:16–17; 5:7), the exploitation of the poor (4:1; 5:7), fierce competition (4:4), and closed elitist networks (5:7). This shows Qoheleth's conviction that humans have a responsibility towards their fellow-humans and that all humans have a right to the goods provided by God<sup>70</sup>.

## Human Cognition Is Limited

The third observation is this: Qoheleth bases his thoughts on experiences in this world<sup>71</sup> (e. g. by saying “I saw”<sup>72</sup> or “I observed”; e.g. 2:13; 3:16). He is, in general, skeptical when it comes to speculations about the realm that is inaccessible to the human experience. For instance, in 3:22 he says: “For who can bring them to see what will be after them?” (also 3:11; 6:11–12; 7:14; 8:7–8, 16; 9:1, 12; 11:5).

Qoheleth observes the world as it is and draws his conclusions from that. He refutes any theology that does not take the limits of human cognition seriously (e.g. 3:22). However, it has also become clear that Qoheleth himself cannot do without any speculation, for instance, when he speaks about a place where humans and animals go (3:20; 6:6) to after death or when he talks of the רוח that af-

69. Krüger, *Leben und Tod* (2009), 61–62.

70. Krüger, *Leben und Tod* (2009), 63–64.

71. However, Qoheleth does not question the existence of God or that he created everything. This he presupposes instead.

72. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes* (1992), XXX, points out that the book of Ecclesiastes contains 21 times the verb ראה (= see, observe) in the first person singular. For more on this, see also Wolfe, *Qoheleth* (2020), 56.

ter death returns to God (2:7). Nevertheless, he remains very reticent and vague in his few speculations on the topic of death.<sup>73</sup> This might be the major difference between him and the views of his surroundings, which he obviously criticizes.

## ■ Is Death the End of Everything?

The fourth conclusion is: Even though Qohelet is skeptical of assumptions about death, since they are not accessible to the human experience, his thinking does not operate under a “theory of absolute death”<sup>74</sup>.

In the context of the entire Book of Ecclesiastes, it becomes obvious that Qoheleth believes the *רוח*—which is given by God and which brings humans to live (Gen 2:7)—to eventually outlive them. Qohelet clarifies, after death the breath will go back to God (12:7). What he leaves open is what that means: For instance, what mode of existence<sup>75</sup> is associated with these thoughts? What kind of quality does the breath has according to Qohelet? Moreover, what are the consequences for each single human being?<sup>76</sup> Understandably, Qohelet, who respects the limitation of human cognition, remains silent on this, but neither does he claim that after death, everything would be over.

However, when Qoheleth talks about the process of dying, it is also evident that for him, humans do not persist after death as beings that consist of dust and breath. What remains is this: Death is the ultimate boundary for life how it is experienced on earth. However, this remains, too: Life on earth is a singular event. Humans should make the best out of it, use it well, and enjoy it. Qoheleth does not tire of repeating this message. 9:7–10 summarizes this attitude well:<sup>77</sup>

“Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a happy heart, because God has approved of your deeds for a long time already. In every moment,

73. More on Qoheleth’s Epistemology in Fox, Qohelet (1989), 79–80.85–89.

74. Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Lehre vom absoluten Tod* (2003), 215–219.

75. Hieke, *Freude* (2012), 188.

76. Lux, *Tod und Gerechtigkeit* (2009), 59–63 and Sitzler, *Tod* (2020), 247.

77. Eccl 9:7–10 is a prominent example of the *Carpe Diem* motive (see also 3:22 and others). More background information on this motive in the history of religions is provided by Fischer, *Lebensfreude* (1999).

your clothes may be white, and the anointing oil on your head may never run out. Enjoy life with your wife, which you love, all the days of your life full of vapor, which he gives you under the sun, all your days full of vapor. For this is your portion of life and of your toils at which you toil under the sun.”

Translation: Juliane Eckstein

## Bibliography

- BIRNBAUM, Elisabeth; SCHWIENHOSRT-SCHÖNBERGER, Ludger. *Kohelet*. (NSKAT 14/2). Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk 2012.
- BIRNBAUM, Elisabeth. *Der Koheletkommentar des Hieronymus*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014.
- BIRNBAUM, Elisabeth. „Das Buch Kohelet – Der Prediger Salomo“. In: BALHORN, Egbert u.a.: *73 Ouvertüren. Die Buchanfänge der Bibel und ihre Botschaft*. Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlaghaus, 2018.
- FISCHER, Alexander A. „Kohelet und die frühe Apokalypitk. Eine Auslegung von Koh 3,16-21“. In: SCHOORS, A. (Hg.). *Oohelet in the Context of Wisdom*. (BETL CXXXVI). Leuven, 1998, 339-356.
- FISCHER, Stefan. *Die Aufforderung zur Lebensfreude im Buch Kohelet und seine Rezeption der ägyptischen Harfnerlieder*. (WAS 2). Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1999.
- FOX, Michael V. *Qohelet and his contradictions*. (JSOTS.S 71). Sheffield, 1989.
- HAUSMANN, Jutta. „Weisheit (AT)“. In: *Das Wissenschaftliche Bibellexikon im Internet* ([www.wiblex.de](http://www.wiblex.de)), 2009 (Zugriffdatum: 23.07.2020).
- HIEKE, Thomas. „Das Gedicht über Freude, Alter und Tod am Ende des Koheletbuches“. In: *Alterzäsuren* (2012), 171-191.
- KÖHLMOOS, Melanie. *Kohelet. Der Prediger Salomo*. (ATD 16,5). Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015.
- KRÜGER, Thomas. *Kohelet (Prediger)*. BKAT XIX (Sonderband). Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2000.
- KRÜGER, Thomas. „Leben und Tod nach Kohelet und Paulus“. In: Ders. *Das menschliche Herz und die Weisung Gottes. Studien zu alttestamentlichen Anthropologie und Ethik*. (AThANT 96). Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2009, 59-77.
- KUTSCHERA, Franz. „Kohelet: Leben im Angesicht des Todes“. In: SCHWIENHORST-SCHÖNBERGER, Ludger. *Das Buch Kohelet. Studien zur*



- Struktur, Geschichte, Rezeption und Theologie.* (BZAW 245). Berlin: De Gruyter, 1997, 363-375.
- LAUHA, Aarre. *Kohelet.* (BKAT 19). Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1978
- LOHFINK, Norbert. „Technik und Tod nach Kohelet“. In: SCHLIER, Heinrich. *Strukturen christlicher Existenz.* Würzburg: Echter, 1968, 27-35.
- LOHFINK, Norbert. *Kohelet.* (NEB.AT). Würzburg: Echter 1999.
- LUX, Rüdiger. „Tod und Gerechtigkeit im Buch Kohelet“. In: BERLEJUNG, Angelika. *Tod und Jenseits im alten Israel und in seiner Umwelt.* (FZAT 64). Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009, 43-65.
- MICHEL, Diethelm. *Qohelet.* (EdF 258). Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1988.
- MÜLLNER, Ilse. *Das hörende Herz. Weisheit in der hebräischen Bibel.* Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2006.
- MURPHY, Roland E. *Ecclesiastes.* (WBC Vol. 23A). Dallas: Word Books, 1992.
- PIRKER, Viera, Megilla Kohelet zu Sukkot. „Psychologische Annäherungen an einen biblischen Autor und ein jüdisches Fest“. In: JÜNGLING, Hans-Winfried und KÖRNER, Christoph (Hg.): „... denn das ist der ganze Mensch“: *Die Textrollen der jüdischen Feste. Kohelet, Ester, Hoheslied, Rut, Klagelieder.* (SBS, 227). Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2012, S. 15–36.
- SCHELLENBERG, Annette. *Der Mensch, das Bild Gottes? Zum Gedanken einer Sonderstellung des Menschen im Alten Testament und in weiteren altorientalischen Quellen.* (ATHANT 101). Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2011.
- SCHELLENBERG, Annette. *Kohelet.* (ZBAK.AT 17). Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2013.
- SITZLER, Jean Pierre. *Der Tod in den Weisheitsschriften des Alten Testaments. Eine Untersuchung zu den Büchern Kohelet und Weisheit.* (ATS 104). Sankt Ottilien: EOS-Editions, 2019.
- SCHOORS, Antoon. *Ecclesiastes.* (Historical Commentary on the Old Testament 12)Leuven: Peeters, 2013.
- SPIECKERMANN, Hermann. „Jugend–Alter–Tod. Kohelets abschließende Reflexion: Koh 11:7-12:8“. In: *Vetus Testamentum* 70 (2020), 193-208.
- SCHÜNGEL-STRAUTMANN, Helen. „Geist (AT)“. In: *Das Wissenschaftliche Bibellexikon im Internet* ([www.wiblex.de](http://www.wiblex.de)), 2009 (Zugriffsdatum: 23.07.2020).

- SCHWIENHORST-SCHÖNBERGER, Ludger. „Nicht im Menschen gründet das Glück“ (2,14). *Kohelet im Spannungsfeld jüdischer Weisheit und hellenistischer Philosophie*. (HBS). Freiburg: Herder, 1992.
- SCHWIENHORST-SCHÖNBERGER, Ludger. „Vertritt Kohelet die Lehre vom absoluten Tod? Zum Argumentationsgang von Koh 9,1-6“. In: FISCHER, Irmtraud. *Auf den Spuren der schriftgelehrten Weisen. Festschrift für Johannes Marböck anlässlich seiner Emeritierung*. (BZAW 331). Berlin: De Gruyter, 2003, 207-219.
- SCHWIENHORST-SCHÖNBERGER, Ludger. *Kohelet*. (HTk AT). Freiburg: Herder, 2004.
- SCHWIENHORST-SCHÖNBERGER, Ludger. *Das Buch Kohelet*. In: FRELVEL, Christian. *Einleitung in das Alte Testament*. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2016<sup>9</sup>, 467-476.
- WILLMES, Bernd. *Menschliches Schicksal und ironische Weisheitskritik im Koheletbuch. Kohelets Ironie und die Grenzen der Exegese*. (Biblisch-Theologische Studien 39). Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2000.
- WILLMES, Bernd. „Lehren für das Leben des weisen Kohelet für Jünglinge.“ In: PEETZ, Melanie; HUEBENTHAL, Sandra. *Ästhetik, sinnlicher Genuss und gute Manieren. Ein biblisches Menü in 25 Gängen. Festschrift für Hans-Winfried Jüngling SJ*. (ÖBS 50). Berlin: Peter Lang, 2018, 377-393.
- WITTE, Markus. „Prediger/Predigerbuch“. In: *Das Wissenschaftliche Bibellexikon im Internet* ([www.wiblex.de](http://www.wiblex.de)), 2006 (Zugriffsdatum: 23.07.2020).
- WOLFE, Lisa Michele. *Qoheleth (Ecclesiastes)*. (WCS 24). Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2020.
- TENGSTRÖM, Sven. קהלת. In: BOTTERWECK, Johannes. *ThWAT* (Bd. VII). Darmstadt: WBG, 2020, Sp. 382-418.
- ZIMMER, Tilmann. *Zwischen Tod und Lebensglück. Eine Untersuchung zur Anthropologie Kohelets* (BZAW 286). Berlin: De Gruyter, 1999.