

Time(less)
Ecclesiastes 3:1-11
Pierre Cannings
Bible Study - Tuesday, July 12, 2022

- I. Appointment Time v.1
- a. Appointed Time
- i. *Time* simply means an ‘occasion’ or a ‘season’ of time; *purpose* pinpoints what one wants to do.
 - ii. bound nature of his undertakings and reflections:¹³ Just like the contingencies of fate, death, and God, time also limits his power of disposition over his own life
 - iii. For everything
 1. they are without doubt a further example of the “futility” (הֶבֶל *hebel*) of all human activity and striving.
- b. Time for Every Event
- i. Event- Matter Business
 1. The Hebrew word for “activity,” always used of people, literally means “desire,” and then by metonymy “what one desires” (cf. Isa. 58:13). For these willful acts people are held accountable (cf. Ecc. 3:17). Each activity, wrote Solomon, has its proper “time” (point in time) and **season** (duration).
 - ii. Under Heaven the stress is on the fact that the *realizability* of every plan is *limited* because it requires a favorable time
 1. First, the changing of the times sets a limit on the *duration* of any possible gain—and not just in regard to “eternity”
- II. In Time v.2-8
- “advantages and disadvantages, good and bad sides” of life.²⁸ Not all of the paired actions are mutually exclusive

¹³ Of the activities named in 3:2–8*, the following can be related back to 1:12–2:26*: “dying” (מות *mwt*: 3:2a*/2:16*), “planting” (נטע *nṭʿ*: 3:2b*/2:4–5*), “building” (בנה *bnh*: 3:3b*/2:4*), “laughing” (שחק *śḥq*: 3:4a*/2:2*), “gathering” (כנס *kns*: 3:5a*/2:8*, 26*), “speaking” (דבר *dbr*: 3:7b*/1:16*; 2:15*), “hating” (שנא *śnʾ*: 3:8a*/2:17–18*).

²⁸ Thus Loretz, *Qohelet*, 252; and, e.g., Loader.

- but all the manifold pursuits of men, creative and destructive, good and evil, benevolent and malevolent
- a concern for the recognition of the right moment is fundamental
- The common denominator of the phenomena named in vv. 2–8 seems, nonetheless, to consist above all in the fact that favorable or unfavorable temporal circumstances both allow and limit the success of human actions. Yet the fulfillment of one’s plans are, in any case, not reliably at one’s disposal solely through one’s own efforts.) Yet at the same time, the adduced examples also show that the time–bound nature of human action exhibits wide variations in specific cases, and thus the degree of human freedom to decide and act is defined anew in each individual case.
 - a. Time Constraints v.2-3
 - i. Life and Death
 1. Birth and Death
 2. Kill and Heal
 3. Tear Down and Build Up
 - ii. There is a beginning and end to life humans are constrained to time
 - b. Time for Relationships (Emotions) v.4-5
 - i. Emotions
 1. Weep and Laugh
 2. Mourn and Dance
 3. Throw Stones and Collect
 - a. ‘Gathering stones together’ will refer to preparing the way for a military conqueror (cf. Isa. 62:10); casting stones will refer to military aggression by ruining an enemy’s fields.
 4. Embrace and Not Embrace
 - c. Time for Togetherness or Separation
 - i. Search or Give up
 - ii. Tear Apart or Sew Together
 1. Tearing up (clothes) and remaining silent are sometimes interpreted as a signs of mourning Yet “tearing up” and “sewing together” can simply refer to a process “out of everyday domestic life
 2. mourning (tearing one’s clothes and remaining silent; cf. Job 2:12–13), and its end (sewing one’s clothes and speaking out). If so, it would relate to the mourning in Ecclesiastes 3:4.
 - iii. Silent or Speak
 - iv. Love and Hate
 - v. War and Peace
 - i. 3:8. Solomon closed his list of opposites by referring to life’s two basic emotions, **love** and **hate**, and the most hostile expression of the latter,

war, and its opposite, **peace**. It may be significant that the list closes, somewhat as it began, with a set of opposites (war and peace) over which a person has little control

III. Timeless v.10-11

a. Task God has given Men

i. Task – Business Affair

1. Work is not simply a part of nature but is an affliction from God (Gen 3:17–19).

ii. Occupy -Troubled:

1. Our entrapment in time is another indication of our mortality
2. Our labor is thus a lifelong affliction with no eternal results

b. Made Everything

i. Made- Do perform work, Genesis 1:31 Beautiful good

ii. Appropriate in Time- Right

1. “Beautiful” here means “appropriate.”³⁷¹ If we can accept life as it is, even the hard parts will be bearable. Yet there is a catch.
2. that point to the ordering of “time” and its determination by God. Thus, for example, Pss 104:27^{4*} and 145:15^{5*} emphasize the “timeliness” of God’s provisioning of creation with

c. Set Eternity

i. In their Heart

ii. Eternity- But we long for eternity and cannot be content with time alone

1. ‘Eternity’ was important in Israel’s heritage. An eternal life had been lost (Gen. 3:22), an ‘eternal covenant’ inaugurated (Gen. 9:16) by an eternal God (Ps. 90:2). An eternal priesthood (Exod. 40:15) and an eternal kingdom (2 Sam. 7:13) were bestowed by a God eternally merciful (Ps. 111:5), giving his people eternal joy (Isa. 35:10). The eternity of God’s dealings with mankind corresponds to something inside us: we have a capacity for eternal things, are concerned about the future, want to understand ‘from the beginning to the end’, and have a sense of something which transcends our immediate situation. Scripture speaks of our creation in the ‘image’ or ‘glory’ of God (Gen. 1:26f.), a glory which is largely forfeited (Rom. 3:23) yet not obliterated (1 Cor. 11:7; Jas 3:9). Our consciousness of God is part

³⁷¹ Fox, *Qohelet*, 193.

^{4*} ²⁷ These all look to you to give them their food in due season;

Psalm 104:27 (NRSV)

^{5*} ¹⁵ The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season.

Psalm 145:15 (NRSV)

of our nature, and the suppression of it is part of our sin (Rom. 1:18–21).

2.

d. Man Will not Find

- i. God's Plan from beginning to the end
- ii. Each aspect of life has its 'time': rain (Lev. 26:4), the downfall of God's enemies (Deut. 32:35), conception (2 Kgs 4:16f.). Hence the great need of 'insight into times' (1 Chr. 12:32; cf. Eccl. 8:5). Wisdom involves knowing 'the times' (Esth. 1:13); godliness says 'My times are in your hands' (Ps. 31:15). The Preacher holds a similar viewpoint: the 'times' of life cannot be fully known (**9:11f.**) but 'in all time' (9:8) one should be content
- iii. The Preacher's vast researchers have found nothing in the finite earthly realm which can satisfy the human heart intellectually or practically. Though he has resolved to understand 'all' that is under the sun (1:13), there is that within him which makes him realize he can never comprehend God's plan in its entirety

Word Studies

Appointed time- There is an appointed time, hour, point in time

Every – Whole, all

Event – matter business

Task – business affair

Occupy- be troubled

Made- Do perform work , Genesis 1:31 Beautiful good

Appropriate- right

Commentary Studies

This text is a masterpiece of wisdom poetry. J. A. Loader observes that the verses move back and forth among desirable and undesirable aspects of life,⁶⁶² and he correctly notes that the book is not telling the reader how to attain the former and avoid the latter. Nevertheless, he, like others, wrongly supposes that the point of this text is that an arbitrary deity manipulates human affairs and that the only appropriate response is resignation to fate.⁶⁷³ Ecclesiastes is not

⁶⁶² For a presentation of chiasmic structuring in this passage, see J. A. Loader, *Polar Structures in the Book of Qohelet*, BZAW 152 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1979), 11–13.

⁶⁷³ Ibid.; see also Loader, *Ecclesiastes*, 33–38. Cf. J. L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), 92.

concerned about questions of “cyclic” versus “linear” time. These verses concern not divine providence or abstract notions of time but human mortality.⁶⁸⁴

Life is composed of joy and sorrow, building and destroying, and living and dying. Each comes at the proper time. This reminds us that we are creatures of time and not yet able to partake of the joys of eternity. No one can be happy who has not come to grips with the reality that life is full of changes and sorrows as well as continuity and joy. We must accept that we are mortal and governed by time.

3:1 The poem concerns life “under heaven.” It is not so much a theological statement as an observation on human life in the human world.

3:2 Instead of a time to “be born” the Hebrew term should be rendered “give birth.”⁶⁹⁵ Giving birth and planting are both ways of giving life.

3:3 Destruction and killing are part of life and cannot be avoided, although healing and building are certainly preferable. Ecclesiastes is not concerned here with ethical questions of what constitutes a just war or the like. The Teacher is merely asserting that in a world where death is a central fact of life, there will also be a time to kill.

3:4 There is a progression of intensity from line *a* to line *b*. Both sorrow and joy are part of life; without one the other is unrecognizable.

3:5 The meaning of line *a* is uncertain, but the *Midrash Rabbah* took it to refer to sexual union. This is possible in light of line *b*.⁶¹⁰⁶ Other possibilities include casting stones to make a field unworkable (as in warfare), or clearing a field of stones to prepare the soil, or the use of stones as counters to record the number of sheep in a flock.⁶¹¹⁷ If a sexual meaning is present, the verse would be saying that this too is fleeting.

3:6 Nothing in this world is ours forever.

3:7 This may allude to mourning and funerals. Mourners tore their clothes, and their comforters kept silent during times of grief, but people were free to repair clothes and freely converse at other times.⁶¹²⁸

3:8 Perfect peace does not exist on earth. The verse is arranged chiasmically: love: hate: war: peace. “Love” and “hate” represent personal feelings, while “war” and “peace” represent socio-political conditions.⁶¹³⁹

Verses 9–15a are not formally part of the wisdom poem of vv. 1–8 but are a reflection on and exposition of it. The logic of vv. 9–14 may be described as follows:

⁸⁶⁴ Contrary to Fox (*Qohelet*, 192) vv. 11, 14 do not establish that divine activity is in view in vv. 1–8. Verse 14 stresses the eternal character of God’s work, but vv. 1–8 stresses the brevity and impermanence of human activity.

⁹⁶⁵ Note the use of the Qal infinitive of לָרַחַם rather than the Niphal stem. Cf. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 94–95.

¹⁰⁶⁶ Cf. Loader, *Polar Structures*, 31.

¹¹⁶⁷ See Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 94–95.

¹²⁶⁸ See Loader, *Polar Structures*, 32. Crenshaw (*Ecclesiastes*, 96) observes that Job’s friends tore their clothes and sat in silence for seven days but comments that this verse need not be restricted to the idea of mourning.

¹³⁶⁹ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 34.

First Conclusion: Our entrapment in time is another indication of our mortality (v. 9).
 Second Conclusion: Our labor is thus a lifelong affliction with no eternal results (v. 10).
 Qualification: Yet every aspect of life is appropriate in its time and should be accepted as such (v. 11a).
 Counterqualification: But we long for eternity and cannot be content with time alone (v. 11b).
 First Addendum: People prefer the joys of life to the sorrows (v. 12).
 Correlative to First Addendum: But the ability to enjoy life is itself a gift of God and thus under his control (v. 13).
 Second Addendum: Only God's work has the perfection and eternal worth for which people long (v. 14a, b).
 Correlative to Second Addendum: God uses time and mortality to humble the human race (v. 14c).

3:9 Human mortality extends beyond the fact of physical death; it is the nullification of all that people do as well (cf. Gen 3:17–19).

3:10 This verse should be rendered, "I have seen all the business God has given to people to afflict them."⁷¹⁴⁰ Work is not simply a part of nature but is an affliction from God (Gen 3:17–19).

3:11 "Beautiful" here means "appropriate."⁷¹⁵¹ If we can accept life as it is, even the hard parts will be bearable. Yet there is a catch. We feel like aliens in the world of time and yearn to be part of eternity.⁷¹⁶² We feel the need for ourselves and our work to be eternal and yet are grieved to be trapped in time. We also desire to understand our place in the universe against the backdrop of eternity. But we cannot find out what God has done from beginning to end. That is, we are not able to discern any plan or pattern to all of this. God's purposes are outside our realm of control or investigation. We thus have a sense of alienation and bewilderment in time.¹⁷

¹⁴⁷⁰ Or "to keep them busy." If "be busy" is the meaning of the word ענה here, it only carries that meaning elsewhere in the Bible in Eccl 1:13. Otherwise it must have the more common meaning, in the Piel, "to afflict." See BHS note.

¹⁵⁷¹ Fox, *Qohelet*, 193.

¹⁶⁷² עולם here means "eternity" and not "world" (which makes no sense in context) or "darkness" (an interpretation maintained by R. F. Youngblood, "Qoheleth's Dark House," in *A Tribute to Gleason Archer*, ed. W. C. Kaiser, Jr. and R. F. Youngblood [Chicago: Moody, 1986], 211–27; it is not supported by sufficient evidence). Nor should the text be amended to עמל (*labor*), as in Fox, *Qohelet*, 195.

¹⁷ Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, vol. 14, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1993), 297–299.

In the course of reading, one may understand this section as a continuation of the comments of King Qoheleth in 1:12–2:26.¹⁸¹ Verse 9 would then (as a rhetorical question) reinforce his assertion in 2:11^{19*} that there is no gain under the sun, and vv. 1–8 could be read as an illustration of his remarks on fate (מִקְרָה *miqreh*) in 2:14–15.²⁰² The king would then be pondering here, in retrospect, the time-bound nature of his undertakings and reflections:²¹³ Just like the contingencies of fate, death, and God, time also limits his power of disposition over his own life. From the king’s perspective, this state of affairs would without doubt be judged negatively (הֶבֶל *hebel*). As in 1:3–11, however, 3:1–9 also lacks any evaluation of the described state of affairs. Then 3:11^{22*} let the time-bound nature of all events appear in a positive light: God “has made everything *beautiful* in its time”! Since 3:10^{23*} begins a critical revision of the king’s reflections in 1:12–2:26, it is perhaps more appropriate in the greater compositional context to understand 3:1–9^{24*} (in a second reading) as a poetic interlude corresponding to 1:3–11^{25*}, “a sort of meditative pause” (Lohfink) between the reflections of “King Qoheleth” in

¹⁸¹ Thus, e.g., Lohfink, who regards 2:24–3:15 as a unit, in which the royal fiction is taken up in 2:25*.

^{19*} ¹¹ Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had spent in doing it, and again, all was vanity and a chasing after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.

Ecclesiastes 2:11 (NRSV)

²⁰² Cf. Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism*, 1:125, on *καῖρός* and *χρόνος* as “concepts of fate” in the Greek–Hellenistic world.

²¹³ Of the activities named in 3:2–8*, the following can be related back to 1:12–2:26*: “dying” (מות *mwt*: 3:2a*/2:16*), “planting” (נטע *ntʿ*: 3:2b*/2:4–5*), “building” (בנה *bnh*: 3:3b*/2:4*), “laughing” (שחק *shq*: 3:4a*/2:2*), “gathering” (כנס *kns*: 3:5a*/2:8*, 26*), “speaking” (דבר *dbr*: 3:7b*/1:16*; 2:15*), “hating” (שנא *snʿ*: 3:8a*/2:17–18*).

^{22*} ¹¹ He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.

Ecclesiastes 3:11 (NRSV)

^{23*} ¹⁰ I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with.

Ecclesiastes 3:10 (NRSV)

^{24*} ¹ For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

² a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;

³ a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up;

⁴ a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance;

⁵ a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;

⁶ a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away;

⁷ a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

⁸ a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.

⁹ What gain have the workers from their toil?

Ecclesiastes 3:1–9 (NRSV)

^{25*} ³ What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun?

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

⁵ The sun rises and the sun goes down, and hurries to the place where it rises.

⁶ The wind blows to the south, and goes around to the north; round and round goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns.

1:12–2:26 and those of the “wise man Qoheleth” in 3:10–4:12^{26*}. May one perhaps also see in the closing of the “catalog of the times” (vv. 2–8) with “a time for peace” (עֵת שָׁלוֹם *’ēt šālôm*) an indication of the end of the “Solomonic” royal travesty?

⁷ All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow, there they continue to flow.

⁸ All things are wearisome; more than one can express; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, or the ear filled with hearing.

⁹ What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun.

¹⁰ Is there a thing of which it is said, “See, this is new”? It has already been, in the ages before us.

¹¹ 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.

Ecclesiastes 1:3–11 (NRSV)

^{26*} ¹⁰ I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with.

¹¹ He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.

¹² I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live;

¹³ moreover, it is God’s gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil.

¹⁴ I know that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has done this, so that all should stand in awe before him.

¹⁵ That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already is; and God seeks out what has gone by.

¹⁶ Moreover I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, wickedness was there, and in the place of righteousness, wickedness was there as well.

¹⁷ I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for he has appointed a time for every matter, and for every work.

¹⁸ I said in my heart with regard to human beings that God is testing them to show that they are but animals.

¹⁹ For the fate of humans and the fate of animals is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and humans have no advantage over the animals; for all is vanity.

²⁰ All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again.

²¹ Who knows whether the human spirit goes upward and the spirit of animals goes downward to the earth?

²² So I saw that there is nothing better than that all should enjoy their work, for that is their lot; who can bring them to see what will be after them?

¹ Again I saw all the oppressions that are practiced under the sun. Look, the tears of the oppressed—with no one to comfort them! On the side of their oppressors there was power—with no one to comfort them.

² And I thought the dead, who have already died, more fortunate than the living, who are still alive;

³ but better than both is the one who has not yet been, and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun.

(Only first 15 verses of range shown)

Ecclesiastes 3:10–4:12 (NRSV)

In terms of content, 3:1–9 can be understood as a continuation and expansion of 1:3–11^{27*}: if it was a question there of the possibilities and limits of human activity on the horizon of “distant ages” (עוֹלָם/עוֹלָמִים *‘ōlām/‘ōlāmîm*), here we now see the smaller changes of “time” (תַּעַר *‘ēt*) within human life. There is also here a repetition of similar things, as expressed in 1:9^{28*}: “What has been done (once) is what will be done (again).”²⁹⁴ If in regard to distant time the question was raised as to what gain people could have from *all* their efforts (1:3) now, in view of the changing of the times, the focus is on the question of what gain can be secured for people through their *toil* (3:9)

■ **1** The introductory thesis is formulated in an artful parallelism of synonyms; its members are related to each other chiastically, and the second line contains an element that goes beyond the first:

	מַזְרֵן (b)	לְכָל (a)
תַּחַת הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ (c)	לְכָל־חַפָּץ (a')	וְעֵת (b')
(a) <i>lakkōl</i>	(b) <i>zēmān</i>	
(b') <i>wē'ēt</i>	(a') <i>lēkol-ḥēpeš</i>	(c) <i>taḥat haššāmāyim</i>

^{27*} ³ What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun?

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

⁵ The sun rises and the sun goes down, and hurries to the place where it rises.

⁶ The wind blows to the south, and goes around to the north; round and round goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns.

⁷ All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow, there they continue to flow.

⁸ All things are wearisome; more than one can express; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, or the ear filled with hearing.

⁹ What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun.

¹⁰ Is there a thing of which it is said, “See, this is new”? It has already been, in the ages before us.

¹¹ 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.

Ecclesiastes 1:3–11 (NRSV)

^{28*} ⁹ What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun.

Ecclesiastes 1:9 (NRSV)

²⁹⁴ Cf., e.g., Siegfried; Gordis; Lohfink.

“Everything” (כָּל־הַיְּמִינִים) [hak]kōl) in v. 1a^{30*} is further defined by “every matter under heaven” (כָּל־הַעֲשָׂוִים תַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם kol-ḥēpeš taḥat haššāmāyim) in v. 1b^{31*}: it is not a question here of “world events” in general, but rather, and especially, of “intentional” human activity (עֲשָׂוִים ḥēpeš = “pleasure, concern, interest, wish, desire, goal, purpose, matter, business”). Through the preposition ל l, the “most general relationship marker” in the system of Hebrew prepositions,³²⁵ this is connected with its “predetermined” or “appropriate” or “favorable time” (זְמַן zēman or עֵת ʿēt).³³⁶ Syntactically, in v. 1a and b we have existential statements with prepositionally added precision.³⁴⁷ They can be read in a double sense. If one accentuates more strongly the *relationship* between the two components (nominal group and prepositional group), the stress is on the fact that the *realizability* of every plan is *limited* because it requires a favorable time (cf. the frequent translation: “Everything has *its* time”). If, however, one lays the emphasis more

^{30*} ¹ For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

Ecclesiastes 3:1 (NRSV)

^{31*} ¹ For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

Ecclesiastes 3:1 (NRSV)

³²⁵ “In later Jewish literature, ʿēt is replaced by zēman” (E. Jenni, “עֵת ʿēt time,” *TLOT* 2:961). On ל l see Jenni, *Präpositionen*, 1:20–21.

³³⁶ Cf. R. Bartelmus, *Einführung in das biblische Hebräisch* (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1994), 45–46.

³⁴⁷ N. Lohfink, “The Present and Eternity: Time in Qoheleth,” *TD* 34 (1987) 237. Cf. Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism*, 1:165, on the “sevenfold structure” of the cosmos in Aristobulus. With Levy, we may ask whether the text alludes to astrological number speculations (Gordis argues against this). Loader (*comm.*; *Polar Structures*, 11ff.; “Qohelet 3, 2–8: A Sonnet in the Old Testament,” *ZAW* 81 [1969] 240–42) recommends a division of vv. 2–8* into four “strophes” that are distinguished from one another through the model of the sequence of “favourable” [f] and “unfavourable” [u] (or “desirable” and “undesirable”) actions: (I) vv. 2–3* (2x fu, 2x uf), (II) vv. 4–5* (2x uf, 2x fu), (III) vv. 6–7* (2x fu, 2x uf), (IV) v. 8* (fu – uf). Yet such a qualification is neither suggested by the text nor clearly preferable in every passage. Just as questionable is A. G. Wright’s (“‘For Everything There Is a Season.’ The Structure and Meaning of the Fourteen Opposites [Ecclesiastes 3, 2–8],” in M. Carrez, J. Doré, and P. Grelot, eds., *De la Tôra au Messie: Mélanges Henri Cazelles* [Paris: Desclée, 1981] 321–28) assumption that v. 4* and v. 7*, which are concerned with joy and sorrow, mark the close of two strophes, the first of which in vv. 2–3* names “constructive” and “destructive” actions, whereas the second in vv. 5–6* juxtaposes “union” and “separation.” This is supposed to show “that the joys and sorrows of life come from constructive/destructive actions and from separations and unions caused by love and hate on the individual and social levels” (idem, “Ecclesiastes [Qoheleth],” in R. E. Brown et al., eds., *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* [Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice–Hall, 1990] 492).

strongly on the element of the *existential* statement (as is clear in vv. 4b^{35*}, 5aβ^{36*}, 8b^{37*}), v. 1^{38*} means that in the changing of the times, the realization of *every* plan is *possible*, in spite of one's limited lifetime ("for *everything* there is a favorable time").

Thus v. 1^{39*} first names in a very open way the possibilities and limits of human activity in time. Then the general statements formulated here are illustrated and made more precise in the following vv. 2–8^{40*}.

■ 2–8^{41*} These verses name 28 (4 x 7) "matters" in 14 (2 x 7) pairs. This could indicate that here "seven, the number of completion, perfection," is supposed to be developed into "four, the cardinal points of the heavens," in order that "the fullness of the time at human's disposal" can be described as ordered "cosmos. The enumerated "matters" cannot be understood throughout as examples of "advantages and disadvantages, good and bad sides" of life.⁴²⁸ Not all of the paired actions are mutually exclusive.⁴³⁹ The (in part) downright trivial character of the named "matters" does not so much reinforce the assumption of a complete "determination" of human

^{35*} 4 a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance;

Ecclesiastes 3:4 (NRSV)

^{36*} 5 a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;

Ecclesiastes 3:5 (NRSV)

^{37*} 8 a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.

Ecclesiastes 3:8 (NRSV)

^{38*} 1 For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

Ecclesiastes 3:1 (NRSV)

^{39*} 1 For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

Ecclesiastes 3:1 (NRSV)

^{40*} 2 a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;

³ a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up;

⁴ a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance;

⁵ a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;

⁶ a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away;

⁷ a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

⁸ a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.

Ecclesiastes 3:2–8 (NRSV)

^{41*} 2 a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;

³ a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up;

⁴ a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance;

⁵ a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;

⁶ a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away;

⁷ a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

⁸ a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.

Ecclesiastes 3:2–8 (NRSV)

⁴²⁸ Thus Loretz, *Qohelet*, 252; and, e.g., Loader.

⁴³⁹ Thus, e.g., K. Gallig, "Die Rätsel der Zeit im Urteil Kohelets (Koh. 3, 1–15)," *ZThK* 58 (1061) 2.

life as to make it ironic.¹⁴⁴⁰ By contrast, the aspect of the constant changing of the “times”¹⁴⁵¹ could play a role in the context as a limit on the durability of a possible “gain” (v. 9^{46*}). The common denominator of the phenomena named in vv. 2–8^{47*} seems, nonetheless, to consist above all in the fact that favorable or unfavorable temporal circumstances both allow and limit the success of human actions. Yet the fulfillment of one’s plans are, in any case, not reliably at one’s disposal solely through one’s own efforts. According to 2:11^{48*}, however, only such results can be credited as “gain” (v. 9^{49*}). Yet at the same time, the adduced examples also show that the time–bound nature of human action exhibits wide variations in specific cases, and thus the degree of human freedom to decide and act is defined anew in each individual case.¹⁵⁰²

■ **2a**^{51*} With “to bear” (or “to procreate”) and “to die,” the first pair of “matters” juxtaposes the highest human possibilities, collaborating in the creation of new life, with human transitoriness. For humankind, procreation and birth are, naturally, not always plannable and at one’s disposal,

⁴⁴¹⁰ Thus, e.g., Lauha; Murphy.

⁴⁵¹¹ Cf. O. Eissfeldt, “Alles Ding währt seine Zeit,” in *Kleine Schriften*, vol. 5 (ed. R. Sellheim and F. Maass; Tübingen: Mohr, 1973) 174.

^{46*} ⁹ What gain have the workers from their toil?

Ecclesiastes 3:9 (NRSV)

^{47*} ² a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;

³ a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up;

⁴ a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance;

⁵ a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;

⁶ a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away;

⁷ a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

⁸ a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.

Ecclesiastes 3:2–8 (NRSV)

^{48*} ¹¹ Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had spent in doing it, and again, all was vanity and a chasing after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.

Ecclesiastes 2:11 (NRSV)

^{49*} ⁹ What gain have the workers from their toil?

Ecclesiastes 3:9 (NRSV)

⁵⁰¹² The fact that there are commonalities *and* differences between the situations named in vv. 2–8* is already signaled by the syntactic variants on the surface level of the text: the pattern תַּעֲשֶׂה ^{‘ē}t + ל / + inf. (20x) is broken in vv. 4b*, 5aβ* (תַּעֲשֶׂה ^{‘ē}t + inf.) and v. 8b* (תַּעֲשֶׂה ^{‘ē}t + noun). Verses 2bβ* and 5a* also add an object, and v. 5bβ* a prepositional modification. The repetition of the verb לָשׁוּב ^šlk hiphil (“throw away,” v. 5a*, 6b*) shows that we are dealing with different counterparts. The literary–critical elimination of these differences (cf., e.g., O. Loretz, “Anfänge jüdischer Philosophie nach Qohelet 1, 1–11 und 3, 1–15,” *UF* 23 [1991] 233ff.) trims the text according to the standard of the expected “statement” itself.

^{51*} ² a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;

Ecclesiastes 3:2 (NRSV)

but they are considerably more so than death (cf. 8:8^{52*}).¹⁵³³ In the world of the first readers of the text, the “time to bear” was, at the same time, for women not infrequently also the “time to die.” As a matter of fact, reproduction and death are closely related; one requires the other: “A generation goes, and a generation comes” (1:4^{54*}).

■ **2b**^{55*} By contrast, the plucking up of what is planted annihilates in a meaningless way the result of planting. The reference here is probably to hostile actions (perhaps in war?), but hardly to the harvest, which one does not “pluck up,” or the pulling up of weeds that are not “planted.”¹⁵⁶⁴ Even if the “times” of planting and the plucking up of what is planted are not at one’s disposal, they doubtless still leave one a considerably greater margin for decision and action than, say, the “time to die” (cf., e.g., Deut 20:19–20^{57*}).

■ **3**^{58*} Whereas “to kill” and “to heal” (on the latter cf. Sir 38:13^{59*}), just like “to plant” and “to pluck up,” are opposite actions in intention and effect, “to break down” and “to build up” can be parts of a comprehensive course of action (say, the building or remodeling of a house), which are meaningfully carried out in succession.¹⁶⁰⁵

^{52*} ⁸ No one has power over the wind to restrain the wind, or power over the day of death; there is no discharge from the battle, nor does wickedness deliver those who practice it.

Ecclesiastes 8:8 (NRSV)

⁵³¹³ With J. Blenkinsopp, “Ecclesiastes 3, 1–15: Another Interpretation,” *JSOT* 66 (1995) 55–64, we may indeed wonder, whether the “time to die” could also be intended to include the right time for suicide.

^{54*} ⁴ A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever.

Ecclesiastes 1:4 (NRSV)

55* ² a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;

Ecclesiastes 3:2 (NRSV)

⁵⁶¹⁴ The qal of עָקַר *‘qr* is not attested elsewhere in the OT. The niphāl in Zeph 2:4* refers to the destruction of a city; the piel to the laming of horses or steers through the cutting of the tendons of their hind feet (Gen 49:6*; Josh 11:6*, 9*; 2 Sam 8:4*; 1 Chr 18:4*). For the harvest, see, e.g., Whitley, *Koheleth*, 31. For pulling weeds see, e.g., G. Sauter, *Was heisst: nach Sinn fragen? Eine theologisch–philosophische Orientierung* (KT 53; Munich: Kaiser, 1982) 28.

^{57*} ¹⁹ If you besiege a town for a long time, making war against it in order to take it, you must not destroy its trees by wielding an ax against them. Although you may take food from them, you must not cut them down. Are trees in the field human beings that they should come under siege from you?

²⁰ You may destroy only the trees that you know do not produce food; you may cut them down for use in building siegeworks against the town that makes war with you, until it falls.

Deuteronomy 20:19–20 (NRSV)

58* ³ a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up;

Ecclesiastes 3:3 (NRSV)

^{59*} ¹³ There may come a time when recovery lies in the hands of physicians,

Sirach 38:13 (NRSV)

⁶⁰¹⁵ Cf. Crenshaw.

■ **4^{61*}** “To weep” and “to laugh,” “to mourn” and “to dance” are to a high degree motivated and provoked by corresponding “causes.” The corresponding “times,” however, do not *force* people to behave in accordance with them (cf. 2:2^{62*}; 7:2–4^{63*}, as well as 7:14^{64*}; 9:8–9^{65*}).

■ **5a^{66*}** In line with the *Midrash Rabbah*, the throwing away or gathering of stones is often interpreted as a metaphor for indulgence or nonindulgence in sexual activity.¹⁶⁷⁶ Here, however, one could also think just as well (if not better) of the cultivation and protection of a field (through throwing away stones from the field and then gathering them again for the building of a wall) or its ruining in war and later restoration (cf. 2 Kgs 3:19^{68*}, 25^{69*}), of the placing of losing and winning of stones in a board game, or the giving out and gathering in of counting stones by a trader in the buying and selling of wares.¹⁷⁰⁷

■ **5b^{71*}** The opposition of “to embrace” and “to refrain from embracing” may express, on the one hand, the trivial state of affairs that one can always do only one of the two things at the same time (but also always does one or the other, whereas one can easily at any given time

^{61*} ⁴ a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance;

Ecclesiastes 3:4 (NRSV)

^{62*} ² I said of laughter, “It is mad,” and of pleasure, “What use is it?”

Ecclesiastes 2:2 (NRSV)

^{63*} ² It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting; for this is the end of everyone, and the living will lay it to heart.

³ Sorrow is better than laughter, for by sadness of countenance the heart is made glad.

⁴ The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.

Ecclesiastes 7:2–4 (NRSV)

^{64*} ¹⁴ In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider; God has made the one as well as the other, so that mortals may not find out anything that will come after them.

Ecclesiastes 7:14 (NRSV)

^{65*} ⁸ Let your garments always be white; do not let oil be lacking on your head.

⁹ Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that are given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun.

Ecclesiastes 9:8–9 (NRSV)

^{66*} ⁵ a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;

Ecclesiastes 3:5 (NRSV)

⁶⁷¹⁶ Cf. the parallels “embrace” and “refrain from embracing”; against this, however, is Galling, “Rätsel,” 9–10.

^{68*} ¹⁹ You shall conquer every fortified city and every choice city; every good tree you shall fell, all springs of water you shall stop up, and every good piece of land you shall ruin with stones.”

2 Kings 3:19 (NRSV)

^{69*} ²⁵ The cities they overturned, and on every good piece of land everyone threw a stone, until it was covered; every spring of water they stopped up, and every good tree they felled. Only at Kir-hareseth did the stone walls remain, until the slingers surrounded and attacked it.

2 Kings 3:25 (NRSV)

⁷⁰¹⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, 7ff*.

^{71*} ⁵ a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;

Ecclesiastes 3:5 (NRSV)

neither “procreate” [or “bear”] nor “die,” etc.). Or, on the other hand, the idea here is that there are situations in which it is indeed *possible* for a person “to embrace,” but it is *appropriate* “to refrain from embracing” (cf. 2 Sam 11:6ff^{72*}). Then here too it would be clear that the time-bound nature of human action does not fully exclude human freedom of decision, but rather challenges it.

■ **6^{73*}** The two pairs of actions in v. 6^{74*} formulate genuine alternatives: one must either “seek” something or “leave [it] lost,” either “keep” it or “throw [it] away”—*tertium non datur* (whereas one does not necessarily have to either “throw away” or “gather”: v. 5a^{75*}). The first pair refers to lost objects; the second to those present. Taken together, the two pairs of actions describe all the possibilities of dealing with objects of personal possession. For each of these possibilities, there are favorable or appropriate situations.

■ **7^{76*}** Tearing up (clothes) and remaining silent are sometimes interpreted as a sign of mourning (in accordance with the *Midrash Rabbah*).¹⁷⁷⁸ Yet “tearing up” and “sewing together” can simply refer to a process “out of everyday domestic life.”¹⁷⁸⁹ The idea that there is an appropriate and favorable time for “keeping silent” and “speaking” is a theme often treated in the wisdom tradition.²⁷⁹⁰

■ **8^{80*}** Whereas “love” and “hate” are largely withheld from human powers of disposition (and “love” can in time turn into “hate”), certainly for the “little people,” “war” and “peace” are conditions of their lives that are not at their disposal (cf. 8:8^{81*}). For kings, however, there is a

^{72*} ⁶ So David sent word to Joab, “Send me Uriah the Hittite.” And Joab sent Uriah to David.

2 Samuel 11:6 (NRSV)

^{73*} ⁶ a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away;

Ecclesiastes 3:6 (NRSV)

^{74*} ⁶ a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away;

Ecclesiastes 3:6 (NRSV)

^{75*} ⁵ a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;

Ecclesiastes 3:5 (NRSV)

^{76*} ⁷ a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

Ecclesiastes 3:7 (NRSV)

⁷⁷¹⁸ Thus, e.g., Delitzsch; Loader.

⁷⁸¹⁹ Lauha.

⁷⁹²⁰ Cf. Prov 15:23*; Sir 1:23–24*; 4:23*; 20:6–7*, 20*; and Walter Bühlmann, *Vom rechten Reden und Schweigen: Studien zu Proverbien 10–31* (OBO 12; Fribourg, Switzerland: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1976).

^{80*} ⁸ a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.

Ecclesiastes 3:8 (NRSV)

^{81*} ⁸ No one has power over the wind to restrain the wind, or power over the day of death; there is no discharge from the battle, nor does wickedness deliver those who practice it.

Ecclesiastes 8:8 (NRSV)

“time” in which they “go out to battle” (2 Sam 11:1^{82*}), that is, a time (of year) favorable for waging war, in which, however, they are by no means compelled to wage war.

■ **9^{83*}** The time-bound nature of human activity described in vv. 2–8^{84*} limits the possibilities of gain (יִצְרֹן; *yitrôn*) for human beings (cf. 1:3^{85*}; 2:11^{86*}) in two respects. First, the changing of the times sets a limit on the *duration* of any possible gain—and not just in regard to “eternity” (cf. 1:3–11^{87*}) but already within the limited human life span (cf. Sir 11:19^{88*}; 18:25–26^{89*}): “From morning to evening conditions [that is, time (καῖρός)] change; all things

^{82*} ¹ In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, David sent Joab with his officers and all Israel with him; they ravaged the Ammonites, and besieged Rabbah. But David remained at Jerusalem.

2 Samuel 11:1 (NRSV)

83* ⁹ What gain have the workers from their toil?

Ecclesiastes 3:9 (NRSV)

^{84*} ² a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;

³ a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up;

⁴ a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance;

⁵ a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;

⁶ a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away;

⁷ a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

⁸ a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.

Ecclesiastes 3:2–8 (NRSV)

85* ³ What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun?

Ecclesiastes 1:3 (NRSV)

^{86*} ¹¹ Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had spent in doing it, and again, all was vanity and a chasing after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.

Ecclesiastes 2:11 (NRSV)

87* ³ What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun?

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

⁵ The sun rises and the sun goes down, and hurries to the place where it rises.

⁶ The wind blows to the south, and goes around to the north; round and round goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns.

⁷ All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow, there they continue to flow.

⁸ All things are wearisome; more than one can express; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, or the ear filled with hearing.

⁹ What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun.

¹⁰ Is there a thing of which it is said, “See, this is new”? It has already been, in the ages before us.

¹¹ 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.

Ecclesiastes 1:3–11 (NRSV)

88* ¹⁹ when he says, “I have found rest, and now I shall feast on my goods!” he does not know how long it will be until he leaves them to others and dies.

Sirach 11:19 (NRSV)

89* ²⁵ In the time of plenty think of the time of hunger; in days of wealth think of poverty and need.

move swiftly before the Lord” (18:26^{90*}). Second, the *accessibility* of any possible gain is limited when the success of human activity depends on the favor or lack of favor of time and circumstance, against which the effort (עמל *ml*) expended in the action cannot (or in any case cannot reliably) prevail.

²⁶ From morning to evening conditions change; all things move swiftly before the Lord.

Sirach 18:25–26 (NRSV)

^{90*} ²⁶ From morning to evening conditions change; all things move swiftly before the Lord.

Sirach 18:26 (NRSV)

■ 1–9^{91*} When read for itself, Qoh 3:1–9^{92*}, like 1:3–11^{93*}, leaves many questions open. The text, for example, still says nothing about whether and to what extent a person is in a position to know if there is or is not a favorable time for a particular project and to predict the changing of the times.²⁹⁴¹ Moreover, 3:1–9^{95*} reveals nothing about whether and to what degree chance,

^{91*} ¹ For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

² a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;

³ a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up;

⁴ a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance;

⁵ a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;

⁶ a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away;

⁷ a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

⁸ a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.

⁹ What gain have the workers from their toil?

Ecclesiastes 3:1–9 (NRSV)

^{92*} ¹ For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

² a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;

³ a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up;

⁴ a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance;

⁵ a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;

⁶ a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away;

⁷ a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

⁸ a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.

⁹ What gain have the workers from their toil?

Ecclesiastes 3:1–9 (NRSV)

^{93*} ³ What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun?

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

⁵ The sun rises and the sun goes down, and hurries to the place where it rises.

⁶ The wind blows to the south, and goes around to the north; round and round goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns.

⁷ All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow, there they continue to flow.

⁸ All things are wearisome; more than one can express; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, or the ear filled with hearing.

⁹ What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun.

¹⁰ Is there a thing of which it is said, “See, this is new”? It has already been, in the ages before us.

¹¹ 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.

Ecclesiastes 1:3–11 (NRSV)

⁹⁴²¹ Cf. also 3:11*, 22*; 6:12*; 7:14*; 8:5–7*; 9:11–12*; 10:14*; 11:2*, 6*.

^{95*} ¹ For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

² a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;

³ a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up;

⁴ a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance;

fate, or the Deity rules in the changing of the times.²⁹⁶² Finally, the text contains no evaluation of the described states of affairs. In the eyes of the king in 1:12–2:26^{97*}, they are without doubt a further example of the “futility” (הֶבֶל *hebel*) of all human activity and striving. Then, however, 3:10–4:12 shows them in a different light. As a “result” of 1:3–3:9^{98*}, one can ascertain that in

⁵ a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;

⁶ a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away;

⁷ a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

⁸ a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.

⁹ What gain have the workers from their toil?

Ecclesiastes 3:1–9 (NRSV)

⁹⁶²² Cf. also 3:11–15*, 17*; 7:13–14*; 8:17*; 11:5*.

^{97*} ¹² I, the Teacher, when king over Israel in Jerusalem,

¹³ applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven; it is an unhappy business that God has given to human beings to be busy with.

¹⁴ I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and a chasing after wind.

¹⁵ What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted.

¹⁶ I said to myself, “I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me; and my mind has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge.”

¹⁷ And I applied my mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is but a chasing after wind.

¹⁸ For in much wisdom is much vexation, and those who increase knowledge increase sorrow.

¹ I said to myself, “Come now, I will make a test of pleasure; enjoy yourself.” But again, this also was vanity.

² I said of laughter, “It is mad,” and of pleasure, “What use is it?”

³ I searched with my mind how to cheer my body with wine—my mind still guiding me with wisdom—and how to lay hold on folly, until I might see what was good for mortals to do under heaven during the few days of their life.

⁴ I made great works; I built houses and planted vineyards for myself;

⁵ I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees.

⁶ I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees.

⁷ I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house; I also had great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem.

⁸ I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and of the provinces; I got singers, both men and women, and delights of the flesh, and many concubines.

⁹ So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem; also my wisdom remained with me.

(Only first 15 verses of range shown)

Ecclesiastes 1:12–2:26 (NRSV)

^{98*} ³ What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun?

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

⁵ The sun rises and the sun goes down, and hurries to the place where it rises.

⁶ The wind blows to the south, and goes around to the north; round and round goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns.

⁷ All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow, there they continue to flow.

view of time, on both the large and the small scale, it must seem (at the very least) questionable whether human beings alone, through their own efforts, can through careful management achieve a reliably available gain of unlimited duration (1:3^{99*}; 2:11^{100*}; 3:9^{101*}).

The statements of 3:1–8^{102*} correspond completely in their still “by no means fatalistic or deterministic in form ... to the wisdom tradition; for both ancient Near Eastern and OT wisdom teachers, a concern for the recognition of the right moment is fundamental.”²¹⁰³³ It is not only of

⁸ All things are wearisome; more than one can express; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, or the ear filled with hearing.

⁹ What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun.

¹⁰ Is there a thing of which it is said, “See, this is new”? It has already been, in the ages before us.

¹¹ 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.

¹² I, the Teacher, when king over Israel in Jerusalem,

¹³ applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven; it is an unhappy business that God has given to human beings to be busy with.

¹⁴ I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and a chasing after wind.

¹⁵ What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted.

¹⁶ I said to myself, “I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me; and my mind has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge.”

¹⁷ And I applied my mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is but a chasing after wind.

¹⁸ For in much wisdom is much vexation, and those who increase knowledge increase sorrow.

(Only first 15 verses of range shown)

Ecclesiastes 1:3–3:9 (NRSV)

^{99*} ³ What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun?

Ecclesiastes 1:3 (NRSV)

^{100*} ¹¹ Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had spent in doing it, and again, all was vanity and a chasing after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.

Ecclesiastes 2:11 (NRSV)

^{101*} ⁹ What gain have the workers from their toil?

Ecclesiastes 3:9 (NRSV)

^{102*} ¹ For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

² a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;

³ a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up;

⁴ a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance;

⁵ a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;

⁶ a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away;

⁷ a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

⁸ a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.

Ecclesiastes 3:1–8 (NRSV)

¹⁰³²³ E. Jenni, “*תָּוֹן* ‘*ēt* time,” *TLOT* 2:959–60. Jenni refers here to Loretz, *Qohelet*, 200, and Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, 140–41, as well as “the pedagogical poem concerning the farmer’s activities in Isa 28:23–29*; also Jer 8:7*; Ezek 16:8*; Amos 5:13*; Job 5:26*; Prov 15:23*; 25:11* ... ; one could also include here the ‘wise who know the times’ in Esth 1:13* and

fundamental importance for agriculture and ships but also for the feast calendar.²¹⁰⁴⁴ Here the boundaries between meteorology and prophecy, astronomy and astrology are (by our present-day understanding) completely fluid.²¹⁰⁵⁵

The “time” theme seems to have had a special virulence in the Hellenistic period as an expression of the feeling of dependence on uncontrollable “fate” or “chance.”²¹⁰⁶⁶ Moving against this feeling, it seems, are statements in early Jewish literature close to the time of the book of Qoheleth that point to the ordering of “time” and its determination by God. Thus, for example, Pss 104:27^{107*} and 145:15^{108*} emphasize the “timeliness” of God’s provisioning of

‘the sons of Issachar who understand the times so that they know what Israel must do’ in 1 Chron 12:32*” (ibid., 960).

¹⁰⁴²⁴ Cf. זְמַן *zēmān* in Esth 9:27*, 31*, as well as Dan 7:25*. For agriculture, in addition to Isa 28:23–29*, cf. here also, e.g., the Gezer calendar, as well as Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 383ff. For ships see Hesiod, ibid., 618ff.

¹⁰⁵²⁵ Cf. *TUAT* 2:46ff., 76ff., 94ff., 132ff.; Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 765ff. That “it was Hesiod’s treatment of the theme which prompted Koheleth’s composition” (Whitley, *Koheleth*, 175) can hardly be asserted, in spite of the partially agreeing themes and statements.

¹⁰⁶²⁶ Cf. Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism*, 1:125, and above on 2:14–15*.

^{107*} 27 These all look to you to give them their food in due season;

Psalm 104:27 (NRSV)

^{108*} 15 The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season.

Psalm 145:15 (NRSV)

creation with necessary food. Sirach 39:16–35^{109*} takes up this idea (cf. vv. 16^{110*}, 33^{111*}) and builds it up into a conception of a proper *temporal* order (cf. vv. 28–29^{112*}: *ܒܫܫܢܐ mišpāt*) of the world, in which everything has importance in its time (v. 21^{113*}). According to Sirach, this order is revealed both in the realm of daily life²¹¹⁴⁷ and in the area of historical changes (cf. Sir

^{109*} 16 “All the works of the Lord are very good, and whatever he commands will be done at the appointed time.

¹⁷ No one can say, ‘What is this?’ or ‘Why is that?’ — for at the appointed time all such questions will be answered. At his word the waters stood in a heap, and the reservoirs of water at the word of his mouth.

¹⁸ When he commands, his every purpose is fulfilled, and none can limit his saving power.

¹⁹ The works of all are before him, and nothing can be hidden from his eyes.

²⁰ From the beginning to the end of time he can see everything, and nothing is too marvelous for him.

²¹ No one can say, ‘What is this?’ or ‘Why is that?’ — for everything has been created for its own purpose.

²² “His blessing covers the dry land like a river, and drenches it like a flood.

²³ But his wrath drives out the nations, as when he turned a watered land into salt.

²⁴ To the faithful his ways are straight, but full of pitfalls for the wicked.

²⁵ From the beginning good things were created for the good, but for sinners good things and bad.

²⁶ The basic necessities of human life are water and fire and iron and salt and wheat flour and milk and honey, the blood of the grape and oil and clothing.

²⁷ All these are good for the godly, but for sinners they turn into evils.

²⁸ “There are winds created for vengeance, and in their anger they can dislodge mountains; on the day of reckoning they will pour out their strength and calm the anger of their Maker.

²⁹ Fire and hail and famine and pestilence, all these have been created for vengeance;

³⁰ the fangs of wild animals and scorpions and vipers, and the sword that punishes the ungodly with destruction.

³¹ They take delight in doing his bidding, always ready for his service on earth; and when their time comes they never disobey his command.”

(Only first 15 verses of range shown)

Sirach 39:16–35 (NRSV)

^{110*} 16 “All the works of the Lord are very good, and whatever he commands will be done at the appointed time.

Sirach 39:16 (NRSV)

^{111*} 33 All the works of the Lord are good, and he will supply every need in its time.

Sirach 39:33 (NRSV)

^{112*} 28 “There are winds created for vengeance, and in their anger they can dislodge mountains; on the day of reckoning they will pour out their strength and calm the anger of their Maker.

²⁹ Fire and hail and famine and pestilence, all these have been created for vengeance;

Sirach 39:28–29 (NRSV)

^{113*} 21 No one can say, ‘What is this?’ or ‘Why is that?’ — for everything has been created for its own purpose.

Sirach 39:21 (NRSV)

¹¹⁴²⁷ Cf. Sir 1:23–24*; 4:20*, 23*; 6:8*; 11:9*, 20*; 18:25–26*; 20:1*, 6–7*, 19–20*; 22:6*; 26:4*; 27:12*; 29:2*, 8*; 30:24*; 31:28*; 32:4*; 38:13*.

10:4^{115*}) and also “eschatology” (cf. 48:10^{116*}; 51:30^{117*} G). *1 Enoch* 1–36 and 72–82 emphasize for cosmological processes that they all appear “in their time.”²¹¹⁸⁸ And according to Daniel 2 and 7, God “gives” (יִהְיֶה *yhb*) the kingdoms of the world “a season and a time” (זְמַן וְעֵת *zēman wē‘iddān*) of their end (7:12^{119*}) and God “changes” (שָׁנָה *šnh haphel*) the “times and seasons” (עֵת וְזְמַן *‘iddānayyâ wēzīmnaayyâ*), as well as their rulers (2:21^{120*}).²¹²¹⁹

On this level, Qoh 3:1–8^{122*} can be read both as an expression of Hellenistic “contingency consciousness” and as an assertion of a “temporal ordering” of reality in the sense of the named early Jewish conceptions. Independent of this, however, according to v. 9^{123*} “time” limits, in any case, a person’s chances of “gai”¹²⁴

^{115*} ⁴ The government of the earth is in the hand of the Lord, and over it he will raise up the right leader for the time.

Sirach 10:4 (NRSV)

^{116*} ¹⁰ At the appointed time, it is written, you are destined to calm the wrath of God before it breaks out in fury, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and to restore the tribes of Jacob.

Sirach 48:10 (NRSV)

^{117*} ³⁰ Do your work in good time, and in his own time God will give you your reward.

Sirach 51:30 (NRSV)

¹¹⁸²⁸ Cf. *1 Enoch* 2:1; 18:15; 72:1, 7; 75:3–4; 78:15–16; 79:2, 4–5; 80:1; 82:10.

^{119*} ¹² As for the rest of the beasts, their dominion was taken away, but their lives were prolonged for a season and a time.

Daniel 7:12 (NRSV)

^{120*} ²¹ He changes times and seasons, deposes kings and sets up kings; he gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding.

Daniel 2:21 (NRSV)

¹²¹²⁹ Cf. further Dan 7:22*, 25*; 8:17*; 9:25*; 11:6*, 13*, 14*, 24*, 35*, 40*; 12:1*, 4*, 9*, 11*.

Cf. also the historical periods in Tob 14:4–5*: “for a time” (*RSV*) (μέχρι χρόνου) or “until the times of the age are completed” (*RSV*) (έως πληρωθῶσιν καιροὶ τοῦ αἰῶνος).

^{122*} ¹ For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

² a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;

³ a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up;

⁴ a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance;

⁵ a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;

⁶ a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away;

⁷ a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

⁸ a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.

Ecclesiastes 3:1–8 (NRSV)

^{123*} ⁹ What gain have the workers from their toil?

Ecclesiastes 3:9 (NRSV)

¹²⁴ Thomas Krüger, [Qoheleth: A Commentary](#), ed. Klaus Baltzer, trans. O. C. Dean Jr., Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2004), 75–79.

1. The Old Testament commonly sees purposefulness in life coming from God's providential oversight of its occasions and seasons. Each aspect of life has its 'time': rain (Lev. 26:4), the downfall of God's enemies (Deut. 32:35), conception (2 Kgs 4:16f.). Hence the great need of 'insight into times' (1 Chr. 12:32; cf. Eccl. 8:5). Wisdom involves knowing 'the times' (Esth. 1:13); godliness says 'My times are in your hands' (Ps. 31:15). The Preacher holds a similar viewpoint: the 'times' of life cannot be fully known (9:11f.). but 'in all time' (9:8) one should be content.

'Every event', says von Rad, 'has its definite place in the time-order; the event is inconceivable without its time, and vice-versa.'⁶¹²⁵⁵ 'God is intimately connected with time,' says H. W. Robinson; '... His relation to men itself requires the time-order for the fulfillment of His purposes.'⁶¹²⁶⁶ This approach to time which permeates the Old Testament⁶¹²⁷⁷ is taken up by the Preacher and made the basis of his optimism. The fourteen couplets of 3:2–8 cover the whole range of human activity. Over it all the Preacher sees God in complete control. It is a warrant at the same time for both humility and confidence.

Time simply means an 'occasion' or a 'season' of time; *purpose* pinpoints what one wants to do. Elsewhere it is used of one's *pleasure* (5:4; 12:1 and the Hebrew of 12:10). The pairing of the varying aspects of human life indicates the universality of God's control. For the expression of totality in pairs is a common Old Testament idiom.⁶¹²⁸⁸ Thus 'man and woman' (Exod. 36:6) or 'great and small' (Jer. 6:13) is used to say emphatically 'everybody'; 'sea and land' (Jon. 1:9) is an emphatic way of saying 'everywhere'.

2–3. The most momentous events of human life are mentioned first: childbearing and death. The Hebrew here is active (*to give birth*, NAS¹²⁹V); it is doubtful whether it can be taken passively (*to be born*, A¹³⁰V, RS¹³¹V), although Jeremiah 25:34 is sometimes cited as an example of an active infinitive with passive force ('your being slaughtered', Heb¹³².)

The next three pairs deal with various creative and destructive human activities. Each of the six verbs may be figuratively used for establishing or undermining. 'Planting the heavens' (Isa.

¹²⁵⁶⁵ G. von Rad, *Theology of the Old Testament*, vol. 2 (1965), p. 100.

¹²⁶⁶⁶ H. W. Robinson, *Revelation and Inspiration in the Old Testament* (1946), p. 112.

¹²⁷⁶⁷ Cf. Gen. 18:10, 14; 31:10; 38:27; 2 Chr. 18:34; 28:22; Ezra 10:13–14; Neh. 9:27; 10:34; Job 5:26; 24:1; 38:23, 32; 39:1–2; Pss 1:3; 9:9; 10:1; 104:27; 145:15; Prov. 15:23; Song 2:12; Isa. 49:8; Jer. 5:24; 8:7, 15; 14:19; 15:11; 30:7; 51:6, 18, 33; Ezek. 21:25; 30:3; Mic. 5:3; Hag. 1:2.

¹²⁸⁶⁸ See further C. H. Gordon, *The World of the Old Testament* (1960), p. 35; A. M. Honeyman, 'Merismus in Biblical Hebrew', *JBL*, 71, 1952, pp. 11–18.

¹²⁹ NASV New American Standard Version, 1971.

¹³⁰ AV Authorized Version (King James), 1611.

¹³¹ RSV Revised Standard Version, 1952.

¹³² Heb. Hebrew.

51:16) indicates permanence and stability.⁶¹³³⁹ *Uproot* or ‘harvest’⁷¹³⁴⁰ is used figuratively elsewhere of destroying a nation (Zeph. 2:4; cf. the Aramaic of Dan. 7:8). *Kill* probably falls in line with this pattern (cf. its figurative use in Job 5:2; Prov. 1:32; 7:26). Certainly *heal* does not always refer to medical needs (cf. Isa. 6:10 following up the imagery of 1:5–6; Isa. 19:22; 57:19; Jer. 33:6 and often elsewhere). *Tear down* is applied to the LORD when Jehoshaphat’s schemes were ruined (2 Chr. 20:37; cf. Ps. 60:1). *Build* is applied to the throne of David, the city of Zion, and to the land of Judah, as well as to literal construction work (cf. Pss 89:4; 102:16). The widespread figurative uses of these verbs strongly suggest they were chosen here to express not only specific activities but all the manifold pursuits of men, creative and destructive, good and evil, benevolent and malevolent. Mankind is not self-sufficient in these activities; he is within the control of God.

4. The next two pairs incorporate human emotions, first private (*weep ... laugh*), then public (*lament ... dance*).

5. The following two pairs deal with friendship and enmity. Four major views have been held of *to throw stones ... to gather stones*: (i) The Aramaic Targum¹³⁵ of Ecclesiastes saw a reference to scattering stones on an old building and preparing to build a new one; this was held also by Ibn Ezra.⁷¹³⁶¹ (ii) Others see a reference to rendering fields unproductive by covering its surface with stones (cf. 2 Kgs 3:19, 25; Isa. 5:2). (iii) Plumprtre¹³⁷ saw here an ‘old Jewish practice ... of flinging stones or earth into the grave at the burial’ in the first phrase, and preparation to build a house, in the second. (iv) More recent scholars have seen a sexual reference following the Midrashic interpretation (cf. GN¹³⁸B). The first three possibilities have often been rejected on the ground that they ‘leave the second half of the verse without any logical connection’ (Jones¹³⁹s). But the second half need not have an exclusively ‘passionate meaning’ (Jones¹⁴⁰s); possibly it alludes merely to showing friendship or enmity. If so, it is likely that the first pair puts the same point in national or military terms. ‘Gathering stones together’ will refer to preparing the way for a military conqueror (cf. Isa. 62:10); casting stones will refer to military aggression by ruining an enemy’s fields.

6. The next two pairs reflect on possessions and our resolutions concerning them: *to search* (better than A¹⁴¹V *get*) ... *to give up* (as lost);⁷¹⁴²² ... *to keep ... to throw away* (N¹⁴³V).

7–8. Some scholars consider that the next pair (*tearing ... sewing together*) refers to mourning and the termination of mourning. There is, however, no specific evidence that ‘sewing

¹³³⁶⁹ This assumes the correction of MT at this point. The text however is not entirely certain (cf. RSV).

¹³⁴⁷⁰ There is Phoenician evidence that ‘harvest’ is a possible meaning (cf. PBQ, p. 270).

¹³⁵ Targum A. Sperber, *The Bible in Aramaic*, vol. IVA, 1968.

¹³⁶⁷¹ Cf. A. Sperber, *The Bible in Aramaic*, vol. IV A (1968), p. 153.

¹³⁷ Plumprtre *Ecclesiastes or The Preacher* by E. H. Plumprtre, 1881.

¹³⁸ GNB Good News Bible, 1976.

¹³⁹ Jones *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes* by E. Jones (*Torch Bible Commentaries*), 1961.

¹⁴⁰ Jones *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes* by E. Jones (*Torch Bible Commentaries*), 1961.

¹⁴¹ AV Authorized Version (King James), 1611.

¹⁴²⁷² The permissive use of piel fits here, as NIV perceives.

¹⁴³ NIV New International Version, 1978.

together' was an expression for the end of mourning. It may be better to take it as a general expression for the varying activities of man, destructive and creative (as in vv. 2b, 3a, 3b, 6). The remaining couplets incorporate human speech (*to be silent ... to speak*), affections (*love ... hate*) and national endeavours (*war ... peace*) under the pervasive control of divinely arranged times.

9. The first eight verses have asserted a providential control of life, but with little interpretation or comment. There has been no mention of the God who initiates and controls this scheme of 'times', nor has its relevance to daily life been elucidated. Verses 9–15 rectify that twin omission. The elucidation is both pessimistic and optimistic. It holds out confirmation of the hope of 2:24–26, and yet also confirms the dark alternative, the pessimism of 1:2–2:23. The thrust of the passage is that man is offered a life that is joyful but not self-sufficient. The initial relevance of the sovereignty of God over earthly 'times' is to confirm the profitlessness of human life. In other words no-one is put into such a superior position that for him the 'vanity' of life does not exist; the problem of 1:3 is not entirely abolished.

10. The Preacher's survey is no longer limited to 'under the sun'; the working of God is brought into consideration. The passing mention of God's activity in 1:13 receives fuller explanation.⁷¹⁴⁴³

11. His view of the earthly realm is that God's disposal of events in their 'times' is *beautiful* (*yāpeh*). The adjective is generally applied to beauty of appearance (Gen. 12:11). Far from being grounds for despair, the 'times' of earthly events are a source of delight.

God has set *eternity* in men's hearts. This expression has been taken to mean (i) eternity (RS¹⁴⁵V, LX¹⁴⁶X), (ii) the world (Mishnah, A¹⁴⁷V), (iii) ignorance (revocalizing 'elem), (iv) darkness (on the basis of an Ugaritic root).⁷¹⁴⁸⁴ 'Eternity', by far the commonest meaning, fits the context well, for the whole passage has been concerned with God's scheme of 'times'. Yet his actions endure *for ever* (14). The 'eternity' in man's heart must be connected with the 'eternity' of v. 14. 'Eternity' was important in Israel's heritage. An eternal life had been lost (Gen. 3:22), an 'eternal covenant' inaugurated (Gen. 9:16) by an eternal God (Ps. 90:2). An eternal priesthood (Exod. 40:15) and an eternal kingdom (2 Sam. 7:13) were bestowed by a God eternally merciful (Ps. 111:5), giving his people eternal joy (Isa. 35:10). The eternity of God's dealings with mankind corresponds to something inside us: we have a capacity for eternal things, are concerned about the future, want to understand 'from the beginning to the end', and have a sense of something which transcends our immediate situation. Scripture speaks of our creation in the 'image' or 'glory' of God (Gen. 1:26f.), a glory which is largely forfeited (Rom. 3:23) yet not obliterated (1 Cor. 11:7; Jas 3:9). Our consciousness of God is part of our nature, and the suppression of it is part of our sin (Rom. 1:18–21).

¹⁴⁴⁷³ GNB translates *fate* in 1:13, although the Hebrew word ('inyan, 'task') is not the same as GNB *fate* in 2:14. In neither case is it a good translation. See pp. 74, 82.

¹⁴⁵ RSV Revised Standard Version, 1952.

¹⁴⁶ LXX The Septuagint (Greek Version of the Old Testament).

¹⁴⁷ AV Authorized Version (King James), 1611.

¹⁴⁸⁷⁴ Cf. Dahood, CPIQ, p. 206; J. Gray, *The Legacy of Canaan*, VTS, 5, 1965, p. 274; and Jones.

This inward ‘eternity’ has a negative result: *man does not find out the work God has done from the beginning to the end* (cf. NI¹⁴⁹V). The Preacher’s vast researchers have found nothing in the finite earthly realm which can satisfy the human heart intellectually or practically. Though he has resolved to understand ‘all’ that is under the sun (1:13), there is that within him which makes him realize he can never comprehend God’s plan in its entirety (*from beginning to end*, NI¹⁵⁰V). This is the nearest he comes to Augustine’s maxim: ‘You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they can find peace in you.’⁷¹⁵¹⁵¹⁵²

Thesis: Everything has its time (3:1–8)

(1) Thesis stated.

3:1. Solomon said, **There is a time ... for every activity under heaven** (cf. 8:6). By the word “activity” Solomon meant people’s deliberate, willful acts. The Hebrew word for “activity,” always used of people, literally means “desire,” and then by metonymy “what one desires” (cf. Isa. 58:13). For these willful acts people are held accountable (cf. Ecc. 3:17). Each activity, wrote Solomon, has its proper “time” (point in time) and **season** (duration).

(2) Thesis illustrated (3:2–8). Solomon followed his general statement with a poem on 14 opposites, each of which happens in its time. The fact that Solomon utilized polar opposites in a multiple of seven and began his list with birth and death is highly significant. The number seven suggests the idea of completeness and the use of polar opposites—a well-known poetical device called merism—suggests totality (cf. Ps. 139:2–3). Though the exact meaning of some of these “activities” is uncertain, Solomon intended to affirm that *all* a person’s activities, both constructive and destructive, and *all* his responses to people, objects, and events happen in their times.

3:2–3. The list begins with a reference to the beginning and end of a person’s life, two events over which he really has no control. Solomon continued by referring to the deliberate acts of one who begins and ends vegetable life (**a time to plant and a time to uproot**), takes and saves human life, and constructs and destroys buildings. Perhaps all these are suggested by the concept of birth and death.

3:4. From the concept of death and destruction, Solomon wrote of the human responses to those events. People experience weeping and mourning, and their opposites, laughing and dancing, two activities by which joy is expressed.

3:5–6. How the two opposites in verse 5 are related to each other and to those in verses 2–4 is uncertain. Many interpretations have been suggested for the meaning of the phrases **a time to scatter** (or “cast away,” KJ¹⁵³V) **stones and a time to gather them**. Perhaps it is best to see

¹⁴⁹ NIV New International Version, 1978.

¹⁵⁰ NIV New International Version, 1978.

¹⁵¹⁷⁵ *Confessions i. 1.*

¹⁵² Michael A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 18, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 91–95.

¹⁵³ KJV King James Version

them as referring to the gathering and rejecting of building materials. This relates these opposites both to the idea of building (v. 3) and to the thought of keeping and throwing away (v. 6).

Solomon then spoke of the display of affections (v. 5b), probably of a man to a woman and perhaps also of a woman to a man. He then wrote about searching for a thing or giving it up as lost and about keeping a thing or throwing it **away** (v. 6). All the opposites in verses 5–6 seem to involve man's interest in things or affection for persons.

3:7. This verse may refer to actions associated with mourning (tearing one's clothes and remaining silent; cf. Job 2:12–13), and its end (sewing one's clothes and speaking out). If so, it would relate to the mourning in Ecclesiastes 3:4.

3:8. Solomon closed his list of opposites by referring to life's two basic emotions, **love** and **hate**, and the most hostile expression of the latter, **war**, and its opposite, **peace**. It may be significant that the list closes, somewhat as it began, with a set of opposites (war and peace) over which a person has little control.

b. Significance: Toil is profitless (3:9)

3:9. Turning from the thesis that every activity has its time, Solomon again raised the question of the value of a person's work, expecting rhetorically the same somber answer as before (cf. 1:3; 2:11), that there is no profit (**gain**, *yitrôn*; cf. comments on 1:3) in one's **toil**.

c. Reason: God's design is inscrutable (3:10–11)

3:10–11. To support the implied negative answer to his question in verse 9, Solomon referred to three observations he had drawn from his reflection on all the human activity represented in the opposites, verses 2–8. This activity is suggested by the word **burden** (*'inyan*), which is translated "task" in the NAS¹⁵⁴B. (1) Solomon observed that **God ... has made everything beautiful** (or, "appropriate"; the same word is trans¹⁵⁵. "proper" in 5:18) **in its time**, that is, God in His providential plans and control has an appropriate time for every activity. (2) Solomon observed that God has put **eternity in the hearts of men**. People have a longing or desire to know the extratemporal significance of themselves and their deeds or activities. (3) Solomon added that people **cannot** know the works of **God ... from beginning to end**, that is, they cannot know the sovereign, eternal plan of God. Human labor is without profit because people are ignorant of God's eternal plan, the basis by which He evaluates the appropriateness and eternal significance of all their activities. Because of this ignorance there is an uncertainty and latent temporality to the value of all one's labor.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁴NASB New American Standard Bible

¹⁵⁵trans. translation, translator, translated

¹⁵⁶ Donald R. Glenn, "[Ecclesiastes](#)," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 983–984.