The present in the book of Qohelet

Introduction

The book of Qohelet contains a, for the Hebrew Bible, strikingly explicit discourse on time. Described by Robinson as a "treatise on time",[1] the book explores an abundance of temporal themes, investigating in depth the consequences that the temporal realities have for human life. Qohelet introduces time as a central concern already in the initial poem in 1:4-11, and time remains a pervasive theme throughout the work, the subject of a tension-filled and sophisticated discussion about the temporal order's conditioning of human existence, as well as the human understanding of and response to this order.

Within the book's discourse on time *the present* stands centre-stage. The present is suggested in several passages as a potential venue to attaining meaning within an otherwise problematic human existence. This is the aspect of the present in Qohelet that scholarly readings have tended to focus on. Thus, the present moment is often interpreted in close connection with Qohelet's discussion of joy, the main question being whether or not (the joy in) the present moment can provide sufficient meaning. Is the present moment put forward in Ecclesiastes a life-embracing carpe diem?[2] Or should one conceive of the attention to the "now" of the human existence more as a memento mori so that the present and its value serve chiefly to remind Qohelet's reader about death to come?[3]

The book contains statements to support views which foreground the present as an encouraging counterpoint to Qohelet's lament about human transience, as well as views which emphasize instead the pessimistic utterances, considering the suggestions about present enjoyment a naïve notion of joy here and now. Thus, in several prominent passages Qohelet is remarkably unequivocal in his praise of the life-possibilities afforded in the present. This is especially the case when he develops his ideas about the character of the present in the book's exhortations to joy.[4] These passages focus univocally on the present, the future disappearing almost entirely from view. Yet, other passages radically draw the value of the "now" of the human existence into doubt.[5]

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[1] Robinson (1946) p. 110.

[2] As in the readings of Lee (2005) and Whybray (1982). Fredericks (1993), p. 63, argues that "… pleasure and enjoyment are good and commendable pursuits to counterbalance one's exhaustive efforts. (…) … Qohelet does nor expect to enjoy life endlessly, any more than he expects to despair of life endlessly."

[3] As is much more the case in the reading of Crenshaw (1987), see for instance p. 23 and p. 183. Zimmer (1999), p. 156, notes that "Die Antwort auf die Frage nach dem Verhältnis von carpe diem and memento mori scheint offensichtlich sehr vom Leser selbst abzuhängen. Man darf vermuten, dass diese Offenheit durchaus im Sinne Kohelets ist."

[4] Schoors (2000) notes seven: 2:24-25, 3:12-13, 3:22, 5:17-19, 8:15, 9:7-9, 11:8. Lee (2005), p. 3, counts eight, including the unusual 7:14 (2:24-26, 3:12-13, 3:22, 5:17-19, 7:14, 8:15, 9:7-10, 11:7-12:1) and states, p. 125, that "Qohelet's theology of enjoyment addresses the most basic and most urgent questions regarding human existence (…) …it is in the regular practice of joy that a person experiences the authentic and complete life intended by God for humanity."

[5] For example 2:14b-20, 4:1-3, and 7:1-4, and, more generally, the dire evaluation of human society here and now.

However, only part of Qohelet's thought about the present moment is encapsulated if one focuses exclusively on determining the hierarchy between Qohelet's affirmations of joy and his pessimistic utterances about the human condition. Rather, I suggest that the presentation of the present moment be evaluated also in relation to the book's discourse on time: this discourse severely impacts Qohelet's understanding of the present moment, including in what ways the present can or cannot be conceived of as meaningful.

Focusing on the present moment in relation to Qohelet's time-discourse may also help us avoid the overly simple dichotomy sometimes established in scholarly works between the positively regarded, at least somewhat meaningful "now" and a problematic and uncertain future whose only reliable point of reference is the inevitability of death. Rather, Qohelet's ideas about how time is structured to govern human life in the present – and how the rule of time is experienced from the human perspective – entail an understanding of the "now" full of contradiction, both affirming human activity now and drawing attention to the problematic relationship that human beings have with the temporal realities in the present.

After briefly delineating a few characteristics of Qohelet's presentation of the present, this paper will look closer at two particular features of the discourse on time: the connection between past, future and present, and humanity's cognitive relationship to the time of the present. Then Qohelet's argument in 8:1-9, which discusses human life possibilities in the present, will be examined. While not belonging to the passages usually referred to in discussions of the present moment in Qohelet, 8:1-9 demonstrates well Qohelet's composite evaluation of the present, as well as the elegant manner in which the author draws into doubt the value and meaning of life in the present. Here Qohelet discusses human activity and use of wisdom, tied closely to reflections about the divine structuring of time. This passage shows the intimate connections in Qohelet's thought-world between the present and the temporal realms of past and future, as well as between human life in the present and human cognitive abilities.

The presentation of the present in Qohelet

Qohelet discusses the present as human life-opportunities here and now. He does not speak about it as a single, snap-shot moment – as one would about the here-and-now dot on a time-line. Instead, he is interested in a present with duration. In a sense, his is an extended present; a time of activity and feeling.[6] A notion of a present which is not large enough to encompass cognitive or physical activity, which bears no relation to past or future, is absent in the book of Qohelet.

The present appears at its most engorged when Qohelet, at times, seems to view the entire current generation of humanity under the heading of a form of present. This is the case when he contrasts the present generation with the past and the future in 1:11 and in other similar reflections, such as 4:2-3 and 7:10. However, most frequently the present is

[6] Howard-Brook and Gwyther (2005) suggest that this is a basic characteristic of "biblical" conceptions of time. They further argue that the realm of the present in what they term a "present-oriented" society is given a high significance – rather than being the dividing line between past and future it is envisaged as an enduring reality.

presented as the life-opportunities afforded here and now – whether that be experiences of oppression and evil, or of joy, or as various other situations facing humankind in time.[7]

The extendedness of the present moment does not, however, render Qohelet's discussion of it concrete only, devoid of abstract reflection on this dimension of time and its relationship to a wider, temporal framework.[8] Qohelet's discussion of the present, as of other aspects of the temporal reality in this world, grapples keenly with fairly general, abstract notions of time. As seen by Machinist, Qohelet is in the process of moving towards a higher degree of abstract conceptualization, and a significant part of this development happens through his reflections on time. Noting the use of terms from the semantic fields of time and knowledge, such as חשבן, מעשׂה and עולם, to describe both a concept and reflection on that concept, Machinist states perceptively that in the book of Qohelet "…we witness the beginnings of a technical vocabulary created or adapted to deal with the problem of time in human existence."[9]

I am intrigued, also, that Qohelet's presentation of life in the present appears intimately connected with movement. Qohelet turns again and again to observe what happens in the present, as if adjusting himself continually to the present which faces him now - and now - and now…[10] The author uses an abundance of verbs of movement not only to describe human activity in the present, but also to depict continuous, repetitious movement within the temporal order which conditions the human life as it is lived here and now. Simultaneously, however, he underlines that this flux of movement which makes up the temporal framework of human existence and experience takes place within fixed world structures.[11]

The present and the past and future

Whether discussing human life-conditions under the sun more generally or reflecting specifically on the temporal realities of our life now, it is a marked tendency of Qohelet's to portray life in the present as lived within the constraints of the cosmic order. He stresses that there is a wider framework of time within which the present must be understood: its relation or none-relation to past and future very much affects the possibilities of establishing within the present a meaningful existence. Furthermore,

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[7] Qohelet's reflections are not systematized – he does not define his concepts carefully as one would in a philosophical treatise, leaving instead the notions and themes of his discourse flexible and consequently somewhat vague.

[8] Pace the view of OT time conception as something eminently concrete in, for instance, Marsh (1952) and Robinson (1946). Barr (1962), p. 98-99, refers to Ecclesiastes to show that the widespread rejection of the biblical writers' ability to conceive of abstract time is erroneous, arguing that if the Hebrew word for time should appear in a context which reflects on time, this demonstrates that it can be used about time in general. According to Barr עת is used in such a way in Qoh. 9:11, the language of which one must suppose was intelligible for the contemporary, Hebrew reader.

[9] Machinist (1995), p. 171.

[10] Christianson (1998), p. 222, helpfully lists words relating to movement in Ecclesiastes. His purpose here is to demonstrate the physical aspect of (the language) of Qohelet's narrative journey: "As if to say 'I set out, yet I return to where I began and am unable to complete my journey (…)' Qoheleth is traveling." Christianson, p. 224.

[11] Note for instance the juxtaposition of depictions of temporal movement with the word עולם in 1:4, in 3:2-8.11 vs. 3:14-15 and 12:5-7.

humanity's inability to properly understand this temporal framework, and indeed the entire temporal dimension of their existence, also shapes their engagement with their conditions of life in the present.

Several interpreters have noted Qohelet's emphasis on the inaccessibility of the past, and the bearing of this reality on the present. The reading of Frydrych offers an interesting perspective because it takes Qohelet's understanding of the cosmos seriously as an impact on the rest of his work.[12] Commenting on the poem in 1:4-11, Frydrych notes that man is here shown as unable to comprehend the supra-generational cyclicity which characterises the cosmic order. In fact, however, the things which are true of any particular generation are also true of another, so that in a certain sense the temporal movement of the generations is cyclic: "However, this cyclic temporal movement is accompanied by an additional linear element that accounts for the displacement of one generation by another, and yet a wider, supra-generational cyclicity, one which accounts for things that have the appearance of being new, but in reality are merely a repetition of something that took place outwith the reach of the present human memory."[13]

In the initial poem it is especially 1:10-11 which detail the consequences that Qohelet envisions the world order (described in 1:4-8 and summed up in 1:9) as having for human existence. These two verses challenge directly the idea of a human continuity to match that of the cosmos which was introduced in 1:4 where the chain of generations moved seamlessly through an unchanging world. In stark contrast with the images in 1:5-7 of continuity and unbroken repetition, 1:10-11 questions this initial assumption, describing the human being as unable to transcend the present in which he or she lives:

1:10-11: *If it is said: See, this is new –that which is before us existed already ages ago. There is no remembrance of the former generations and there will be no remembrance either of the coming generations who are to be by those who follow after them.*

Humanity is strikingly unable to forge links between what should be their past, present and future. This basic condition of life creates several problems for mankind. Bentzen focuses completely on Qohelet's resultant rejection of remembrance: that one will never be remembered by one's successors. According to Bentzen this essentially constitutes Qohelet's (wholly negative) answer to the question in 1:3.[14] It certainly pains Qohelet that the dead are forgotten regardless of their merits, and he returns to this problem

[12] Frydrych (2002), p. 115: "… the whole of Qoheleth's reasoning stems from the outline of the cosmos that this passage spells out." Kamano (2002), p. 105, similarly underlines the importance of the cosmology in this poem for Qohelet's further reflections.

[13] Frydrych (2002), p. 118. Unfortunately, he does not problematize this further, suggesting simply on p. 119 that because of the inaccessibility of the supra-generational cyclicity Qohelet focuses his investigation of human meaning on what can be achieved in the life-span of a single individual. This understanding does not account very well for the many statements throughout the book about the problems of past and future in relation to the present, and about the problems created by humanity's lacking intellectual prowess.

[14] Bentzen (1942), p. 14. Bentzen even translates "man husker ikke de gamle", thus underlining that in his view the issue is that of people not being remembered. See also p. 10: "Verden er et evigt Kredsløb. End ikke I mindet lever man videre. Hermed er også det Gammelisraelittiske Haab gjort til intet."

several times.[15] However, 1:10-11 also renders problematic the situation of human beings *during* the days of their lives.

Because of the way that time is set up humanity is cut off from the past and the future. On a very basic level this makes human continuity impossible. As Berger has argued, the process of forgetting, which is shown in the initial poem to be built into the fabric of time, subverts all human meaning as it erases history and gain. Since humans are historical beings the constant moving of time – with its constant production of forgetfulness - casts the meaning of their existence into doubt.[16]

The reality of time's continual repetition can thus have as consequence in human life that the present loses its value. Not only is it doomed to become past - it is doomed to disappear completely and be forgotten, as the memory of the past has disappeared in the present (1:11). Since the same type of events and occurrences recur continually there will always be a new present to replace the current one – and there will never be space to remember the time past which dies away with the individuals. Therefore, the time of the world is in direct collision with individual, human existence *and* with collective efforts to establish historical continuity. The present exists in a very uneasy relationship both with the past with which there is no continuity and which is wholly inaccessible to us in the present – and with the future: in the future it is *my own* oblivion which is at stake, an exacerbation of the problem with the past. Consequently, there is a sense in Qohelet that the past and the future are eating away at the edges of the present.

Qohelet reinforces this idea in the royal fiction's conclusion, especially in 2:16-19. Because Qohelet will be forgotten, the argument runs, neither his wise achievements, nor the joy that he has experienced constitutes a יתרון. A further consequence of the lacking remembrance is that the doer is divorced from his accomplishments, so that he can neither know nor influence whether his successor will be a wise man. This double focus on Qohelet being forgotten *and* being prevented from knowing who will follow him is strongly reminiscent of the argument in 1:9-11 which emphasized both the future generations' forgetting the present and the present ignorance about the future. And Qohelet's life opportunities in the present are implicated as well when the past and future disappear from view: *"And I hated all my toil which I have toiled with under the sun which I must leave to the man who comes after me"* laments Qohelet (2:18). Instead of simply affirming the present over against the lost past and the unknown future, Qohelet suggests that the loss of these temporal horizons results in a devaluation of the present as well: The despair over the lost past and future seems to bleed into the present.

Shorter statements later in the book maintain the impression of the present being problematically fenced in by past and future. For instance, when Qohelet cautions against

[15] For example 2:14b-16, 3:19-21, 4:16, and 6:12.

[16] Berger (2001), p. 148-149. Frydrych (2002) does not consider the limitations of memory as problematic as does Berger. However, he notes: "The individual generational cycles of human existence lack any tangible and persistent link; they are connected by human memory alone. This has only got a limited reach…" As a persistent link between the generations is lacking, all human achievement is bound to disappear from human memory at some point. Frydrych (2002), p. 119.

nostalgia: there can be no longing for a past to which man has no access and which is furthermore "the same" as the present due to the sameness in time (7:10). Each of the instances of narrative in the book concludes simply that all will be forgotten and that the past is a lost country (1:12-2:20, 4:13-16, 9:13-15).

The future of my own existence is opaque as well, as is also the present facing me now: human beings simply do not understand the set-up of the temporal world within which we move (3:11, 3:22, 6:12, 8:7 and 10:16).

The present and human cognition

The last couple of textual examples in particular imply that Qohelet does not simply wish to suggest the present as a narrower, yet fundamentally unthreatened venue for meaning.[17] The problem of human existence in time has a forceful cognitive dimension: the time-order as it actually governs human life is not the same as the human experience of time. The cognitive nature of many of the problems experienced by human beings living in time exacerbate these problems, creating an extra layer of tension between time as it orders the world at large and human life in time.

It is generally acknowledged that Qohelet depicts human beings as unable to understand the future. In Qohelet's view, there is something fundamentally wrong about the temporal set-up which makes it "crooked" (1:15, 7:14), and it can be concluded about the obscure character of the changing times and events of our lives that "God has made both one and the other so that man shall not figure out anything after him" (7:14). Everything happening after death is entirely out of view as well because of the reality of oblivion and the total annihilation in death of the individual: "… the dead know nothing and they have no reward anymore for their memory is forgotten." (9:5). Qohelet laments again and again that man does know the future and asks rhetorically whether anybody can remedy this situation. Ironically, the only one who is able to transgress and manipulate the temporal limitations of man and who might thus repair the human situation is the very divinity who has established the temporal order (3:14-15).

The issue of human non-understanding is not only raised in relation to the future or the time of the divinity, however – if this were the case Qohelet would agree with the authors of, for instance, several psalms which suggest man's inability to understand the temporal reality of God because of his different temporal conditions. Rather, man does not understand his present or his past either.

This radical claim makes sense if one keeps in mind the presentation in the framing poems of cosmic time and human time. Here Qohelet begins to unravel the seeming correspondences and similarities between human time and world time, demonstrating that the discourse on time must concern itself with several "levels" of time, in order to accommodate the diverse temporal realities of world, man and God, as well as the human cognitive relationship to these.

[17] Simultaneously, however, the problematic nature of time and our failure to understand time are among the issues that move Qohelet to joy-exhortations; see for instance 9:7-10 in relation to 9:4-6 and 11:7-10 in relation to 11:5-6 and 12:1-7.

Another key-text is the poem in chapter 3:1-8 which engages directly with the extended present of human life, questioning its value given the temporal conditions of man. While Qohelet's first poem concerned itself with the cosmic framework of human existence, the focus is here narrowed down to humanity's everyday life. Yet here as well Qohelet presents the temporal dimension of human life as characterized by repetition – and suggests that perceived differences are in reality cycles of sameness, confirming to a larger pattern. As humanity was fooled into believing that the sameness of things in human life ensures a degree of continuity (1:4-11), they also expect the ordering of "times" in their own existence to give them points of reference through which they can engage intellectually with their present. However, it is not so: rather, the human experience of alternating times prevents them from establishing any reliable patterns of expectations towards time (3:2-8, 7:13-4). This is not only problematic in relation to their future, but excludes any יתרן of their toil in the present as well (3:9).

That the insufficient cognitive prowess of humanity is at the heart of their failed relationship with time is made even more explicit in chapter three than it was in 1:10-11: man is shown to be unable to grapple with the realities of time (3:11) – this is an all-pervasive problem, encompassing very much the present as well as the wider reaches of time.

At several points during his work, Qohelet seems to suggest that the temporal set-up is somehow deceptive. It is not simply that humanity does not understand time – rather, we misconstrue the temporal conditions of our life (1:10, 7:10 and 8:17, for instance). This situation is highly problematic, because it means that the human experience of time cannot be trusted, even when it seems to us to be extremely reliable. I suggest that Qohelet is very much aware of this problematic; that he works consciously within a paradoxical discourse where every statement made from the human perspective about the time-order is unavoidably destabilized because it is also being emphasized that the human experience of time cannot be trusted. This destabilizes Qohelet's own presentation as well.

While it is not possible to investigate it in depth here, I suggest that this problematic may have contributed to the author's compositional choice to introduce stark contradictions and tensions into his presentation of the present, as well as into other aspects of the time-discourse. If so, it is an elegant strategy: Qohelet is describing the changeless structures and repetitious character of the temporal world, but he has to do so through the lens of human cognition – and seeing as the human mind is unable to properly understand the temporal realities conditioning our lives and invariably miscomprehends them, that which is in reality unchanging continually changes and moves about in Qohelet's presentation.

In this connection we may also note Qohelet's choice of a repetitious, almost cyclical mode of presentation which examines ever again the same themes. Kawin states: "Koheleth is pictured as continually rediscovering them [his observations]. He returns – from not considering, or from an unacceptable conclusion, or from the end of the last

instant of considering – and considers again."[18] The repetitious style emphasises pertinent points in Qohelet's discussion of time and cognition; although Qohelet turns again and again to face human existence in the present and its wider cosmic framework, he never fully manages to achieve the desired knowledge and understanding.[19]

Case study: Ecclesiastes 8:1-9

In several ways Ecclesiastes 8:1-9 is a problematic passage. It is seeped in contradiction and to make matters worse, it is not particularly easy to figure out what the passage is actually about: it envelops a reflection on the divine ordering of the temporal world within a discussion about earthly powers and the correct attitude before them. It is, furthermore, difficult to be entirely sure *who* Qohelet is talking about at various points of 8:1-9. This passage with its convoluted conclusions thrives on ambiguity, especially regarding the identity of the king and the potential ability of the wise to cope with the realities of power and time facing him.

While it is difficult to completely bypass the fact that Qohelet in this passage has something unexpected to say about the human relationship to time, in scholarly readings the temporal aspect of 8:1-9 often gets shoved quite far into the background. Instead, the evaluation of earthly powers is placed at the forefront. Loader's interpretation is characteristic of this kind of work, seeing the passage mainly as a meditation on human power: "… the king can do what he pleases (v. 3c) and no one can call him into account (v. 4). In this manner the Preacher stresses the political supremacy of the king and the total powerlessness of the subject."[20] Brown describes the passage as "a survivalist's guide" for conducting oneself before royal power.[21] However, as well as not giving sufficient weight to the statements on time and the temporal order in the passage, this type of reading is hard pressed to account for Qohelet's change of mind between the beginning and the end of the passage regarding earthly power: in 8:9 Qohelet is happy to state that the earthly hierarchies of power are to the detriment of human beings, while in 8:2-5 he championed a much more traditional doctrine, allowing the wise the ability to act prudently before power to avoid evil consequences.[22] These two viewpoints are separated by an explicit reflection on the divinely ordered cosmic time in 8:6-8.

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[18] Kawin (1972), p. 40. Yet Kawin would argue, p. 41, that: "These returnings never threaten to become repetitions, because each rediscovery is preceded by a conclusion that, closing the matter for us, frees us to experience each repetition as something new." Fredericks (1993), p. 118-119, has also noted the cyclical mode of presentation, arguing that Qohelet structures his argument in a repetitious, cyclical way which mirrors his belief that the unity of reality is to be found in its repetition.

[19] We have to disagree with Eliade (1954), p. 90, therefore, who argues that through eternal repetitions (as those found in Qohelet) "…time is suspended, or at least its virulence is diminished." Rather, the oppressiveness of time weighs heavy on Qohelet – and the repetitious style with its contradictions underlines this.

[20] Loader (1986), p. 96.

[21] Brown (2000), p. 87.

[22] Hatton (2008), p. 119, attempts to deal with this problem by arguing that the passage is dialogic, allowing contradictory voices to be heard: "So Qohelet 8.2 begins a passage on the subject of obedience to authority with an appeal for unconditional compliance with royal commands as both pious and right (…) Verses 8.3-8 urge further prudential reasons for loyality, namely respect for royal power in an uncertain world. So Qohelet 8.9 is unexpectedly negative…" Brown (2000), p. 87, simply acknowledges that earthly powers have a tendency to use them at others' expense, but does not go into the matter further.

My interest here is to suggest how this passage with its puzzling statements about time and power might be understood if read in close connection with the temporal discourse in the book – focusing especially on the present because the possibility of a well-considered life in the present is an important subject in 8:1-9. The emphasis will be on the two characteristics of the present picked out above, namely the connection between the present and the wider temporal framework, and humanity's problematic cognitive relationship to the present.

8:1-5: The wise knows time and judgement

The passage in 8:1-9 concerns itself with authority, both earthly and divine, discussing the possibility and the benefits of obedience, as well as meditating on the relationship between subject and ruler. After an initial praise of wisdom in 8:1, 8:2-8:4 suggest several reasons why one should obey the earthly ruler: because of the divine oath (8:2), because of the king's sovereign power (8:3),[23] and because the subject cannot question the king (8:4). Most interesting for our purpose here, however, is the baffling statement from Qohelet in 8:5 as he argues that such obedience is absolutely possible: he claims that the wise man knows "time and judgement." The man who is wise can discern what will be the proper action at the proper moment; to him time makes sense in the present:

Qohelet 8:5: *"He who keeps the commandment shall not experience evil, and the heart of the wise knows time and judgement."*

Just how unexpected this viewpoint is becomes clear if one compares it with Qohelet's other statements on the subjects of knowing the right time to act and understanding in general the temporal set-up of the world. Qohelet 8:5 seems to completely contradict earlier statements such as Qohelet 3:11:

"He has made every thing beautiful in its time; he has also placed העלם in their heart, yet so that man cannot figure out the work that God has done from the beginning to the end."

Similarly, 7:13-14 states: *"Behold the work of God, for who can make that straight which he has made crooked? In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity realise that God has made both one and the other so that man shall not figure out anything after him."*

While the latter of these two verses focuses on the future almost exclusively and could therefore more easily coexist peacefully with verse 8:5, verse 3:11 is orientated much more towards the present, reflecting on creation's temporal dimension in its totality. This is also the case in verse 8:17 where Qohelet unequivocally claims that:

[23] Krüger (2004), p. 152, notes about 8:2.3a that it is "an admonition that is in several respects unclear and ambiguous." For instance, is the reader asked to obey the king or to pay attention to his mood? What is meant by the oath of God? Should the Masoretic text division be kept? Does בהל mean to hurry or to be frightened? Longman (1998), p. 211, suggests a departure from the Masoretic verse division and moving "to not hasten" from 8:3 he translates: "…and do not rush into a vow to God." While this emendation does not strike me as necessary and ruins the parallelism between hasten/depart in 8:3, it does pick up on the fact that the wider passage concerns itself with divine as well as earthly authority.

"I saw the whole work of God; that man cannot figure out the work which is done under the sun. Even though a man works hard to seek it, he shall not figure it out, and even if the wise man claims to know (it), he cannot figure it out."

The encouraging view of 8:5 jars painfully against this highly emphatic statement[24] from which it is separated by only a dozen verses.

A striking feature in 8:2-5 is, however, that Qohelet has removed God and the temporal order established by him from the equation. Focusing solely on earthly affairs he is able to affirm the human ability to choose the proper moment to act. Yet, while earthly power is the sole focus in 8:2-5, the scope of the discussion expands in 8:6. Qohelet here elegantly merges the question about timely action in the worldly sphere with the problem of recognizing time in general.[25]

8:6-9: The evil of man lies heavy upon him

The particular focus in 8:6 is the proper recognition of the time to come. This encompasses both that which is appropriate or characteristic of the future and the awareness of when life will end. Humanity's faulty and limited perception of structured world-time, and therefore of the quality and content of time to come, is an issue that Qohelet has already discussed at length – especially in chapters 1 and 3. He is therefore able to indicate, through catch-phrases already known to the reader, the change of focus from worldly power to divine establishment of the temporal order and the human's place within it. Most noticeable are the phrases "every matter has its time" (cf. 3:1 and 3:17) and "the evil of man is great upon him" (cf. 1:13), and Qohelet also alludes to the previously discussed troubles of mortal man:

8:6: *"Indeed, every matter has its time and judgement, for the evil of man is great upon him."*[26]

In this subtle shift of focus, the temporal reality of man - his mortality and his understanding of the time which governs his life - comes to occupy the space held in 8:5 by the prudent time to act in relation to the earthly powers. It is this shift which allows Qohelet to turn upside-down the conclusion of 8:5 and state flat out in 8:7 that man cannot know what will be.[27] Qohelet emphasizes that in temporal matters no real power belongs to man – and certainly not within the sphere of cognition and timely actions.

Krüger suggests differently as the implication of 8:6 that the time-bound nature of all events and actions (v. 6a) is a consequence of the "evil" of human beings…[28] Thus, it is

[24] 8:17 repeats constructions with מצא + לא three times in this one verse!

[25] A similar move can be seen in 4:1 to 4:2-3 where the lament about oppression under the sun is connected to the wider (temporal) structures in the world.

[26] The main textual issue in 8:6-7 is the translation of the many occurrences of כי: I have chosen to translate the first emphatically, and the second causally.

[27] As noted by Krüger (2004), p. 156, the statement about man's evil lying heavily upon him in 8:7 does not fit well with the claim that the wise will not know any evil thing.

[28] Krüger (2004), p. 156.

improbable that the wise man can make use of the time-bound nature of all events. Krüger interprets the passage as dealing with an opportunistic type of behaviour which, given the temporal realities in 8:6ff, makes little or no sense.[29] I agree with Krüger that the discussion of time in 8:6ff impacts the scenario of 8:2-5, but I do not think that it is the general guilt of every human being which is in view here[30] – rather, the limitations placed by the temporal conditions on human existence and cognition demand that Qohelet adjust his view in 8:2-5 on the human ability to act in a well-considered manner at the appropriate moment.

The imagery of verses 8:6-9 draws on the semantic field of power, as did the previous verses, incorporating especially images from the sphere of military and authority. However, the positive assertions of 8:2-5 are completely gone.

8:8 retains the temporal focus, using again language which already has well-established connotations in Qohelet's discourse on time: the subject is holding on to the רוח; a word which has been used, firstly, about the wind exemplifying the cosmic temporal-structure that man is unable to grasp or fully participate in and, secondly, about the divinely given life-breath.[31] Probably both are in view here. As in 2:14b-16 the problem of death is in view, impacting the life-possibilities in the present. Simultaneously, I would argue, there is in the image a dimension of non-knowing, of the opaque, of that which continually slips out of our grasp when we try to hold on to it… Thus, in 8:8 both of the temporal order's problematic dimensions discussed above are in view, dealing severe damage to humanity's attempts to live meaningfully, also in the present. Life becomes a battle in which man continually attempts to gain dominion over that which is out of his reach. It is a relentless war, from which there is no respite and no discharge, save in the form of the obliteration of the individual in his death.[32]

Because Qohelet in 8:6-8 stresses man's lack of knowledge about that which is to come, one could object to the present reading that Qohelet's focus changes away from the time of the present completely when he moves his discussion from earthly matters to the implications of the cosmic design for humanity. I would argue differently that it does not.

Rather, Qohelet demonstrates it as divinely willed that man cannot figure out his temporal conditions, even to the extent of acting sensibly in his present. Qohelet's depiction of man's inability to understand the temporal reality well enough to navigate within it, including developing reasonable expectations about what is to come, springs in this passage directly out of his discussion in 8:2-5 of acting sensibly in the world here and

[29] Krüger (2004), p. 157.

[30] Regarding the word רעת I agree with Whybray (1989), p. 132, and Longman (1998), p. 214, that it is not human sin, but human ignorance which is in view here.

[31] Crenshaw (1998), p. 152, notes the ambiguity of the reference to ruah as it might deny "that anyone is strong enough to resist the powerful force of the wind" or alternatively "indicate life-force, which no one can hold at the moment of death", and he prefers the second option.

[32] Interpreters who discuss in connection with 8:8 whether one could be discharged from Israel's battles or not, looking to the law-code for support, seem to miss the point of the verse: the battle is a metaphor for life and it is unimportant whether it emulates actual warfare in this particular aspect, pace Whybray (1989) p. 215, and Ogden (1987) p. 133.

now. Verses 8:6-8 thus provide the cosmic framework within which human, present activity must be understood and judged. Furthermore, the language which Qohelet uses in 8:6ff help maintain the connection to the present life of man, for instance when Qohelet refers to the different times and events in man's present life like he did it in 3:1-8. The use in 8:6-8 of central words from 8:2-5 have the same function, especially רעה and ידע.

Finally, Qohelet returns explicitly to this passage's opening theme: earthly powers and how to act before them.[33] Thus, in 8:9, Qohelet ties together his initial observation about the reality of worldly power with his discussion of man's temporal reality. Having interlocked notions of human and divine dominion the narrator passes judgement on human rule, flat-out contradicting what was said initially.[34] The relationship between divinity and man in the realm of time (8:6-8) so affects the relationship man/man that Qohelet reverses his previous statement. Connecting the human inability to relate to time with the situation in human society he suggests, now, that every relationship of power even within the sphere of human life is problematic. Is God still lurking in the background here; the ultimate king and oppressor?[35]

The reversal in the attitude towards earthly rulers, as well as the fact that the reflections in this passage begin and end in the realm of human activity in the present underline also that the present moment is implicated in Qohelet's indictment on the human understanding of time. The deceptiveness of the temporal order has implications both for man's understanding of the future and the widest limits of his existence, and for his everyday life, in that even his seeming ability to navigate in the present is revealed as a mirage. Man cannot even comfortable judge his ability to act responsibly towards human rulers – it would *appear* that one can make the right decisions if one is wise, but Qohelet suggests that even in human matters, such appearances are deceptive: the divinely established temporal order is unknowable and man's belief that he can intellectually engage with it and navigate within it in his daily life is fundamentally a mirage.

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[33] I agree with Longman (1998), p. 215, that 8:9 makes much more sense as a conclusion to 8:1-8 than as the introduction to the next unit.

[34] One may of course understand the verse as dealing with another kind or another aspect of power entirely and thus disregard the tension with 8:2-5. Crenshaw (1998), p. 153, chooses such a solution and does not comment on the relationship between 8:2-5 and 8:9, asking instead whether those wielding power are most likely to hurt themselves or others.

[35] The entire passage is somewhat ambiguous regarding the identity of the ruler. Even in 8:2-5 where the earthly king is explicitly in focus, the author uses language that sows doubt about this king's identity. Firstly, there is the issue of "the oath of God" or the "divine oath". This could be either a subjective or an objective genitive, referring either to God's oath regarding kingship or alternatively an oath sworn in the name of God to the king. See for instance Crenshaw (1998), p. 150. Secondly, the language about the king is elsewhere also used about the divinity: in Ps. 115:3 it is God who does what he wants (חפצ עשׂה), and Qohelet's warning about the distance between subject and ruler is not a far cry from the warning in 5:1 to keep in mind that "… God is in heaven and you are on earth." As noted by Longman (1998), p 212, the warning in 9:4 that the king cannot be gainsaid is similar to a rhetorical question posed by Job to God in Job 9:12. An interesting passage for comparison is 4:1-3 which discusses the structures of power/oppression and power in the human realm while simultaneously referring to the divine responsibility for the wider order of the world.

Concluding remarks

This paper has suggested that exploring Qohelet's extensive discussion of human life in the present in connection with his discourse on time allows for a more composite and a more faithful understanding of the present moment in this book. Two venues in particular have been investigated within the discourse on time: firstly, the relationship of the present to the past and future. Here it was argued that Qohelet's despair over the loss of these temporal horizons seems to bleed into the present, destabilizing this temporal dimension as well. Secondly, humanity's cognitive ability (or inability) to engage with their temporal conditions was considered. Qohelet shows that the problem of time in human existence is to a great extent cognitive in nature as human beings are unable to properly understand and relate to the temporal realities conditioning their life. Finally, 8:1-9 was looked at in some detail. Here Qohelet weaves together advice about human life in the present with reflections on the temporal conditions of humanity and their understanding of these. In this passage Qohelet reevaluates his expectations regarding the ability of human beings to live and act well here and now after having reflected on the wider framework of the temporal realities and their impact on life in the present.

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