

# Coherence in Ecclesiastes 3:16–22

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## Abstract

Ecclesiastes 3:16–22 has been interpreted as an incoherent text or as having unresolved tension. This article seeks to explain the flow of thought in the text. Various exegetical options are evaluated in light of the text and the theology of the book. To trace the flow of thought, different views on the coherence of the text are surveyed and evaluated on the basis of the exegesis. This article argues that the text can be understood as a coherent whole discussing two reactions to observing a corrupt court. One is an affirmation of an afterlife judgment and the other is an expression of human limitations. The concept of human limitations is offered as an argument to renounce futile pursuit of permanent profit in this life and to pursue joy as a gift given by God.

## 1. Introduction

And again I saw under the sun a place of judgment and there was wickedness there, a place of justice and

there was wickedness there! I thought that God would judge the just and the wicked as there is a time for every matter and for every deed there. I thought that this is on account of human beings that God would expose them and show them that they are [just as] quadrupeds by themselves. The lot of the human and the lot of the quadruped is the same lot to both of them. As one dies, so does the other, and they both have the same spirit and the human has no advantage over the quadruped, for all is futile. Both go to the same place. Both are from the soil and both return to the soil. Who knows whether the spirit of humans goes up and the spirit of quadrupeds goes down to the earth? And I saw that there is nothing better than that one has joy in his work, for this is his portion, for who will bring him back to see what will be after him? (Translation of Ecclesiastes 3:16–22 slightly modified from Huovila 2018, 177)

## Conspectus

### Keywords

Ecclesiastes, coherence, judgment, afterlife, joy

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Bible-based. Christ-centred. Spirit-led.

Ecclesiastes 3:16–22 has generated a number of interpretations. Some interpreters do not see a coherent thought expressed in these verses. For example, Crenshaw (1987, 102) considers 3:17 to possibly be a gloss because it would make the text incoherent in his interpretation. Qohelet's view, as presented by Longman (1998, 127–128), is incoherent in that there is divine retribution but no time for it. Finally, according to Bartholomew (2011, 177–179), Qohelet juxtaposes two contradictory views with no resolution in the passage. The passage argues for joy from corruption, judgment, mortality, and direction of spirits after death. The purpose of this article is to explain the flow of thought in the passage. To do so, exegetical options are evaluated in light of the text and the theology of the book, and the relationship of the main ideas in the passage to each other is examined. This is needed because many interpretations assume some incoherence in the passage or Qohelet's view, or do not explain how the ideas in the passage relate to each other as part of a coherent argument. It is assumed that, other things being equal, a coherent interpretation is to be preferred over an incoherent one and is thus more likely to capture the meaning intended by the author. Qohelet's views on determinism, afterlife, and divine judgment are discussed. This helps exclude some interpretive options on the basis of assumed consistency by Qohelet. Various interpretations are surveyed and evaluated in section 3. In section 4, the interrelationships of the different parts of the text are discussed in light of the surveyed options. This leads to a coherent view of the argument presented in the text.

## 2. Theological Preliminaries

### 2.1 Introduction

Some views on Qohelet's<sup>1</sup> theology have greatly influenced the interpretation of Ecclesiastes 3:16–22. Four are discussed here. They are

Qohelet's view on determinism, the meaning of *Sheol*, his view on an afterlife, and his view on divine judgment. These are discussed in this order. Also, a brief explanation of futility in Ecclesiastes is given.

If Qohelet believed that God will judge every person in the afterlife, and if he was coherent, then the interpretation of Ecclesiastes 3:17 that Qohelet referred to an afterlife judgment is a possibility. If he did not believe in a divine judgment in the afterlife, such an interpretation results in an incoherent reading. Therefore, his view on a divine judgment in the afterlife is relevant to the interpretation of Ecclesiastes 3:17.

If Qohelet did not believe in an afterlife, neither could he believe in a judgment in it. In this case, he would not refer to the afterlife in 3:17. In Ecclesiastes 9:10, Qohelet claims that there is no knowledge in *Sheol*. If this view is incompatible with the idea of a conscious afterlife judgment, and if he was coherent, Ecclesiastes 3:17 cannot refer to such an afterlife judgment. Thus, the concept of *Sheol* is relevant for interpreting Ecclesiastes 3:17.

Qohelet's view on determinism is relevant because it may undermine Lohfink's (2003, 66–67) and Samet's (2019, 587) interpretation of Ecclesiastes 3:17 as referring to God judging in the judgment by the corrupt human judge. This discussion of theological preliminaries follows mostly Huovila's (2018, 176–212) argumentation.

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<sup>1</sup> In this article, the name Qohelet refers to the literary character by the same name in the book of Ecclesiastes. The debate about Qohelet's identity is not relevant to this article. By referring to what Qohelet believed or did not believe, reference is made to beliefs or lack of them attributed to him in the book of Ecclesiastes, and to what can reasonably be inferred from these.

## 2.2 *Qohelet's view on determinism*

Murphy (1992, 39) considers that Qohelet teaches determinism in Ecclesiastes 3:1. Fox (1999, 194–206) argues that the passage should not be understood as teaching determinism and that Qohelet did not believe in determinism. Murphy (1992, 39) stresses that the times in the catalogue of times of Ecclesiastes 3 are God's times, not our times, and that they happen to us under divine control. He (1992, 31) also claims that “all times are *fixed* by God, and over them humans have no control” (emphasis in original).

Samet (2019) argues for a thorough determinism in Qohelet's theology. She notes two hints of determinism in the catalogue of times, but she does not consider them decisive. They are “a time to give birth and a time to die” in 3:2, and the use of זמן (“appointed time”) in 3:1 (Samet 2019, 578, gloss hers). Interpreting the catalogue of times as a catalogue of appropriate times rather than determined times, a time to give birth and a time to die seem rather natural. Samet understands זמן to mean “appointed time” in biblical Hebrew, being the late biblical Hebrew parallel of מועד, “appointed time.” As appointed times are often appropriate times, the extension of the meaning is natural. The corpus of late biblical Hebrew has only four instances of זמן. This is not sufficient to exclude the meaning of “appropriate time.” Fox (1999, 200–201) thinks the word is used to complete the parallelism (see also Huovila 2018, 184).

Samet (2019) considers the stronger arguments for determinism to relate to the appendix to the catalogue, in Ecclesiastes 3:9–17. Her view of the structure of the text is discussed in section 3.1. She interprets three verses referring to God's deeds (3:14, 15, 17) in a deterministic context, thereby attempting to solve exegetical difficulties in them. In her interpretation, Qohelet argues for the idea that “God's predestination is absolute and eternal.... Human conducts that are usually ascribed to free will are in fact God's actions” (Samet 2019, 588).

Samet (2019, 582) understands Ecclesiastes 3:14 as saying that God causes people to fear him. She interprets this to mean that “everything is in the hands of God, *including* fear of God. Not only are humans unable to choose their actions, they cannot even decide their thoughts and beliefs” (Samet 2019, 583, emphasis in original). She explicitly rejects the interpretation that the verse is saying that God has done something (referring to a fixed time system expressed in the catalogue of times) so that people would fear him. The argument is based on the basic meaning of עשה ש (“God has caused that”), which she thinks can hardly mean “he has done X so that Y would happen.” The object is not missing but it is the subordinate clause. Seow (1997, 165) thinks, on the contrary, that the relative clause is a result or purpose clause.

Samet's reading of Ecclesiastes 3:14 is syntactically natural and straightforward. However, it is not clear that the fact that God causes people to fear him excludes people's free will. Some people will fear him and God has caused it. However, in causation there is a degree of control. God may well have made the world so that he makes people fear him by hiding his deeds and timing from them (3:11), and people thereby losing ability to control the appropriate times. God making people fear him need not be considered to negate the free will. There may be causality without implying complete control.

Samet (2019, 584–587) argues that a difficult expression יבקש את־נרדף (“he seeks the persecuted”) in Ecclesiastes 3:15 implies that the one responsible for persecution is actually God, not the evildoer who persecutes the oppressed. In her interpretation, נרדף (“persecuted”) refers to the persecuted. It does not refer to cyclical events. Persecution or oppression is a well-established meaning for the verb. The word יבקש (“he seeks”), in connection with נרדפים (“the persecuted”) can mean, in her interpretation, either looking after the oppressed, that is taking vengeance on their behalf,

or seeking to oppress them. She prefers the latter. She notes that the words occur together in contexts of hostile persecution.

The third statement Samet (2019, 586–588) discusses in support of her thesis is Ecclesiastes 3:17. She understands the verse to claim that it is not the mortal judge who causes injustice, but God. He does it through human courts. In this interpretation the word  $\text{אש}$  (“there”) in verse 17 refers to the corrupt court of verse 16. This makes sense in a deterministic text but it is not the only way to read it. An alternative is discussed in section 3.3.1. In the alternative, the word refers to the occasion of God’s judgment.

Fox (1999, 200–202) argues that Qohelet did not believe in determinism. He notes that determinism is incompatible with Ecclesiastes 7:17. The verse records an admonition by Qohelet not to die before one’s time. If the time of death is predetermined, it is impossible to die before it. In a deterministic worldview one cannot influence the time of one’s death. The imperatives imply that one can influence it. Samet (2019, 588–590) notes that Qohelet makes statements that assume free will. She explains this lack of consistency by drawing a parallel to apocalyptic literature with traditional biblical categories of free will coexisting with a deterministic agenda. Its authors allowed the two views in apparent logical contradiction to coexist. The basic concepts of free will theology were too intuitive and too deeply rooted to be removed from deterministic discourse.

There is no need to understand Ecclesiastes 3 as teaching determinism. As Fox (1999, 197–204) argues, the times in the catalogue of times can be understood as appropriate times. This is supported by the claim in 3:11 that God made all things appropriate in their time. While Samet’s (2019) argument is thought-provoking and well written, it is not conclusive. In this study, a non-deterministic interpretation of Qohelet is preferred to a deterministic one as more coherent with the book’s overall argument.

## 2.3 *The meaning of Sheol*

The word *Sheol* is used to refer to a location associated with death. There is debate about what is in *Sheol*. One view considers that it is the spirit of the deceased. This referent may be called the netherworld. This view is argued for by Johnston (2002, 73–75). Another view considers that *Sheol* refers to the place of the body after death. This referent may be called the grave, though it should be noted that an individual grave is never referred to. This view is argued for by Harris (1962). Bar (2015) gives support to the view that it can be used to refer to both. For a detailed discussion, see Huovila (2018, 213–221), who argues that it can refer to both. He also argues that the distinction between body and spirit is relevant for the book of Ecclesiastes. This is because Ecclesiastes 12:7 makes a distinction between them, even though the text does not describe the state of the departed spirit. The possibility that *Sheol* can refer to the physical realm makes it possible that when Ecclesiastes 9:10 claims there is no knowledge in *Sheol*, the reference is to the body. This is relevant to the text, as it discusses opportunities to act in this world rather than opportunities to act in the realm of spirits.

## 2.4 *Qohelet’s view of the afterlife*

There are a few passages that have been used to argue that Qohelet did not believe in an afterlife. They are Ecclesiastes 9:5, 9:6, 9:10, and 3:21. These are discussed in this order. The last verse is not discussed in this section but in section 3.5, because it is part of the passage of central concern to this article. The discussion follows Huovila (2018, 218–221).

Ecclesiastes 9:5 claims that the dead know nothing. Apart from the context, the claim is easy to understand as a claim of no conscious afterlife, denying the concept of a conscious spirit that survives death. This interpretation seems quite natural because it is not so easy to see why a statement that a corpse knows nothing is relevant.

This argument is not strong in a context that discusses bodily activity on earth, and the fact that the window of opportunity for it closes at death. This is the case in Ecclesiastes 9:5. Knowing is mentioned as something the living do, as they know they will die. That means they know their opportunity to act will end (see Eccl 9:10). They can act on this information now, knowing that whatever they want to do, they have limited time for. The dead do not know anything they can act on. The knowing that is relevant in the text is knowledge that can be acted on. The discussion is not about the state of the dead in the abstract but only in its relationship to activity in this life. The next verse (9:6) mentions the dead as not partaking of this life anymore. Understanding the dead in Ecclesiastes 9:5 as referring to the corpse is no more trivial than 9:6 mentioning that the dead no longer have a portion in this life. This interpretation means that Ecclesiastes 9:5 makes no claim about the existence of an afterlife. It only implies that there is a separation between this life and any possible afterlife.

Ecclesiastes 9:6 claims that love, hate, and jealousy have already disappeared among the deceased. Huovila (2018, 84–86) notes three possibilities for understanding the meaning. They are that the dead do not experience these emotions, the dead do not act in these manners, and the dead do not experience others acting in these manners. The last option is quite possibly the right interpretation, because in that interpretation the statement is closer in meaning to the latter part of the verse claiming that the deceased will never again have a portion in what happens under the sun.

Ecclesiastes 9:10 claims that in *Sheol* there is no work, no thought or planning, no knowledge, and no wisdom. Therefore, one should do all one can while one is alive. The concern is the separation of the deceased from all activity in this life. He cannot participate in it anymore. It is irrelevant to this concern whether the deceased has a spirit that survives death and can

work, think, plan, know, and have wisdom, as long as the deceased cannot thereby continue his opportunity to have an influence in this life. Thus, the non-action of the corpse is very relevant in this text. There is no necessity to interpret the reference to be the spirit rather than the corpse.

The texts allow for an interpretation where there is no conscious spirit after death. Such a view would even add some depth to the statements. However, these texts do not require such an interpretation. Therefore, one should be open to the possibility that Qohelet believed in conscious afterlife and in a divine judgment in it.

## 2.5 *Qohelet's view of a divine judgment in the afterlife*

Few interpreters think that Qohelet believed in a just divine judgment in the afterlife (see Huovila 2018, 67–70, 178–180 and the references there). One argument against that being his view is that Qohelet insists that people cannot know the future (Seow 1997, 166–167). This argument is weak in that Qohelet believed one can know something about the future even though he claimed one cannot know the future in general. Crenshaw (1987, 192) considers the view too optimistic for Qohelet. This argues for a view of Qohelet's theology of divine judgment on the basis of the interpreter's general understanding of Qohelet's level of optimism with little further argumentation.

The epilogist clearly believed in the judgment of all deeds (Eccl 12:13–14). This is best understood as an eschatological judgment. This is because “there is no observable judgment of all deeds in this life,” because “Qohelet has argued against all things receiving a proper judgment on earth,” and because “there is no textual support for the idea that the judgment of all deeds is not just” (Huovila 2018, 231–232, quotations on page 231).

This view is not shared by all. Seow (1997, 395) thinks that the judgment referred to by the epilogist is probably eschatological. Fredericks (2010,

250) thinks it is not necessarily the final judgment. Murphy (1992, 126) is uncertain. The locus of this article, Ecclesiastes 3:18–22, is attributed to Qohelet. So, the question is whether Qohelet believed in this view. If the epilogist believed in it, it makes it more probable that Qohelet also did.

If the theological preliminaries discussed above are correct, there is no necessary reason to deny Qohelet the view that there is a personal divine judgment in the afterlife. Ecclesiastes 3:18–22 is interpreted in this article based on the assumption that Qohelet’s worldview allows for such a possibility and the assumption that Qohelet did not believe in determinism. It is argued that the assumption that Qohelet believed in a personal divine judgment in the afterlife makes the best sense of the passage. Therefore, it is Qohelet’s view. The argumentation follows Huovila (2018, 176–212).

## 2.6 The meaning of הבל “futility”

The thematic word for Ecclesiastes, הבל (“futility”), has received a number of interpretations. According to Huovila (2018, 114–156), it means futility, often measured by the standard of achieving permanent profit in this life. A more technical expression of his view is as follows:

[T]he meaning of the word הבל in the book of Ecclesiastes (with possible exceptions when there is good reason to believe that the use is unrelated to the summary statement) falls within the general sense of “futility,” and in most occurrences within the meaning “that which is associated with failure to gain permanent profit, (1) as that which fails to accomplish this, or (2) as the cause or (3) circumstance of the failure.” (Huovila 2018, 153)

The view is also defended by Huovila and Liroy (2019). The three sub meanings in the definition are metonymically related to each other as an

extended prototype category. This understanding of futility in Ecclesiastes gives a single unified meaning for all occurrences related to the summary statement.

## 2.7 Summary of theological preliminaries

Arguments for Qohelet’s determinism are not considered decisive. A non-deterministic reading makes the book somewhat more coherent. *Sheol* can refer to the place of dead bodies as well as the place of the spirits of the dead. Qohelet’s view is not incompatible with life after death. The thematic futility is measured relative to the standard of achieving permanent profit in this life.

# 3. Key Elements in Ecclesiastes 3:16–22

## 3.1 Structure

Huovila (2018, 178) notes that the section 3:16–22 “is linked to verse 10 (ראיתי ‘I saw’) by ועוד ראיתי ‘and again I saw’ (Eccl 3:16) and delimited by ושובתי אני ואראה ‘and again I saw’ in 4:1.” This makes it a section that is meaningful to discuss as a whole. The section begins by recording an observation of an evil court in verse 16. It mentions two conclusions by Qohelet, both introduced by אמרתי אני בלבי (“I said in my heart”; vv. 17, 18). This is followed by a discussion of the common death of humans and animals, or more specifically of some animals (בהמה “quadruped”) in verses 19–21. The section is concluded by a note on the importance of joy in verse 22. The purpose of this article is to examine how the thoughts expressed in these verses cohere. This is done by examining the meaning of these verses and their mutual relationships.

The internal structure of the passage contains a setting (3:16), the first reaction (3:17), the second reaction (3:18–21), and the conclusion (3:22).

The second reaction can be further divided into a summary statement (3:18), further explanation (3:19–20), and a question about directions of spirits in death (3:21). The rhetorical question of verse 21 is given a subsection of its own due to its importance in this article.

Samet (2019, 579–582) argues that Ecclesiastes 3:16–17 does not start a new section after 3:1–15 but rather belongs to the same section. She has two arguments. One is that it is unclear why a passage dedicated to the mechanism of death should begin with a discussion of injustice in courts. This is discussed in section 4.1.2. The other argument is that a reference to the determined times seems out of place (3:17 referring back to 3:1). But the parallel may be more verbal than conceptual (Huovila 2018, 178–185). Because Ecclesiastes 3:17 and 3:18 both express Qohelet’s reaction, it makes sense to consider them part of the same section. This is not to deny cohesive links to Ecclesiastes 3:1–15.

### 3.2 *Setting 3:16*

And again I saw under the sun a place of judgment and there was wickedness there, a place of justice and there was wickedness there!<sup>2</sup>

There is little disagreement about the setting. Qohelet observes a court (place of judgment) “under the sun,” that is “in the realm of the living” as opposed to the netherworld (Seow 1997, 104–105). In the court, which is supposed to be a place of judgment, there was wickedness. The court is called a place of judgment and a place of justice. The latter term highlights the wrong: wickedness is in the very place that is supposed to be a place of justice. Fox (1999, 214) explains why a corrupt court can be called a place

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<sup>2</sup> Translation slightly modified from Huovila (2018, 177).

of justice by analogy to English. In English, one “can call a law court a ‘court of justice’ in the same way, even if the particular one is corrupt.”

### 3.3 *Qohelet’s first conclusion: God’s judgment 3:17*

I thought that God would judge the just and the wicked as there is a time for every matter and for every deed there.<sup>3</sup>

Verse 17 has generated a high number of interpretations. Interpreters have struggled to reconcile the idea of God judging the just and the wicked and the view that Qohelet did not believe in an afterlife judgment. For example, Crenshaw (1987, 102) notes that Qohelet “complains repeatedly that the same fate befalls evildoers and good people.” Because of tension with other statements of divine judgment by Qohelet, he thinks that the verse may be a gloss. Seow (1997, 166) thinks the judgment is potential, signifying that the judgment is in God’s hand. Longman (1998, 127–128) thinks Qohelet believes in divine retribution but has no time for it. This makes Qohelet incoherent. Gordis (1951, 225) thinks the reference is to an afterlife judgment, but he understands the intent to be satirical.

The view that the book of Ecclesiastes contains no argument that Qohelet did not believe in an afterlife divine judgment was discussed and argued for in section 2. In light of this, there is no need to avoid the implication that 3:17 refers to one. This does not solve all the difficulties in this verse. The word **אש** (“there”) has received a vast number of interpretations, including textual emendations. Also, the possibly elliptical nature of the text presents its own challenges.

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<sup>3</sup> Translation from Huovila (2018, 177).

### 3.3.1 The meaning of םש (“there”) in 3:17

Huovila (2018, 178–188) discusses six views on how םש is to be understood. This discussion follows his, elaborating on some details and summarizing others. Five of the views do not understand the word םש to mean “there.” These are briefly mentioned last.

(1) The word is to be pointed as םֶשׁ, and it means “there.” This is supported by the Masoretic pointing and the Septuagint translation as ἐκεῖ, “there.” There are various suggestions about what place is referred to. These include the place of judgment in verse 16 (Fox 1999, 215; Lohfink 2003, 66–67; Samet 2019, 587) and the period after death (Gordis 1951, 225). One way to understand it is that its referent is the occasion of divine judgment, and that the expression is elliptical, possibly expanded as “there is a time [of judgment] for all things [where and when God judges] and time [of judgment] over all deeds there [where and when God judges]” (Huovila 2018, 180).

It is not plausible that םש refers to the expression תחת השמש (“under the sun”) in verse 16. There are two references using שמה (“there”) in the same verse. These refer to the corrupt court just introduced rather than the more remote “under the sun.” Otherwise, the introduction of the corrupt court is awkward. Because of the two anaphoric references to the corrupt court, it is a more active referent than תחת השמש (“under the sun”) and thus more likely understood by the reader as the referent of םש in 3:17.

Samet’s interpretation that God judges all deeds at the corrupt court makes good sense of the text, but only assuming a deterministic view where God does not judge justly. Fox (1995, 215) and Lohfink (2003, 66–67) think that םש refers to the corrupt court. Because of the rarity of the use of םש as an attribute, it is better to understand the place to be the place of divine judgment and not of the deeds to be judged. If it were to be assumed that it refers to the corrupt court as the place of the deeds to be judged, the

author is still very vague as to how this is supposed to be understood in any meaningful sense. Assuming God’s judgment to take place at the corrupt, earthly court presupposes a view of God as an imperfect judge.

Furthermore, it is not clear how all deeds would be judged in the earthly court. Not all deeds are judged at any earthly court but only actual court cases. If the reference to all things is seen as a reference to the catalogue of times, the parallelism appears weak. This is because the catalogue of times does not appear to be a list of things that have a time in court. Even if the reference to all things is diluted to all kinds of deeds, it is not clear why God’s judgment is manifested especially in the corrupt court, apart from a claim that it is God judging at the corrupt court. Understanding a reference to the occasion of divine judgment in the afterlife is superior in that it treats the reference as fully comprehensive, and it makes the statement clearly relevant and understandable in the context. It gives a natural reason for why there is an occasion for all things and deeds there. It is that all things will be judged there. Understanding a reference to the earthly court would require more processing to understand how the “all deeds” is to be qualified and how God judges at the corrupt court. Understanding the judgment to take place in the afterlife is more in line with the idea of God as a righteous judge, it provides a clear occasion for the fulfilment, it is highly relevant for the text, and it does not contradict Qohelet’s ideas about the afterlife.

Based on these considerations, it is best to understand the passage as affirming a divine judgment of all deeds in the afterlife, and םש as referring to the occasion of divine judgment in the afterlife. This interpretation allows for the judgement to be just, with the consequence that this passage is consistent not only internally but also with the Jewish idea of God as a righteous judge. The other views to be mentioned do not understand םש to mean “there.”



(2) The word is to be pointed as  $\text{ִּשָׁ}$ , “appointed,” “established,” or “set.” The word order with the verb last is peculiar enough to call this interpretation into question.

(3) The consonantal text is to be emended. This is unnecessary as the text makes sense as it stands.

(4) The word  $\text{ִּשָׁ}$  is a noun or gerund from  $\text{שָׁם}$  or  $\text{שׁוּם}$ , meaning “destiny” (Seow 1997, 166–167). The existence of such a meaning is speculative.

(5) The word  $\text{ִּשָׁ}$  is to be repointed as  $\text{שָׁם}$ , “name, designation” (Seow 1997, 167). If the understanding is that for all things there is a name, preposition  $\text{לְ}$  (“to”) is more natural than  $\text{עַל}$  (“on”).

(6) The word is an asseverative particle (Whitley 1979, 34–36 tentatively). All her examples for this meaning are more plausibly understood as extensions of the basic meaning “there,” as is argued in detail in Huovila (2018, 186–187).

Because alternatives for the meaning “there” are weak and because a reference to an afterlife judgment is more relevant and semantically more natural than a reference to the earthly court of 3:16, the interpretation of a reference to an afterlife judgment is preferred. It also allows Qohelet to consider God as a righteous judge.

### 3.3.2 The meaning of $\text{יִשְׁפֹּט}$ (“judges”) in 3:17

Seow (1997, 166) argues that the imperfect form of  $\text{יִשְׁפֹּט}$  indicates potential (“may judge”). Huovila (2018, 178–188) argues that  $\text{שָׁם}$  means “there” in this text, and that a reference to a judgment in this life is not natural. If the reference is to an afterlife judgment, there is no reason to understand the judgment as only potential. Therefore, the imperfect form is not to be understood as indicating potential. The basic argument against Huovila’s view is that it is incompatible with Qohelet’s worldview. This was discussed in section 2.

## 3.4 Qohelet’s second conclusion: Similarity of humans and animals 3:18–20

In the second conclusion, Qohelet discusses the purpose or the result of God allowing injustice in court and the similarity of humans and animals in death.<sup>4</sup> Huovila (2018, 188) translates Ecclesiastes 3:18 as “I thought that this is on account of human beings that God would expose them and show them that they are [just as] quadrupeds by themselves.” The verse raises a number of exegetical questions. Huovila (2018, 188–194) discusses four of them besides the connection to the injustice mentioned in 3:16 and to Qohelet’s first reaction to it. The following is a summary of his conclusions.

(1)  $\text{עַל־דְּבָרָתָא}$ , translated above as “on account of,” introduces the divine purpose or the result of the wickedness in court. It is for the sake of human beings, and specifically so that or in order that God would expose them or reveal what they are like.

(2)  $\text{לְבַרְם}$ , translated above as “expose them,” is to be understood as an infinitive. It is “quite probable that the meaning in Ecclesiastes 3:18 is related to this [meaning ‘to make clear’] in that God makes clear what people are. This is related to people being exposed as to how they behave in circumstances like when the court is corrupt.” God is better understood as the subject of the verb rather than the object (Huovila 2018, 191–192).

(3)  $\text{לְרֵאוֹתָא}$ , translated above as “show,” is a qal form referring to humans seeing. He considers emendation of vocalization to hif’il unnecessary. A more literal translation is “they would see.”

(4)  $\text{בְּהֵמָה לְהֵמָה}$ , translated above as “by themselves,” has an ellipsed  $\text{בְּהֵמָה}$ , “quadruped” ( $\text{הֵמָה בְּהֵמָה לְהֵמָה}$ ), unless the text is to be emended. In either case, the sense is roughly the same: it qualifies the equality of humans with

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<sup>4</sup> How these two thoughts are related is discussed in sections 4.1.2 and 4.1.3.

the animals. It may be used to create a contrast: “humans are animals *in themselves*, but not necessarily with respect to divine judgment” (Huovila 2018, 194, emphasis in original).

Huovila (2018, 177) translates 3:19–20 as follows:

The lot of the human and the lot of the quadruped is the same lot to both of them. As one dies, so does the other, and they both have the same spirit and the human has no advantage over the quadruped for all is futile. Both go to the same place. Both are from the soil and both return to the soil.

Here Qohelet denies that the event of death is different for humans and animals. Because of death, humans cannot make any more permanent profit than animals. This makes all things futile in Qohelet’s sense. The human corpse and the animal corpse decompose the same way.

In this passage, Qohelet argues that a purpose or result of God allowing corruption at court is that people see they are like animals with respect to death, and more specifically that they cannot gain any more profit than animals.

### 3.5 *Rhetorical question on the different directions of spirits in 3:21*

In Ecclesiastes 3:21 Qohelet asks who knows whether the human spirit goes up and the animal spirit goes down. Though some understand the question as presupposing the idea that the human spirit goes up and the animal spirit goes down (Kaiser 1979, 70–71; Fredericks 2010, 110–111, 123), the clause that is the object of knowing is really a polar question. This is so because of the resumptive pronoun אִי־הוּ, which requires the הוּ to be understood as an interrogative particle rather than an article. The interrogative particle in

turn requires the question to be understood as a polar question. Therefore, the question really is about who knows whether the human spirit goes up and the animal spirit goes down.

Bryson (2011, 95) thinks that the rhetorical question seems to indicate that the human spirit goes up and the animal spirit goes down. Huovila (2018, 198) argues that the function of the rhetorical question could be to “draw attention to a possible state of affairs as a potential basis for an action or thought,” or “to the lack of knowledge of a state of affairs as strengthening the basis for an action or thought.” It is used to serve as the basis of the exhortation to have joy in 3:22. As argued elsewhere (Huovila 2018, 198–200), it is not likely that Qohelet affirms the worldview presupposed by the question. Rather, Qohelet questions a specific view of the afterlife. The view rather weakens Qohelet’s argument for having joy now in Ecclesiastes 3:22, and therefore Qohelet questions it.

As argued in Huovila (2018, 204–212), it is possible that Qohelet refers to the Egyptian view of the afterlife or some similar view. Much of what we know about the Egyptian view of the afterlife comes from books of the dead. They were produced from the seventeenth century to the first century BC, pointing to the existence of a perception of the afterlife. This covers the whole range of suggested dates for the book of Ecclesiastes.

The concept of coming forth by day was an important element of the Egyptian view. For those with a good lot in the afterlife, part of the deceased (the *ba*) was considered to be able to depart the netherworld in the morning and return in the evening. At least the king was believed to be able to travel across the sky with the sun-god. It is less clear whether the peasant could expect the same. The evidence of an afterlife for animals is not quite as clear. It is quite possible that an afterlife was ascribed to animals. Huovila (2018, 209) is not aware of any evidence that the prospect for animals might include the concept of coming forth by day.

The Egyptian view fits Ecclesiastes 3:21. Huovila's arguments include the following claims: (1) The human spirit ascending (by going forth by the day) and the animal spirit descending (to the netherworld) may well be sufficient for the original readers to identify the particular view; (2) In the view, the ascending human spirit is in a more privileged position than the animal spirit descending; (3) The view would undermine Qohelet's argument for having joy. In Egypt, the better lot was considered dependent on, or at least enhanced by, the use of magic. "There were skeptical views on whether the elaborate preparations for afterlife were worth making as opposed to enjoying the pleasures of life (Taylor 2001, 44–45)" (Huovila 2018, 209).

The function of Ecclesiastes 3:21 is to undermine a possible objection to Qohelet's argument of enjoying life now. Belief in the objected view might cause some of the original readers of the book to lose joy in life because of pursuing a better afterlife. The pursuit implied following an expensive system of afterlife preparations, for some requiring overwork to fund it.

### 3.6 *Qohelet's final conclusion: The superiority of joy in 3:22*

Ecclesiastes 3:22 contains three clauses beginning with כִּי ("that"). The first one claims that there is nothing better than having joy in one's work. The second one is that the joy is one's portion. The third one is a rhetorical question about who will bring one to see what would be after him, questioning the possibility. The expression "after him" has been understood as referring to what happens to the individual after his death, what happens on earth after his death, or what happens later in the person's life on earth (Fox 1999, 217; Huovila 2018, 82).

The connection to the preceding text on death is weaker if the reference is to the time before death. This argues for the reference to be to the time

after death. There are two basic arguments why the reference is to what happens on earth rather than to the individual after his death. One is that it is more consistent with the flow of thought when a belief in an afterlife judgment has been expressed in 3:17. The other is that there is no need to bring anyone to himself. The idea is that another expression would be more appropriate if the idea was to show his own future to himself (for example מִי יֵרָאֶה, "who will show"). If one is considered to have departed to the afterlife, the idea of bringing him to see what there is after his time makes more sense (Huovila 2018, 82).

The three clauses together form an argument for joy. It is the best thing, it is a portion to be enjoyed, and one cannot know what will happen on earth after one's death. The last one undermines a possible counterargument to Qohelet's argument for joy. The counterargument is that one should ignore opportunities to enjoy legitimate joy now in pursuit of a better (but highly uncertain) future of enjoying in the afterlife a portion of earthly life. The counterargument is similar to the argument from the direction of spirits after death.

### 3.7 *Key elements summarized*

The setting in Ecclesiastes 3:16 records an observation of a corrupt court. This observation triggers two reactions by Qohelet. The first is about God judging the just and the wicked. It has received many interpretations, but there is no need to avoid the idea that it is an afterlife judgment. The word מָשַׁח has generated many interpretations. A good option is that it refers to the occasion of divine judgment in the afterlife. The second reaction is that the injustice reveals what people are like. They are mortal. The position that the direction of spirits of people and animals differs is questioned. The function may be to undermine a possible counterargument to Qohelet's

argument for the importance of joy. The argument is that there is nothing better, joy is one's portion, and one cannot see what is after him.

## 4. The Main Proposals for the Flow of Thought

### 4.1 Key questions on the flow of thought

The following questions about the flow of thought in Ecclesiastes 3:16–22 are discussed:

- (1) How are Qohelet's two reactions to injustice related to each other?
- (2) How does understanding mortality serve as a result of injustice?
- (3) How is the death of animals related to injustice?
- (4) How does mortality support the argument for joy?
- (5) How does lack of certainty about the direction of spirits in death relate to the argument for joy?
- (6) What is the main point of the passage as a whole?

The preceding discussion has touched on some of these questions from a rather narrow, exegetical point of view. Here the purpose is to discuss these questions as they relate to the flow of thought. The questions are discussed in this order with a presentation of different solutions. Many of the arguments in this section are based on Huovila (2018, 176–212).

#### 4.1.1 Interrelationship of Qohelet's two reactions to injustice

Qohelet reacted to injustice in two ways. First, that God will judge, and second, that the divine purpose or the result of the injustice is that God will reveal what humans are like (though there is a variety of interpretations for both reactions). Many scholars see the two reactions as incompatible

or at least in conflict with each other. For example, Crenshaw (1987, 102) thinks the first comment may be a gloss. Bartholomew (2009, 176–178) considers Qohelet to juxtapose two reactions, the confessional one and the enigmatic one. In the confessional one, he affirms that God has a time for judgment. In the enigmatic one, he notes that the observable fate of humans and animals is the same. Human limitations may bring one to espouse the enigmatic view or to push one to approach life in the light of verse 22. In verse 22, Qohelet commends joy. Thus, Bartholomew contrasts two alternative approaches to the question of injustice.

According to Bryson (2011, 94–95), Qohelet thinks that God will make things right, but does not seem to think about “God's final judgment at the end of time” in 3:17. In 3:21 he seems to conceive of life after death for humans. He views this as Qohelet's inner struggle. This approach is rather similar to Bartholomew's, though he considers the rhetorical question of 3:21 to imply a possibility for an afterlife rather than a denial of the different directions of human and animal spirits.

Longman (1998, 127–128) thinks that in the verses, there is a tension or a contradiction in that Qohelet asserts a belief in divine retribution, without allocating time for it. Longman considers that Qohelet did not believe in an afterlife. Enns (2011, 59) understands Qohelet as rejecting the concept of an afterlife or at least any way of knowing it for sure. What is known is that death makes all labor pointless, and therefore the “lamentable conclusion” is that there is nothing better than to enjoy one's work. Qohelet notes that God judging in verse 17 is a shallow consolation or an outright taunt as the injustice is also in God's control.

Seow (1997, 175–176) considers 3:17 to teach that judgment is entirely in God's hands. Qohelet in another place affirms the view found elsewhere in the Bible that when a person dies, the dust returns to the earth and the life-breath returns to God, but in this passage he “refuses to entertain any

notion of separate destinies for the life-breaths of people and animals.” This is perhaps a reaction to a speculative view in Qohelet’s generation. Seow does not see the first reaction as any certainty that God will set things right in judgment. The ultimate point Qohelet makes is that people should enjoy their work. It is not quite clear how Seow relates the ideas to each other.

Fox (1999, 214–215) understands Qohelet to think that God will execute judgment, but death may intervene or, if the judgment is death, its universality makes the sentence meaningless. Thus, divine judgment does not rectify the wrongs of this life. He finds the  $\text{דָּש}$  at the end of the verse as difficult, preferring to emend it. A reference to the afterlife would presuppose its existence. Therefore, Fox does not believe  $\text{דָּש}$  to refer to it. Without emendation, it refers to the court of justice. In light of death eliminating distinctions, pleasure is commended.

The common understanding of placing the two observations Qohelet makes at tension with each other may not be the best understanding of the passage. While they are two distinct reactions to injustice, the author is using these to support his flow of thought. The tension-maximizing approach tends to view the main theme of the book as a struggle of faith (Bartholomew 2009, 93), or collapse of meaning (Fox 1999, 133). There is little textual evidence for this (Huovila 2018, 17–30). According to a different understanding of the text, the commendation of joy is considered a genuine commendation of real joy (Huovila 2018, 101–114) rather than a commendation of pleasure as a best option when real meaning has collapsed (Fox 1999, 113–115, 127–131, 138–145). The text is understood as creating an argument to it from injustice.

#### 4.1.2 The relationship between injustice and understanding mortality

Many commentaries make no explicit comment on how the injustice of 3:16 is related to the theme of mortality in 3:18–21. These include Fox (1999, 214–217),<sup>5</sup> Seow (1997, 175–176), and Provan (2001, 92–101).

Fredericks (2010, 121–122) connects the humiliation of humans being at the level of the beast to them respecting God as creator and judge. Bartholomew (2009, 177) understands Qohelet to say that the purpose of injustice is to remind humans of their mortality. Huovila (2018, 193) thinks that “the result or divine purpose of corruption in court is that God uses it to expose what people are like.” He suggests that the connection between injustice and understanding mortality is based on human limitations. Seeing one’s limitations as a recipient of injustice can remind one of the limitation of mortality (194–195). While there is some contrast between Fredericks’s connection of humiliation to respecting God as a judge, and Bartholomew and Huovila’s view of human limitations as the common theme, the views are close. Understanding one’s limitations can lead to respecting God as creator and judge.

#### 4.1.3 How is the death of animals related to injustice?

If the purpose of comparing the death of animals to that of humans is to humiliate them so that they respect God (Fredericks 2010, 121–122), the connection is easy to make as suffering injustice can also have the same impact. Likewise, if the concept of human limitations is the connecting thought, the similarity of animal death to human death is a reminder of human limitations. An underlying thought is probably that these, injustice

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<sup>5</sup> Fox notes that the observation of injustice leads to thoughts of death.

in court and the common death of humans and animals, are examples of futility, as all these may cause profit to be temporal (see section 2.6).

#### 4.1.4 How does mortality support the argument for joy?

Fox (1999, 217) considers the most likely interpretation of 3:22 to be that ignorance of what happens on earth after one's death is a reason to seize the present moment. Qohelet "concludes that pleasure is the only recourse" because of death, which eliminates distinctions (Fox 1999, 214). Longman (1998, 131) understands the support from mortality to the argument of joy in a similar manner. He notes that death makes justice uncertain, and this leads Qohelet to assert the value of enjoying the present. Both Longman and Fox share the assumption that the support mortality offers to joy is through injustice. Fredericks (2011, 123) relates verse 22 to ignorance about how one's accomplishments will be valued or built on after death. This ignorance is a basis to enjoy one's activities now.

A view that gives a better explanation of why the specific phraseology was chosen is that Qohelet addresses a possible counterargument to his exhortation to value joy. This counterargument consists in the possibility to enjoy in the afterlife the profit one has toiled for in this life. Thus it would make sense to overwork for profit and lose joy now, in order to gain it in the afterlife. Mortality supports the argument for joy by undermining the profit-centered approach to life by making the achieved profit temporal.

#### 4.1.5 How does lack of certainty about the direction of spirits in death relate to the argument for joy?

Crenshaw (1987, 104) understands Qohelet's point to be that speculation about humans enjoying a favorable status after death is a waste of time.

Fredericks (2010, 122–123, 126) thinks that the thought is that because of the brevity of life, one should enjoy one's work and accomplishments. Qohelet's exhortation is to be happy and not worry about what happens on earth after death.

We can understand better why the specific expression was chosen if the lack of certainty to refer to a specific view would undermine Qohelet's argument (see section 3.5). In this view, one's toil now enhances one's afterlife experience. Qohelet argues against overwork and prefers work coupled with joy. If one knew for certain that the view is correct that the human spirit would go up and the animal spirit would go down, overwork could also make sense. The argument for joy is not refuted by this argument, because the view itself is suspect. Thus, Qohelet questions the potential counterargument to support his call for joy.

#### 4.1.6 What is the main point of the passage as a whole?

The answers to the five questions above paint a picture of the argument as a whole. If the two responses to the observation of injustice stand in stark contrast to each other, the commendation of joy can be regarded as the best available option when the truly best option is not available (Fox 1999, 127–131; Longman 1998, 131; Bryson 2011, 93–96), or as one of two options to react to human limitations (Bartholomew 2009, 178). If they are in harmony with each other, then they address the same question from different viewpoints. This is Huovila's understanding of the passage. The first observation deals with theodicy and the second with providing a basis for joy through the recognition of human limitations.

Injustice and mortality are both reminders of human limitations. These limitations are examples of futility. Mortality supports joy as a best option

in light of futility. Futility and joy are understood in different ways. Joy is reduced to pleasure by Fox (1999, 113–115), and argued to be true joy by Huovila (2018, 101–114). The resulting picture is either a rather resigned view for pleasure because of futility (Fox 1999, 113–115, 127–131, 138–145; Longman 1998, 131) or finding deep joy when a futile attempt to gain some permanent profit in this life is given up. Some leave the tension unresolved at this stage of the book (Bartholomew 2009, 179–182).

The lack of certainty about the direction of spirits is understood as agnosticism about what happens after death in general (Longman 1998, 129–133) or in some specific, rather orthodox view (Enns 2011, 58–59), resulting in appreciation of pleasure. This article argues that it questions a particular point of view that could serve as a counterargument to Qohelet's argument for joy. Some commentators do not connect the thoughts together.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

Not connecting the lack of certainty of the direction of the human and animal spirits to the observation of injustice and the commendation of joy makes the text less cohesive and likely misses the original intent of the paragraph. It is more likely the thoughts are interconnected.

The idea that Qohelet questioned an orthodox view suffers from the problem that the particular view cannot be identified as a specific view within the orthodox Judaism of the time. The language is too specific for the view to be an expression of general agnosticism. These attempts to understand the text result in a view of Qohelet where he struggles with his faith and recommends joy in that context. The problem for this view is the specific language used to question the particular view.

The passage gives a two-fold response to injustice. One is to affirm that God will guarantee a just end-result in an afterlife judgment. The other is to draw attention to what God is doing as he allows injustice in this time.

He is revealing human limitations. Understanding them well can free one to enjoy life by taking away the burden of trying to get profit out of life. There is a potential counterargument to this. If suffering now enhances the afterlife, it could well be worth not valuing joy over profit. Qohelet undermines this argument in the specific case of a view that has human and animal spirits departing in different directions. This view may be a reference to the Egyptian view of the afterlife, in which one could toil a lot to be able to afford elaborate funeral arrangements to enhance one's afterlife.

If Qohelet affirms a divine judgment in the afterlife, it is quite conceivable that he would affirm a different form of the argument. In line with the ending of the book (Eccl 12:13–14), obedience to God is to take precedence over joy. In Qohelet's view, however, joy is accepted by God in general, and thus the counterargument is not valid for his concern here. He is more concerned with people losing joy because of overwork (Eccl 4:4–8).

Qohelet wants to teach about life, specifically about human limitations as a reason to give up an obstacle that hinders receiving joy as a gift from God. The obstacle is the attempt to find permanent profit in life. This attempt is bound to fail. This is relevant, as people who intellectually understand their mortality fail to live accordingly in their lives, trying to hoard wealth that they will lose anyway, and losing their joy in the process. They may attempt to gain security through wealth, but wealth is incapable of providing such security, as it is lost in earthly life or at death at the latest.

If an opportunity to have joy is God's gift, it honors God to receive the gift. Overwork that takes away the joy God wants to give does not respect the divine gift-giver. Qohelet argues for his theology of joy on the basis of injustice and death as human limitations.

This way of reading the passage explains why Qohelet used such an otherwise strange way to refer to a question of the afterlife, namely

discussing the direction of spirits. It also implies this passage discusses theodicy in a rather direct way, giving two answers: ultimate justice in the afterlife, and a divine purpose, or at least use, of injustice to teach people. When interpreted this way, the text coheres well.

A coherent reading is to be preferred to an incoherent one, unless there are good arguments to the contrary. An important argument against a coherent reading has been that Qohelet could not refer to an afterlife judgment. The support for the view was evaluated and found weak. All this argues for the view that Ecclesiastes 3:16–22 can be read as a coherent text, and that a coherent interpretation does not do violence to the text as it stands.

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