actions and their consequences. The poem thus evidences a dynamic movement from beginning to end. As Helen Vendler observes, the “thinking” of poetry is “always in process, always active. It issues ... in pictures of the human mind at work, recalling, evaluating, and structuring experience.”33 This is why the import of poems cannot be appreciated by paraphrasing their main point, but rather the point “can be grasped only by our participating in the process they unfold.”34 So too in Proverbs 5, the lesson cannot be fully articulated apart from the experience of its unfolding within the lines of the poem. It positions the reader as the son of the father, amenable to instruction and with an impressionable imagination. Through its language and imagery, it carries the student through an imaginative exercise in moral discernment, coloring his picture of the world in accord with the father’s vision of wisdom.

34 Vendler, Poets Thinking, 119, emphasis added.

In his “Last Lecture” about the absurd nature of human life, the character Qohelet presents some thoughts on a large group of events, activities, and moods and their relationship to time (Qoh 3:1-8). Scholars debate whether the speech at this point merely lists them or constitutes a poem, and whether the sentence that introduces the speech has the character of poetry and is the first line of the poem. The debate has not turned on a clear definition of a poem and poetry or of a list. Nor has it produced an articulate statement about the relevance for understanding the character Qohelet or the book Qohelet. In fact, many of those who do not consider the speech a poem nevertheless have it printed in verse format.3 A second set of debates concerns various linguistic and conceptual aspects of the speech: the meaning and referents of the key word הָעָרֶב (“time”) and other elements, the syntax that determines the relationship between the elements within each clause and between the different clauses, the logic of the total set and its sequence, and the point overall.

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This study argues that the two sets of debates about the form and the content of the speech are related; that they respond to mixed signals present in the speech; that the indeterminacy and inconsistency in the semantics, syntax, and sequence of the speech serve to advance a view on the nature of speech and poetry; and that this view of poetry stands at the heart of the character’s thoughts on the absurdity of life. The study interprets the speech at 3:1–8 as Qohelet’s mimicry of proverbial poetry, which claims to encapsulate the nature of life and package it pithily for the discerning. Combining the proverbial line, list, and extended instruction all in one, Qohelet’s mastery of proverbial poetry authorizes him to illustrate its fatal flaws.

The argument begins by defining biblical poetry – written poetry – and distinguishing it from the list. The definition informs a critical survey of the speech at Qoh 3:1–8, which traces how the features generate a sense of coherence and meaning, and then analyzes the semantics, syntax, and sequence to reveal fundamental instability. The argument concludes by situating the speech at 3:1–8 in the context of Qohelet’s complete lecture, which denies the validity and utility of the proverbs, lists, and poems of wisdom-speech.

THE SPEECH AT QOHELET 3:1–8

As applied to the treasury of Hebrew literature from ancient Israel, Judea, and Babylon known as the Jewish Bible, the idea of poetry may be said to refer to patterned evocative speech – speech that is structured by varieties of repetition and that evokes the presence of a speaker to effect something more or something other than the transmission of information.¹ Speech is the verbal component of the text, specifically, speech belonging to and constituting a speaker in the text rather than speech about the text, like a title or preface. Patterning – regularized repetition – can occur in any aspect of speech, its meaning, grammar, lexemes, or sounds. To effect a pattern, repetition must occur with sufficient frequency and at effective junctures to be perceptibly an organizing factor. In biblical poetry, patterning occurs primarily at the level of the clause, namely from one clause to another, with respect to both the length of a clause and its constitutive elements – accent, syntax, and semantics.² By “evocativeness” is meant the aim or the effect, not of participating in the world immediately, but of conjuring or eliciting a virtual representation of it and simulating a speaker in it, which in turn can then affect one’s experience of the real world and engagement in it.³ In this definition, biblical poetry is not a manner of speaking but a type of event, an event that turns on speech.

Lists bear a striking resemblance to poems. They are patterned speech. But they are not necessarily evocative. They function to transmit information as part of the regular activity of the world for use directly in it. Evocativeness depends on the contextualization of the speech, and contextualization can either be signaled by additional speech around the poem or be supplied by the audience on the basis of their own conventions and interests. Moreover, an audience may knowingly choose to treat a list as a poem or a poem as a list. Evocativeness, then, is protean, subjective, and, for the critic, a moving target.⁴ The relationship between the list and the poem is even tighter in that both entail classification and organization, but whereas the list can be said to present conceptual or conceptualized entities in a fixed sequence, the poem can be said to put them in motion, to show interaction, to feature relationships, to bring them, as it were, to life. If the list embodies knowledge and transmits values, then the poem instigates evaluation and demands acknowledgment. From this point of view, one may say the biblical poem turns on the list.

By this threefold measure, the famous speech by the character Qohelet about times for things at 3:2–8 in the book of Qohelet is a poem. At the same time, aspects of the poem show the proverbial emperor to have no clothes: poetry is a sham. The analysis below reviews the elements that make the speech poetry and those that unravel it. Ambiguity in the basic syntax and semantics of the speech preclude providing a translation that can serve as a stable referent against which to develop the argument. The elements will be presented and analyzed in turn until a clear picture of the speech as a whole can emerge.

Introduced by a general statement that everything, every endeavor, has its time and its timing (v. 1), the speech at vv. 2–8 presents a series of events, activities, and states of mind – twenty-eight items as fourteen pairs

⁴ Compare Stanley Fish, Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 303–37.
of oppositions — which by the logic of illustration and accumulation capture together the lives of human beings:6

1: being born and dying
2: planting and uprooting
3: killing and tending8
4: smashing and building
5: crying and merrymaking
6: mourning and dancing
7: discarding stones9 and gathering them
8: clasping and avoiding to clasp
9: demanding and forfeiting10
10: preserving and discarding11
11: tearing and sewing
12: keeping silent and speaking
13: loving and hating
14: war and peace

Each event or activity is preceded by the word āt ("time"), with every second instance preceded by the conjunction waw ("and"). The repeated alternation of āt ... waw āt ... āt ... waw āt ... ("a time ... and a time ... a time ... and a time ...") creates pairings and lines and gives the speech its structure. Nearly all activities, events, and states of mind (twenty-six) are

6 The pairs are not merisms, as many claim, but illustrations (Fox, A Time to Tear Down, 194).
7 Scholars debate whether qal šálede means here "to give birth," an imprecise opposite of námit "to die," or, unusual for the qal stem, "to be born"; see C. L. Seow, Ecclesiastes, AB 18C (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 166; PaulJoison, A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew, 2 vols., trans. and rev. T. Muramoto (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1981), 2:1439:51:245. Qohelet used the qal inf. cstr. with passive force earlier: līqān "be set lighted" (1:15); he will use the niphal inf. cstr. for the root yāhā-l later: yīm bi wākaldād "the day of one's birth, on which one is born" (7:1). Perhaps he means here the passive but uses the active form to match all the infinitives that follow.
8 The root q-r- means not only to heal (TDOT 13:1996–1999) but also to tend to, keep well: Exod 15:36; Isa 51:4–6; Ezek 47:9; 21; Hos 1:13; Prov 4:22.
9 Hiphil 1:2-3 means not only to cast but to (leave) abandon: HALOT 21:528, BDB 151d (add 5:3 Exod 24:30 to 5:30).
11 Hiphil 1:4-6 again. 11

formulated as the infinitive construct — twenty-three preceded by the prepositional prefix lō- ("to [verb]") or "for [gerund]"),12 and three without it (mourning and dancing, in l. 6, clauses a and b; gathering stones, in l. 7b). The final pair are nouns (war and peace, in l. 14). And almost all of the activities, events, and states of mind (twenty-four) are conveyed by a single word; the others by only two (uprooting, in l. 2b; discarding stones and gathering stones, in l. 7; avoiding to clasp, in l. 8b). The predominance of infinitives construct, single-word concepts, and brief clauses — forms of repetition — tightens the structure.

The steady repetition of a particular sound throughout the speech has its impact too. The regular recurrence of the sounds āt and waw every line — āt twice per line at the head of each clause, and waw prefixed to āt every second clause — creates its own sense of ebb and flow, of rhythm and rhyme, a symmetry sublime. In its effect, all those human activities and events named have their place and their pace, rotating in turn and in tune, like the heavens under which — so the introduction — they happen. The semantic content of the repeated sound āt, "time," reinforces the sense of pacing and regularity. Together, the twenty-eight infinitives and nouns promote a general impression of human activity and concretize the sense of āt as seasonality, marking something reliable, logical, or even necessary. Concluding with the noun sālōm "peace" strikes a round and ringing note that brings the alternating pairs to resolution with a sense of overall perfect completeness, harmony, and uniformity.13

The activities named, pairings made, and placement in sequence all contribute to the sense of totality of life, how it is lived, and categories and values that make life meaningful. The framing pairs play a decisive role. The speech begins with the pair of birth and death and concludes with that of war and peace — events that happen to people.14 The bodily process of birth has its own compulsion; failure to comply and participate can have disastrous results for both birther and birthed. Death rarely is conceived to involve the active participation of the dying; typically, it

12 Many represent the construction as genitival, "of [gerund]," but usage in the Hebrew Bible counters that.
14 Compare Norbert Lohfink, Qoheleth, trans. S. McEvenue, CC (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 60; Michael V. Fox, Ecclesiastes, JPS Bible Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004), 20; Kneebbe, Der Prediger, 133.
The Utility and Futility of Poetry in Qohelet

birth and death, especially through the coloring of the third pair, killing and tending. The correlation creates a frame for the activities in between as a single set. At the same time, love and hate serve in the technical and legal language both of individual relationships, like friendship and rivalry and marriage and divorce, and of political ones affecting the collective, in treaties of alliance or vassalage and in diplomatic correspondence. Bound up with the states of peace and war, the language of love and hate, then, makes a Janus-like pivot to the final pair.

The framing pairs of the series, processed more quickly by an audience, also represent the variation in notions of opposition that might occur, or have occurred, in the intervening set. The final pair confirms the impression made by the first that opposition as a constructed concept has varieties and, what is more, that these can coexist in a single list to produce a sense of how life is lived not just between events, but between types of events. The experience of life and its vicissitudes is a cognitive enterprise. The speech, then, represents the wisdom genre. Cases of illustrative value line up in agglomerative fashion to produce cumulative knowledge about life as a knowledge-based affair. Repetition of form generates understanding of matter; aesthetics affords control, in language as in life. The voicing of such speech is that of the wise, who experiences life, packages it, and reproduces it for others. The character voicing it, Qohelet, does not just add wisdom, but goes beyond his level of discourse to get into character and play the wise. This evocativeness would make it a poem. Further considerations will strengthen the case while revealing an underlying subversiveness.

As pointed out by Jacqueline Vayntrub, the speech in Qohelet strikingly resembles a text (in alphabetic script and Hebrew or Phoenician language) found at the site of ancient Gezer some twenty-four miles west of Jerusalem and prepared in the late tenth or early ninth century BCE.

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13 Closest: 2 Kgs 2; Suggestive: Gen 49:13; Num 20:13-28; Deut 31:28-31; 31:11-35; 1 Sam 31:2-5; 2 Sam 1:16-17; 17:25.
14 Kroeber, _Der Prophet_, 131.
15 Beyond Barton, that variation signals conclusion (Book of Ecclesiastes, 104-05).
16 J. A. Louden refers to poles of desirable and undesirable ("Qohelet 3:2-8 - A Somnet in the Old Testament," ZAW 81 [1969]: 240-41; Polar Structures in the Book of Qohelet [Berlin: de Gruyter, 1979], 11-13, 29-33), which many adopt. But all the activities are subject to circumstance and may be taken as desirable or undesirable. Better, therefore, to describe the types of opposition without evaluative prejudice.
17 Roland E. Murphy, _Ecclesiastes_, WBC 2:3 (Nashville: Nelson, 1995), 34.
some five hundred years before Qohelet.44 Like Qohelet’s speech, the Gezer text joins a set of nine activities – gathering, sowing, late sowing, weeding, harvesting barley, harvesting wheat, measuring, pruning, and cutting45 – by a word for a unit of time repeated eight times, yrḥ, “month.” The activities are denoted by one word five times and by two words three times, in a mix of infinitives and nouns, each one preceded by yrḥ – four times by yrḥ alone (singular “month”) and four more times by yrḥw (plural “two months,” plus singular pronominal suffix functioning proleptically – “of it”).46 Nine activities and twelve months are adapted to each other in eight lines. The result is imprecise and inapplicable practically and imbalanced and imperfect aesthetically. Vayntrub incisively reasons that rather than transmit traditional knowledge, the Gezer text represents an intellectual exercise, creates new knowledge, constitutes a literary event.

Vayntrub’s use of Qohelet’s speech to shed light on the character of the Gezer text as forcibly folding a set of activities into a separate temporal scheme has the return effect of shedding light on Qohelet’s speech. Similar to the Gezer text, it mashes together multiple schemes in a way that looks and sounds consistent but upon inspection resists synthesis and pulls in alternate directions – indeed, more so. The divergences do not solely reflect the mismatch between two schemes; they occur within the schemes too. Entirely in the author’s control, they need not occur and throw harsh light on the speaker’s intent.

First of all, the activities in the Gezer text line up in a chronological sequence that recurs reliably and productively on an annual basis.47 In Qohelet’s speech, as C.L. Snow has insisted, no discernible principle groups the pairs or guides their sequence – neither chronology nor causality, neither materials nor mood, not perspective or result, not word counts or syllable counts or consonant schemes like alliteration and the acrostic.48 Some pairs begin with a constructive or life-advancing item and close around the other pole, others do the reverse; some are indeterminate, others are altogether neutral – and the sequence does not reflect this aspect, either. No discernible principle explains the items selected for mention and those left out. What is archetypal about claspings and avoiding to clasp?

There are other puzzling choices: opposing “clasping” (ḥ-b-q) to the clumsy inverse “avoiding to clasp” (r-b-q min b-q), rather than a distinct activity like “releasing” (l-l-h), “separating” (p-r-d), “fleeing” (b-r-h), or even “distancing” (r-b-q alone) in l. 8, reused the root “discard” (ḥiphil ṣ-l-h) in l. 7a, 10b; and seeming to repeat a core idea, in building and breaking in l. 4 and gathering stones and discarding them in l. 7. As said, most items are denoted by one Hebrew word, but a few are denoted by two; most are cast as infinitive construct with preposition, but some are cast without. Speech dominated by rigid patterners is best by erratic irregularity; the sense of patterning is belied by its anthesis, randomness.

Secondly, the unit of time in the Gezer text, yrḥ “month,” reflects an observable recurring celestial event and adapts it to political, legal, and other administrative purposes. In Qohelet’s speech, by contrast, the term ‘et acts as a literary keyword and structural anchor but refers to no stable temporal entity.49 Planting and hoeing are seasonal activities, determined by the sun and climate and recurring annually. Birth comes at the end of a fairly fixed term after a discrete, willed event whenever and wherever it occurs.50 Death has no regular, discernible term at all apart from a general lifespan, “seventy years and if it be but thirty years” (Ps 90:10). If birth and death still are natural or fated to occur, what time span, season, or process is appropriate for killing? Which season would not be one for tending? The only meaning for ‘et that could encompass all the events, activities, and moods has nothing to do with the cosmically or otherwise fixed forms of recurrence evoked by the repetitions and structure of the speech, but with sets of conditions observable to and identifiable by humans – circumstances – and requiring their keen judgment.51

Thirdly, the Gezer text, which lacks an introduction, presents a series of sentence fragments, construct phrases comprising yrḥ or yrḥw followed

45 See Vayntrub, “Observe Due Measure,” 198–199, but kāl likely reflects kūl, “to measure.” (see HALOT 1465), and qē, as the final entry, is likely multivalent (note Amos 8:1–3).
47 On thematic grouping, see Vayntrub, “Observe Due Measure,” 197–99.
48 Snow, Ecclesiastes, 171–72; see also Fox, A Time to Tear Down, 193–94.
50 See Gen 18:10; 14: lamāmō’ed; ḫā’ē ṣāḥ yāṣē; also Job 39:1–2.
51 In this direction, Vayntrub, “Observe Due Measure,” 194–96.
by a noun or prepositionless infinitive construct, "a month of X" or "two months of it, of X." Qohelet's speech, which has an introduction, presents a complex, ambiguous case that actually shifts with the perspective of the reader. The dominant construction of the clauses - (a) noun 'ět followed by (b) preposition l- plus (c) infinitive construct - can be independent, in which case the speech is a series of separate statements, but it can also be dependent, in which case the speech is a series of dependent clauses hanging on a single independent clause - in the introduction at v. 1 - namely one very long statement. Nearly all commentators assume the second option. The formal cast of the clause 'ět l-kol bēpēš in the introduction does resemble the clauses that follow, 'ět l- [inf. cstr.]. But the syntax differs. In the introduction, a compound sentence in parallelism, the preposition l- signals possession, and the clauses are statements of possession: lākkol zamān wā ʾět l-kol bēpēš tabāt hašāšmāyām, "Every time it has its time and every endeavor under the heavens has its timing." In the clauses that follow, the l- of the infinitives construct signals purpose, and the clauses are statements of existence: 'ět l-[inf. cstr.], "There is a time tofor [activity]." 35 This change in syntax makes the clauses after the introduction a series of independent statements. 36 The speech's form creates the sense of structure and continuity, its content - fissures and instability.

In fact, as the speech progresses, this reading of it comes undone. The three clauses that have infinitives construct without preposition l- (II. 6, 7b), and the two clauses with nouns (I. 14) are bound phrases, "a time of," and must be dependent. 37 While the two clauses of line 6, "mourning" and "dancing," could be standing in opposition to those that precede them in line 5, "crying" and "merrymaking," and qualifying them respectively; in line 7, "gathering stones" cannot stand in opposition with "discarding stones"; it must depend on a clause in the introduction, which means so must all the clauses in between. The final line, two clauses with two nouns in construct, "a time of war and a time of peace," strengthens the reevaluation of the whole as lines of dependent clauses. The syntax of the whole, then, actually shifts with the audience's vantage point: independent clauses when read from the introduction on, dependent clauses when reconsidered from the conclusion back, with a few moments of ambiguity in between. 38

An even sharper problem exists. The dominant clause form, 'ět followed by l- prefixed infinitive construct, indicates purpose and gives instruction: there are times or seasons "for" or "to," that is, in which one should do as appropriate to them, which expresses the view that the activity realizes or responds to a recognizable time or season. 39 The two other clause forms, 'ět followed by unprefixed infinitive construct or by a noun, offer description: there are times or seasons "of," that is, characterized by certain activities or events, which expresses the view that the time is a function of activities and events. 40 Just what idea does the speech mean to convey, and how does it hold together? Whereas the Gezer text superimposes two coherent schemes - sets of repetition in form and content - to debatable effect, in Qohelet's speech the schemes themselves do not hold. The sound, structure, and substance create the experience of the rhythm, regularity, and harmony of human existence, but departures in form and contradictions in meaning irritate and frustrate the experience. The speech, whose rhythm and rhyme seemingly mean to simulate the harmony of life, is thwarted by anomalous elements and random divergence.

Finally, the Gezer text, which lacks an introduction, has no contextualization - additional speech in the text that would frame the compound list and direct its interpretation. The speech at Qoh 3:2-8 has a context in the text, a speaker who introduces it and articulates it. 41 Its meaning, therefore, turns on this character - his situation, his general idea, his style of delivery, and his aim in this bit of speech. 42 Clarifying this context will

35 This reading, that the text contains two different syntactical and semantic pulls, neither of which can be shown to yield fully to the other, and which recognizes the confusion as significant (see below), draws its inspiration from Fish, Is There a Text in This Class, 147-73.
36 Fox, Ecclesiastes, 19-20. Longman translates the clauses "a time to [verb]" (Book of Ecclesiastes, 211-12), yet oddly denies the prescriptive aspect (214).
37 See Ecclesiastes, 16:1 and Longman (Book of Ecclesiastes, 211) take the prepositionless infinitives construct seriously enough to represent the clauses as nouns in construct with gerunds, but draw no conclusions about the speech as a whole. Prepositionless infinitives construct closest to purpose are agricultural season; because the conditions and activities are so closely aligned, e.g. Jer 50:16; 51:35 Song 2:12; likewise activities of great regularity, e.g., Gen 29:7; Josh 10:27.
38 Vayntrub, "Observe Due Measure," 380.
39 What follows develops Robert Gordis's idea that Qohelet quotes others and relates them (e.g. "Quotations in Wisdom Literature," JQR 30 [1939]: 123-47; Kocheth, 95-108, despite debatable description and instances) and Michael Fox's idea that absurdity is the linchpin of Qohelet's anti-proverbialism (Qohelet and His Contradictions, JSOTSup 71 [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999]: A Time to Tear Down, 27-43).
The Context of the Speech at Qohelet 3:1-8

The poem at Qoh 3:12-8 is spoken by a character referred to mostly by the proper noun “Qohelet,” an irreducible person, but also, oddly enough, by the descriptor “the qōhelet,” a type of person, one defined by a particular activity, evidently that of drawing crowds. This double set of designations playfully signals to the readership the constructed nature of the character. It also gives him the best of two (overlapping) worlds of associations, a type of wise scholar and lecturer (12:9-10) and a particular royal individual—a son of David who was king in Jerusalem over all Israel (1:11, 12), whose station afforded him the best education and the best opportunities to apply it, and whose Solomonic cast calls to mind the mastery of proverbial and all other genres of wisdom [1 Kgs 3:3-28; 5:9-14; ET 4:29-34].

The setting presented by the text does not actually foreground Qohelet. Rather, two anonymous people are in conversation, and one quotes to the other—a son or pupil—a long, rambling lecture by Qohelet. In the lecture, Qohelet had talked about his past, where he began, realizations that shook him, a journey he undertook, and the understanding he achieved. He said he was a former king over “all Israel,” who had seen all manner of success (Qoh 11:2). He had built massively, gathered a teeming entourage and household, amassed farm animals manifold, planted luxuriantly, produced crops in abundance, brought in precious metals and exotic goods, commanded a diplomatic army, owned the finest talent in entertainment, and spared himself no self-indulgence (2:4-11). He said that he had far surpassed all who came before him in Jerusalem; he was the poster-child for proverbial wisdom, for lessons learned and transmitted, for the road to riches, for mastery of the reason and the rhyme of life (2:9). He was the princely counterpart to the female personification of wisdom in the book of Proverbs, the one she beckons and guarantees health, wealth, and happiness (esp. Prov 8:11-36; also 1:20-33; 3:13-18; 4:5-9; 9:1-6).

But Qohelet had a series of realizations that challenged traditional, proverbial wisdom (Qoh 2:1-16). Death does not distinguish between the successful and the sad sack. It renders assets useless and the effort to gain them fruitless. Nor can Qohelet guarantee his assets’ fate, that they will not be squandered by his successor, that he himself will possess them until his death, or that divine fate has not used him to favor another. So Qohelet resolved to examine the proverbial wisdom by which he had lived—cause and effect, comparison and application, restraint and reward, the reason and rhyme of life—and ascertain its difference from folly, for if even a king could not guarantee such a thing, who could?

As the lecture wound its way, Qohelet reviewed many of the conventional pieces of wisdom he had examined on a host of matters in a variety of settings, citing them to discard them, even composing his own to parody them. Proverbial wisdom trades in life’s patterns, formulas of action and result, guarantees of work and yield: who lives in its constraints will have no complaints. It expresses them in pithy sayings of balance and measure, puzzling series of poetic lines, and whole poems of voiced instruction. And these offer quotidian, quirky, and cryptic situations that only the clever can enjoy, decode, and apply. Qohelet came to deny the proverbial predictability of life, the rule of causality, wisdom through formula. In his newer, prosaic view, life comprises utterly useless repetition and singular accidents. The wise thought the proverb ineffectual and self-pricking in the mouth of the fool, like the legs of the lame and the rose-stem in the hand of the drunk (Prov 26:7, 9); Qohelet found the proverb itself useless and the wise self-pricking.

Qohelet began his lecture (Qoh 1:14-11) by highlighting the useless repetition, illusory dynamism, and utter stasis of the world’s elements in their spheres (the earth, the sun in the sky above it, the wind at its surface, and the water running through it and below) and of human cognitive organs and processes (speaking, seeing, and hearing). Then he turned to the accidental dimension, treating at length its relentless attack on human knowledge and control. Reviewed together, certain parts of Qohelet’s critique illuminate the poem at 3:1-8.
In one instructive instance (8:5) that features the key word 'et, Qohelet cited a proverbial piece of wisdom, "who does as told misfortune will not know" (kōmēr miṣqā lō yēđa‘ dāhār rā‘), a poetic line whose rhythm and rhyme serve its reason (cause and effect); then he offered the more knowing insight born of experience, "but timing and course of action does the astute mind discern" (wō ēt umiṣqāt yēđa‘ lēb hāḵām). Mindless obedience does not guarantee good fortune and results; the wise improvise. Qohelet’s quip balances the proverb, creating a couplet of thought and counterthought, one that turns on the root y-d- “to know, knowledge.” The proverb applies the root to a passive experience — an experience to be avoided, knowledge never to have; the quip reappplies it to active participation in the event, shaping it and turning it to advantage. The quip also sharply pits mīṣqāt against miṣqā, which typically it complements. Qohelet did not end the point here, but elaborated (8:6-7) by repeating the sentence from 3:11 and explicating: Every endeavor has its unique timing and course of action (ēḵōl ḫēpēs ēt umiṣqāt); on the whole, fate and misfortune overwhelm a man (rā‘ at hā‘ āḏām rabbā ḥāyē), who knows not what will come next (ēnēnē yōḏēa‘ mā ṣeṣṣē ḫēyēb), and when it does come, no one will tell him it is what is next, consequence, and not something wholly other, coincidence (ka ṣēṣ hōḵēb mi yāḏgē ṣê). Evidently, the statement introducing the poem at 3:12-8 featured not seasonality but serendipity. In a similar way earlier on (7:1-6a), Qohelet first quoted a proverbial series about values and practices. Reputation (which subsists) trumps rubbing oil (which dissolves); the day of death (one of triumph), that of birth (all needs and no deeds); the house of mourning, that of feasting, when death and reputation are on instructive display. So too, trump trumps joy and chasteisement tomfoolery for their edifying effect. Then Qohelet punctured the series with a counterproverb about the wise being themselves fully susceptible to whims and greed (v. 6b-7): “But this too is untenable, for ungainly gain makes fools of the wise and a gift dispenses with sense” (wōgam zēb ḫēbel ki hā‘ōṣeq yōḇēlē lāḵām wēy uḇēḇēd

43 Compare Prov 4:14 lōmūr miṣqātay wēḇēləy; 7:12 lōmūr miṣqātay wēḇēləy; 19:16 lōmūr miṣqā lōmūr nēḇē hōḇē ḫāḏēḏyē yāmāt (Qere: yāmātis), and the entire passage at 7:1-7. 


45 The echo created by the shared noun pattern, mīṣqā-li, reinforces their correlation. 

46 Even those recognizing circumstances — as in the poem at 3:12-8 — cannot control them.

Later on in his speech (9:11), in classic proverbial fashion, Qohelet offered a symmetrical list of paradigmatic cases to illustrate his counter-proverbial point, which too features ‘et, that neither innate talents nor learned skills guarantee success — not to the fleetest does the race ever go, nor does the valiant victory always know, not to the cleverest does the money ever flow, nor does the wise always stand in grace’s glow — because “chance and circumstance befal all” (‘ēt ṭwēpēḏ ‘yəḵērub et ḫāḏēḏ). Worse, he added (v. 12), repeating his earlier sentiment (8:5b-7), no better than trapped fish and snared birds do people caught by misfortune grasp their situation when it suddenly befalls them (ki gām lō yēḏa‘ hā‘ āḏām et ʾāḏiḥ ... yāḏa‘ ṭiḇa‘ hā‘ āḏām lā ʾēt rā‘ ḫēṣṣē tīḇīpōl ḥēḇēn pīt ʾāḇē). The wisdom seemingly championed by the poem at 3:12-8 is illusory.

In a fourth example, Qohelet summed up a proverb he just examined in his own parable (9:14-16), the advantage of the wise over weapons (9:18a tōḇā boknā ṭikkāḏ bōrēh), and then followed it up with the irony that a single misstep can ruin a huge advantage (9:18b wōḇōpē ‘ēḇad yā ṭōḇā bōrēh). This led him to compose his own proverbial, parabolic, parallelistic couplet (10:1), that the intricate plan is foiled and the delicate artifice spoiled by the most common and random of things, the bug in the computer, the fly in the ointment, which he not only expressed semantically but also modeled syntactically: “Dead flies will rot, bubble the perfumer’s ointment; more precious than wisdom, than honor is but a bit of folly” (zaḇāḇē mēḇōkā ṭiḇa‘ lī yāḇḥāl lī sēmēn rōqēḥa‘ lī yāḏtā mēḇōkā mikkāḇōd sīḵūt ma’āḏē). The form of the proverb illustrates its message: the nearly perfect parallelism is marred by doubled elements lacking the mere conjunction “and” in both its lines: yāb lī yāḇḥāl lī mēḇōkā mikkāḇōd. The wry observation and its ironic formulation
show Qohelet to be a master of the proverbial line and list, and a disaster for proverbial wisdom; he can compose with the cleverest and undercut the concept of doing so, all at the same time.

The sentiment at 10:11 captures the experience of the poem at 3:1–8, the stubborn resistance to its own symmetry and the difficult syntax. That Qohelet composed the deliciously flawed proverbial line at 10:1 with ironic intent suggests that he also composed the poem as a parody, one that mimics the wise, who absurdly persist in seeking patterns and willfully ignore patterns' inherent flaws and necessary failure. Qohelet satirized the human penchant for patternizing life, though it has a way always of going awry. Symmetry, he argued, can never suppress serendipity.

The poem's frame sharpens the point. After the poem, Qohelet exclaimed the futility of all toil since God controls all outcomes (vv. 9–15). Scholars agree that the thought follows from the poem logically as the conclusion to draw from it. Because action is determined by time or circumstances, and time or circumstances by God, toil is pointless. However, whereas Qohelet's remarks following the poem refer to God explicitly times six times and implicitly twice more, the poem with its introduction never does; the contrast challenges the retroactive, univocal reading. The poem creates regularity, implies predictability, and anticipates a remark that the wise know how to identify the times and turn them to their advantage. Accordingly, some have sought the historical origins of the poem in some other context and signs of its adaptation for Qohelet's speech. The suggestions have not been compelling. Moreover, they do not account for the degree of disjunction between the poem and the speech around it.

Qohelet gave clear indication that the poem does not represent his thought. In the poem, the term 'et refers to a season, cycle, or regular recurrence. Throughout the rest of his lecture it indicates the irregular, the coincidental, the singular. Indeed, immediately after the poem with his reaction to it, Qohelet repeated the remark that set the poem in motion – 'Et lskol bîpes – with a contrasting sense (3:16–17). Lamenting the vagaries of the courthouse, he declared justice the preserve of God because 'every affair has its unique circumstances' (l'skol lskol bîpes), the kind that only God can know, interrelate, and evaluate. The repetition suggests that Qohelet's debate with the proverbially wise turns precisely on conceptualizing time. The proverbially wise see patterns, reliable repetitions whose identification they can turn to their advantage. Qohelet sees a mirage, and beyond the mirage – unyielding fate and fortune.

Moreover, after the poem, Qohelet asked a hinting question (3:19) that concludes the line of thought he expressed before the poem (2:18–26), which sets off the poem as distinct. He had been talking of his newfound recognition that he could not control the bounty he had amassed through work and planning. It would not serve him in death, but go to another, perhaps an undeserving lazy fool. Even in life, any enjoyment is fleeting and offers no guarantee for what follows; indeed, it gives no genuine satisfaction at all. He of all people should know. In fact, he said, it looks very much like the inscrutable deity will have one person work to give it to another. Who, then, is the fool and the patsy? The rhetorical question at 3:19 continues and punctuates this line of thought: What benefit has the doer for all his toiling?

The poem in the midst of that train of thought interrupts it and contradicts it. The poem's aura of seasonality and timeliness implies a formula for success, but the discourse framing it denies all form of guarantee. This flow—development of a point, contradiction, conclusion of original point—reinforces the view that the poem represents the wisdom Qohelet came to reject. Consistent with his style, Qohelet performed a wise-sounding poem whose rhythm and rhyme suggest the reasonableness of time, and then he parried with his more-knowing alternative. Moreover, the poem is one that fails its own standards and shows its own absurdity. To judge by other parts of the lecture, Qohelet did not cite a sloppy poem; he composed a parody of one. And by all

50 Kneer, Der Prediger, 134; Gordis, Koheleth, 228–239; Murphy, Ecclesiastes, 33, 59; Longman, Book of Ecclesiastes, 111, 128; Fox, A Time to Tear Down, 192–205; Scorr, Ecclesiastes, 169–72; Lohfink, Qoheleth, 59–60; Fox, Ecclesiastes, 201; Amnon Schoors, Ecclesiastes, HCOT (Leuven: Peeters, 2013), 228–229.
51 Scorr, Ecclesiastes, 169–70.
52 Vaynerb sees the radical break between the poem's attempt at systematization and the prose that undercut it ("Observe Due Measure," 194–95). Compare Longman, Book of Ecclesiastes, 111.
54 Contrast Fox, A Time to Tear Down, 206.
55 Compare the extensive discussion in Fox, A Time to Tear Down, 194–206. Qohelet's remark "he made (or: did) everything well at its time" (3:11:4) may too represent the traditional wisdom he debunked.
signals, when he uttered it he did not simply get into character as the voice of the wise; he performed it derisively, in mocking tone.56

CONCLUSION

In his speech, Qoheleth cites proverbs to undercut them, wields proverbs against each other, and composes his own proverbial poems to parodic effect, none more forcefully than the series of "times" at 3:1–8. From this perspective, the unwieldy, rambling prose of Qoheleth's philippic that has so perplexed readers seems designed by the author of Qoheleth as a deliberate counterpart to the spectrum of measured poetic speeches typical of proverbial speakers. It presents a direct antithesis to those poetic instructional speeches that stay on theme (e.g., in Prov 1–9), while it parodies the long, unstructured sequences of disconnected proverbial lines (e.g., in Prov 10:1–24:22) as unrealistic and unusable.57 Poetry - verbal imagery capturing life - is a sham; life prosaically keeps one off-balance.58

The author of Qoheleth did not have Qoheleth explode all poetry, but had him end his lecture with a masterful bit of poetry, the topic, prosody, and poetics of which suit the lecture perfectly (11:9–12:7). Nor did the author give Qoheleth the last word. The character quoting Qoheleth's lecture to a son or pupil (12:8–14) describes Qoheleth as one of the wise who cast many proverbs (v. 9), and then concludes wielding his own (v. 11).

56 The observations that the usage of zaman in the introduction at 3:1 is imprecise and serves merely to complete the parallelism (Fox, A Time to Tear Down, 201) and the conventions of parallelism would have the unusual term zaman come second not first (Longman, Book of Ecclesiastes, 114) suggest that Qoheleth formulated an unusual opening line to strengthen the signal of an ironic moment beginning.

57 On the typology of Proverbial matter, see Jacqueline Veytras, Proverbs and the Limits of Poetry (PhD diss., The University of Chicago, 2015), 256–349.

58 Relatedly, the conflicting forms of characterization for the quoted speaker in Qoheleth - the person, Qoheleth, and the type, "the qoheleth" - reinforce the counterpoint between him and the different kinds of speakers in Proverbs, fathers and mothers (e.g., Prov 1–9) and also named individuals (30:21; 31:2).