

Book review

FRANCO PIOTTI, *CIÒ CHE SI FA SOTTO IL SOLE*.
QOHELET: APPUNTI SPARSI (STUDI BIBLICI),
BOLOGNA: EDB, 2024. 302 PP. ISBN 978-8810978337.

REVIEWED BY MIKLÓS ISTVÁN SZABÓ ¹

Franco Piotti's volume belongs to the long philological tradition of Qoheleth studies. *Ciò che si fa sotto il sole. Qohelet: appunti sparsi* offers a series of readings of Ecclesiastes focused on several basic questions: the value of human toil, the meaning and limits of wisdom, the future of the human being, and the relation between created order, lived experience, and the disorder perceived in history. The phrase "under the sun" in the title keeps the discussion anchored in this earthly and experiential horizon.

Until his retirement, Franco Piotti conducted research at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore in Milan. His work on Qoheleth goes back to his thesis, *Il problema della lingua originale nell'Ecclesiaste*. He later published numerous studies on Qoheleth and biblical wisdom literature in *Bibbia e Oriente*. His 2012 volume *Qohelet. La ricerca del senso della vita*, published by Morcelliana, marks an earlier stage of this long engagement. Piotti has also written on philology and the history of the Hebrew language. That background matters here, since the present book repeatedly reads theological questions through close attention to language, and textual detail.

The Introduction states the programme of the volume. Piotti begins from a question that carries a degree of self-irony: why add another book on Qoheleth after a biblical book that already speaks about the increase of knowledge and the endless making of many books (cf. Qoh 1:18; 12:12)? His answer is modest in scope. This is not another continuous commentary. It is a set of thematic studies,

1 SZABÓ Miklós István is Chief Educational Officer, Ludovika University of Public Service, Budapest, Hungary and he has PhD degree in Theology. szabomiklosistvan@gmail.com



loosely connected and guided by a common interpretative direction. The expression *appunti sparsi* (“scattered notes”) therefore describes both Piotti’s own form and the non-linear, associative structure he finds in Qoheleth.

A central claim follows from this. Qoheleth is more than a collection of detached sayings, yet it resists the shape of a closed, linear treatise. Piotti reads the book as a text made of repetitions, recurring motifs, paratactic links, and thematic returns. That premise governs the volume. Qoheleth becomes a critical reader of biblical wisdom, legal, social, and political traditions. Interpretation, in turn, has to follow the text through its repetitions, fractures, and internal tensions.

The opening study, “Osservare la Legge o seguire cuore e occhi?”, turns to Torah and desire. Qoheleth urges the young man to follow the ways of his heart and the sight of his eyes. Is this simply wisdom’s invitation to enjoy life, or does it shift the emphasis of the inherited tradition? Piotti reads Qoh 11:9 against Num 15:39, where the same movement after “heart” and “eyes” names forbidden conduct. In Numbers, the phrase belongs to the language of infidelity and idolatry. In Qoheleth, it becomes a summons to receive the joy God gives during the short time in which it is available. One of the book’s main lines of interpretation is already visible here: Qoheleth remains inside the language of tradition while making that language answer new questions. Joy is the divine gift offered within a human life marked by *hebel*. The example also clarifies Piotti’s method. Individual sentences have to be read closely, but familiar formulas must also be followed as they move into new contexts. Qoheleth’s force lies in that re-use. Traditional language is not discarded. It is made unstable.

“È certa la diversità tra uomini e animali?” moves from Torah to anthropology. The anthropocentric language of Gen 1–2 seems to secure the human being’s privileged place in creation: the image of God, the mandate to rule, and a distinctive status among living beings. Qoh 3:18–21 unsettles that certainty. Death, origin from dust, and the shared life-breath make any simple appeal to human exceptional status more difficult. What appears first “under the sun” is common finitude. Human beings and animals live, breathe, die, and return to dust. Human distinctiveness is therefore read as responsibility rather than superiority. Piotti does not cancel the theological claims of Genesis. He asks what happens when those claims are heard from the standpoint of mortality.

The next study, “Può essere attuale Qo 3,18–21?”, stays with the same passage and asks about its contemporary force. Human beings and animals come from the same dust, are sustained by the same breath, and return to the same death. That claim

tests modern self-understanding. Piotti does not turn Qoheleth into an author of animal ethics. Nor does he erase human responsibility. He lets the biblical question remain in place: what do we actually know about the ultimate difference between human beings and animals “under the sun”? The passage resists quick doctrinal closure through later teaching on the soul, resurrection, or final judgment. For that reason, it can disturb an anthropocentric confidence that treats animals as mere instruments. Thomas Aquinas, Descartes, the Catechism of the Catholic Church, and more recent ecclesial documents enter the discussion at this point. The issue becomes theological and ethical. A misunderstood anthropocentrism has often valued animals chiefly in relation to human needs and dignity. Qoheleth gives Piotti a way to reopen that habit of thought.

Royal power enters in “Davvero «per mezzo mio regnano i re» [Pr 8:15]?” Biblical tradition can associate wise rule with divine wisdom, justice, protection of the needy, and the good of society. Qoheleth measures that association against political experience. The old and foolish king in Qoh 4:13–16, the short-lived popularity of the poor but wise young man, and the forgotten deed of the poor wise man in Qoh 9:13–16 all point to a fracture between wisdom and power. Wisdom may save a city and still have little social effect when it is linked to poverty and insignificance. Power, for its part, loses sapiential legitimacy when the ruler refuses counsel, justice, and service to the community. Piotti handles this material with attention to its irony. Possessing power does not guarantee wisdom. Wisdom does not guarantee influence, remembrance, or lasting esteem.

“Davvero i re detestano fare il male [Pr 16:12]?” continues the political line, now with royal morality in view. Proverbs presents the king as one who protects the poor, hates wickedness, receives counsel, and establishes his throne through righteousness. Qoheleth sees a different royal world “under the sun.” Wisdom does not reliably guide government. Power is fragile and unpredictable. Bureaucracy can become an instrument of oppression, economic exploitation, and fear. The critique is experiential. Against the ideal king of Proverbs stands a political reality shaped by interest, the self-preservation of power, and the vulnerability of the weak. Piotti places this critique against the background of Hellenistic rule, especially the Ptolemaic systems of taxation and administration in Palestine. Prov 16:12 is read from the ground level of political life.

“L’ordine sociale riflette quello cosmico?” follows the social consequences of these political readings. Traditional wisdom can imagine a world in which the divine order of creation is mirrored in social life: just government, protection of

the poor, respect for law, and communal peace. Qoheleth sees oppression, envy, rivalry, corruption, bureaucratic exploitation, and fear. Qoh 4:1–3 places the tears of the oppressed before the reader. Qoh 5:7–8 exposes distorted justice within administration. Qoh 8:1–9 and 10:16–20 portray a world of power in which the subject is vulnerable, speech is dangerous, denunciation may be ordinary, and wisdom has limited practical force. Social order, in this reading, has failed to reflect the order of creation. Piotti gives the claim historical weight by setting it against Hellenistic, especially Ptolemaic, systems of taxation, administration, and economic control. In such a setting peasants, the poor, and the socially weak could easily become victims of local and imperial mechanisms of power.

“Come afferrare il dono divino della gioia?” turns back to human action and joy after the darker social chapters. Work “under the sun” remains ambiguous. It can mean toil, futile effort, disappointment, and rivalry. It can also open a space in which the fruits of labour are received as God’s gift. Qoheleth’s account of failure does not end in passivity. Wealth may be lost. Another may inherit the results of one’s labour. Rivalry may damage relationships. Laziness can become self-destructive. Unforeseen events can undo plans at any moment. Still, the text calls for action: work, sow, take risks, and seize the brief occasions when joy is given in labour’s fruit. Piotti’s reading is strongest when it keeps joy from becoming either a reward for achievement or the automatic result of success. It remains fragile and unpredictable. The comparison with the parable of the talents in Matthew’s Gospel supports the same point: gift calls for use and risk. Qoheleth’s theology of joy is worked out from fragility, not from ease.

The concluding reflections place the argument in a broader historical and hermeneutical frame. Piotti relates Qoheleth to the socio-political experience of Judea under Hellenistic rule, more specifically under the Ptolemies. The implied world is hierarchical, tax-based, economically oppressive, and bureaucratically controlled. Greek philosophical influence is treated cautiously. Qoheleth appears instead as an author deeply acquainted with Israel’s wisdom and religious tradition, yet willing to reread that tradition from the standpoint of experience. Piotti gathers the main results around five areas: the critique of inherited religious language, the questioning of anthropocentric readings of creation, the demythologizing of royal power, the disintegration of social order, and the ambivalence of work and human action. Qoheleth stands within Israel’s faith. Its customary formulas are tested against injustice, abuses of power, social vulnerability, shared mortality, and the fragile results of labour.

Piotti's work deserves attention as a scholarly monograph and as an exercise in close reading. It is especially suitable for theological and humanities libraries, as well as for university and departmental collections, where it can support the study of Qoheleth, biblical wisdom literature, and Old Testament hermeneutics. It may also serve readers pursuing self-directed study. Where the book is not locally available, it is worth seeking through interlibrary loan or, where possible, acquiring as a personal copy.

Beyond its scholarly utility, the book offers a reading of Qoheleth that speaks to the tensions between faith, doubt, experience, and institutional religious discourse. Near the end of the volume, Piotti formulates the contemporary relevance of Ecclesiastes in especially direct terms:

“Qoheleth's word therefore undoubtedly proves to be an outstretched hand to those who, even in our own day, whether mature believers or doubting seekers, may find themselves in serious difficulty when faced with the monotonous and uncritical repetition of theological and dogmatic assertions lacking biblical grounding and expressed in forms and language now obsolete and alien to modern sensibility, or when faced with the frequent divergence between principles proclaimed in theory and the practices actually implemented by those responsible for governing and guiding the ecclesial institution.” (p. 285; translation mine).

This is where Piotti's reading finally rests. Qoheleth remains an indispensable interlocutor because it presses faith toward a form of speech that is more honest, more credible, and more attentive to experience.