The 1980 German original of this commentary received a brief review in *JBL* 102 (1983): 322. That brief eighty-six-page commentary grew out of the author’s translation of Qoheleth for *Die Einheitsübersetzung* and was partly intended as an explanation of that translation’s renderings. It was intended for nonscholars and did not explicitly interact with other research; it rarely gave clues as to the bases for its often intriguing suggestions. The present English version of the commentary is expanded by a new preface and by additions and other changes that do not appear in the published German *Vorlage* but were completed about 1990 for a revision that did not appear in German. “So this English translation is now a new, and henceforth the only, authentic version” (ix, from Lohfink’s new preface). The changes are sometimes significant, though the book’s basic approach is unaltered. For instance, helpful diagrams of literary and thematic structures appear throughout that were not in the original. The book adds a selective bibliography up to 2000, though the commentary, like its *Vorlage*, does not engage the works listed and is of course uninfluenced by the important work of recent decades.

A few characteristic features of the commentary should be noted. Under the influence of the “New Criticism,” the commentary pays particular attention to literary structures and patterns, though diverging considerably from A. G. Wright’s famous attempts to explain “The Riddle of the Sphinx.” To my mind this remains one of the more helpful features of the work: it forces the reader to look at the book as literature and to weigh his or her own outline of the book and its sections carefully. The commentary is further characterized by
the thesis of Rainer Braun (Kohelet und die frühhellenistische Popularphilosophie [BZAW 130; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1973]) that Qoheleth was heavily influenced by Hellenistic philosophical thought. The comparative material adduced is virtually all Greek, while the literary setting of Qoheleth in the ancient Near East is virtually ignored, except for the usual nod to Siduri the alewife and a “Song of the Harper” at 9:7–10. For Lohfink, Qoheleth is set in the Ptolemaic Hellenistic period before the Maccabean revolt, and upper-class economic issues and terms weigh heavily in his account. Alexandria is as important as Jerusalem (see 103–4, 118). The following telling paragraph on the translation of 5:12–15 is lacking in the published German original.

Our translation follows the hypothesis that this section employs technical phrases from business and banking—phrases that are sometimes not known from other sources, but whose meaning can be surmised. The telltale clue that leads to this view is the technical meaning of beyādō, which occurs twice here. Normally it means “in his hand”; but we have a Hebrew text from the same historical period that uses the phrase in a business context with the technical meaning “on his account.” (83)

For Lohfink these verses now concern wealth that “is lost in bankruptcy” (תִּשָּׁרֶת, 5:12) so that there remains nothing “in his accounts” (תִּדָּר). The German original had the more accurate and multivalent “Durch ein schlechtes Geschäft ging ihm dieser Reichtum verloren . . . aber jetzt hat er nichts mehr, das ihm gehört” (44–45). The change to far greater specificity (here “banking”) is typical of the new English version: the sociohistorical explanation of the text has become more specific, with a consequent loss of interpretative possibilities open to the reader of Qoheleth. The full argument for this interpretation of 5:12–16 cannot be found in the commentary but appeared as an article, now conveniently collected along with much else, in his Studien zu Kohelet (SBAB 26; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1998), 143–50.

There is always a tension in a semipopular work by a distinguished scholar between the idiosyncrasies of his or her own interpretation (often based on much learning) and the duty to present to laypersons the main results of scholarship, especially in a book as contested as Qoheleth. The problem is exacerbated when the interpretation enters the translation of the biblical text so as to restrict the interpretive possibilities open to the reader. It is one thing to say that תִּשָּׁרֶת (5:12) refers to bankruptcy or תִּדָּר to bank “accounts”; it is another to translate it thus. Such moves confuse translation with commentary, so that lay readers can think only of bankruptcy and banks as they are known from the modern world, since the commentary does not explain the relevant features of the presumed “banking” system in Qoheleth’s day. Similarly, the account of two competing agricultural policies (80–81) seems to presume a level of socioeconomic
certainty that leads to circular arguments about the text and its presumed setting. It is instructive to contrast Lohfink’s appeal to a Greek-speaking Hellenistic economic world to Leong-Choon Seow’s appeal to Aramaic texts from the Persian period.

For Lohfink, Qoheleth presents a new worldview that seeks to overthrow the inadequate “ideology” or worldview of traditional wisdom as represented in Proverbs (90, 97, 117–18). I no longer believe such a paradigm for the relation of Qoheleth to Proverbs is valid, for it ignores the very nature of proverbial literature. Proverbs require contradictions to function, so that they may encompass the range of human experiences, even while they focus on the salient general patterns of reality that humans need to function. One such general pattern, easily caricatured in both ancient and modern times, is the “deed-consequence” pattern. Wisdom scholarship has, at least in part, become more aware of the subtlety of proverbs with regard to the limits of wisdom, and the uncertain consequences that attend the generalizing statements of traditional proverbs and their opposites.

According to Lohfink, Qoheleth is much like a modern existentialist in worldview. While he does not specify Heidegger (appealing rather to Karl Jaspers), readers may hear echoes of the Marburg professor. “The essential discovery that constitutes us as fully human is when we realize that we are that being which is headed toward death. . . . To know that we will die is the achievement that, above all, the book of Qoheleth desires for its readers” (110, 112). Also interesting is Lohfink’s move to psychologize the concept of “good” (בֵּין), which is reflected in the regular translation “happiness.” “The good is, therefore, an ecstasy that unites consciousness around one point” (85). This quasi-mystical, inward move seems to me a Western, post-Augustinian development, foreign to the concrete enjoyment (within limits!) of creation and created goods advocated by Qoheleth and the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament in general.

Some words about the English translation are called for. McEvenue not only translated Lohfink’s unpublished German revision but also retranslated Qoheleth from Hebrew, with an eye to Lohfink’s translation and commentary. While the commentary itself contains an occasional Germanism (“With him every activity is bathed in the light of freedom” [75]), it is in the biblical translation that I find the results mixed and sometimes confusing.

On the one hand, there is a literalizing tendency (admirable in itself) that renders the metaphoric keyword בֵּין by a comparable English metaphor, “breath.” Unfortunately, this translation does not always work in English. For example, 6:11 reads, “There happen many words that only multiply breath” (89), with the subsequent explanation that the “many words” are “sayings as they are cited and deconstructed in 7:1ff.” (91). On the
other hand, sometimes the translation of the biblical text seems too loose and interpretive or does not parse well in English. Thus, מלחמה סודרה (5:7, originally “Gericht und Gerechtigkeit”) becomes “justice and law-abiding,” with the later term functioning oddly as a gerund. Stylistically, I often felt that the book would have profited from a careful editing, for instance, excising unnecessary infinitival constructions that make Qoheleth’s literary masterpiece seem a chore to read.

In spite of my caveats, it is good to have Lohfink’s thought-provoking commentary in English, an accomplishment that begs for Lohfink’s collected essays on Qoheleth to follow.