This commentary on Qoheleth was originally written for the Hermeneia series and subsequently revised for Biblischer Kommentar, where it appeared more expeditiously than in its English version, yet awaiting publication. My review depends solely on the German commentary, which consists of an extensive introduction (11–67), copious bibliography (1–9, 68–92, plus short bibliographies for each textual unit being interpreted), and the commentary proper (93–376). In the introduction Krüger addresses the following issues: themes, composition, literary types, tensions and contradictions, origin and historical context, the influence of the book on later religious communities, language, and text.

Readers will encounter few surprises in the introduction but will be brought up to date on current research and, for the most part, pointed toward scholarly consensus, insofar as it exists. Krüger isolates for brief discussion such themes as eating and drinking, enjoyment as the highest good, God and humankind, the transient nature of reality and its insubstantiality, time and chance, profit and portion, toil and work, riches and poverty, power and rule, wisdom and folly.

The section on composition acknowledges the hypothetical character of all suggestions about the structure of the biblical book. One structure is clear: superscription, motto,
corpus of the book, motto, epilogue. Beyond that, however, the precise arrangement depends to some extent on subjective factors. Krüger opts for an outline that becomes problematic at its midpoint, 6:10–8:17.

1:1 Superscription
1:2 Motto
1:3–4:12 The King and the Wise
4:13–5:8 The King and God
5:9–6:9 Poverty and Wealth
6:10–8:17 A Critical Discussion of Traditional Wisdom
9:1–12:7 Life in Regard to Chance and Change
12:8 Motto
12:9–14 Epilogue

The unit consisting of 6:10–8:17 is not the only one that criticizes views championed by sages past and present. Furthermore, the exquisite poem in 3:1–8 and its immediate sequel does not really comment on royalty and the wise. Krüger admits that his view is but one of several possibilities; as alternatives to his own, he mentions the rhetorically controlled proposal of A. D. G. Wright, the palindrome suggested by Norbert Lohfink, and Schwienhorst-Schönberger’s four-part hypothesis. In the end, he does not think establishing a comprehensive structure is necessary for interpretation.

The discussion of literary types covers the usual wisdom forms: proverb, admonition, rhetorical question, example, didactic poem, reflection, and similar texts in the first person. Krüger thinks Qoheleth deconstructs certain royal types into travesty and uses carpe diem from Harper Songs, but most interestingly he is attracted to the philosophical symposiastic form advocated by Uehlinger. The importance of symposia to Sirach suggests that Qoheleth may also have been familiar with philosophical orations at banquets. If so, why did he conceal the occasions? Ben Sira saw no need to do so.

Krüger downplays the contradictions within Qoheleth, claiming that the text can be viewed as coherent if one grants its discursive nature and allows for a generous amount of irony. Krüger is not troubled by the epilogue’s assertion of divine judgment or by its imperative to fear God and keep his commandments. He thinks the reference to divine judgment can be understood as daily occurrences of harm rather than an eschatological assize. Similarly, he believes Qoheleth actually encouraged people to fear God and to keep at least one commandment, that regarding vows. I doubt that one can infer from 5:6 anything more than the necessity of acknowledging the threat posed by the Almighty and that acceptance of common-sense advice about honoring a vow really makes Qoheleth an endorser of the commandments in the Torah. Furthermore, it is highly unlikely that
editors were active elsewhere in the Bible (e.g., Hos 14:10; the superscriptions in Proverbs; Job 32–37) but ignored the most radical book of all.

The historical context of Qoheleth, according to Krüger, places the author under Greek influence like Ben Sira, who lived slightly more than a quarter of a century later. Agreeing with Robert Harrison that Greek influence cannot be proven, Krüger thinks it likely that at an interactive level of reflection Qoheleth shaped his thoughts under the impact of Greek philosophy. His chief antagonists, however, were Hebraic sages, whose rigidity as seen in Prov 1–9 and Job 28 had precipitated an earlier crisis, to which Qoheleth responded by bringing the empirical dimension into play. To that claim I have two comments: (1) Qoheleth is far less empirical than the appeals to personal experience imply; and (2) the popular wisdom underlying Prov 10–24 and 25–31 was equally empirical. The composers of these sayings observed reality and drew analogies from nature and human behavior.

The commentary itself is a fine blend of inquiry and analysis; the full range of interpretive possibilities stands alongside keen insights and attention to grammar, syntax, and theology. Perhaps rhetorical strategy receives less than recent interpreters think appropriate, although Krüger does leave room for Michael Fox’s proposal of Qoheleth as the persona being commented on by someone else.

I shall limit myself to Krüger’s comments on the epilogue, partly because they illustrate the richness of the commentary and partly because they pose a major problem for me. Krüger asks whether or not 12:12–14 goes beyond 12:9–11 and criticizes Qoheleth more severely. This section of the commentary provides nuancing to Gerald Sheppard’s interpretation of the epilogue as similar to Sirach. Krüger thinks of Qoheleth as mediating instruction to the people (Qoh 12:9), whereas Sirach prepares elite leaders for the community (Sir 37:23). Although both Qoheleth and Sirach deny any existence after death and an eschatological judgment, Sirach values torah more highly and does not ground anthropology in the Primeval Narrative (Gen 1–11) the way Qoheleth does. Krüger makes three points as corrective to Sheppard. First, Qoheleth rationalizes cult and the fear of God, infusing the later concept with the numinous and refusing to equate it with wisdom and piety. Second, the nomistic understanding of fear of God is found in several psalms (112:1; 119:63; 128:1; 19:10), and fear of God comes at the end of wisdom for Qoheleth (12:14) but at the beginning for Prov 1–9; Sir 1:14; and Ps 111:10. In addition, neither the fear of God nor the keeping of divine commandments guarantees life. Third, Qoh 12:13 refers to all humanity, reducing Israel’s law to a common kernel (Delitzsch) or better still, relativizing torah. In short, Krüger writes, Qoheleth’s wisdom is self-critical, and even if two different people added the epilogue, the second inadvertently strengthened Qoheleth’s critical stance over against traditional wisdom.
I have considerable appreciation for Krüger’s effort to understand Qoheleth, but some questions remain unresolved for me. How does a reader determine an author’s theology and anthropology when contradictions and tensions abound? Can such irreconcilable differences be nuanced out of existence, removing the sting of radical skepticism? Does Qoheleth’s silence about personified wisdom really imply rejection of the concept and permit one to see 7:23–29 as a clever attack on the feminization of wisdom in Prov 8 and Sir 24? Should the motto in 1:2 and 12:8 function as a guide to Qoheleth’s thought? I am not persuaded that Sir 37:23 and Qoh 12:9 represent elite leaders versus direct instruction, that Qoh 12:14 lacks an eschatological dimension, and that Qoh 11:7–12:7 is apocalyptic. Nevertheless, I shall consult this commentary again and again.