The particular portion of Qoheleth with which this article will deal has, like so many others, been a problem in terms of determining the limits of the pericope and its relationship to the surrounding material. The possibilities are that this section is inseparable from the preceding discussion in chs. ix and x, and that it in fact concludes that portion of the book (cf. R. Gordis, G. R. Castellino, A. G. Wright, et al.); that it is simply one of numerous independent units (so K. Galling) without any particular relationship to either what precedes or follows; that it is of a piece with the material which follows in ix 7-xii 8 (so G. A. Barton, O. S. Rankin, et al.). W. Zimmerli represents a slightly different position, for he places verses 7-8 together with xi 1-6 to form one unit.

Our task here is to seek a better definition of the limits of the thought unit, to determine the characteristics and theme of the unit, and finally, to see its relationship to the surrounding material and its place within the book as a whole.

In determining the limits of the unit under consideration, reference should first be made to an earlier article, "Qoheleth ix 17-x 20. Variations on the theme of wisdom's strength and vulnerability", VT 30 (1980), pp. 27-37, in which I argued that ix 17-x 20 constituted one thought unit. Those arguments need not be repeated here, except to state that the twin themes of wisdom's power on the one hand and of its vulnerability to folly on the other, introduced in ix 17-18, are illustrated in x 1-20. This illustrative material is bound together by inclusiones in x 1, 8-11, and 20. Thus we are justified in looking for the origin of a new unit at xi 1.

With xi 1 there commences a section marked by certain rhetorical and literary features which help fix the unit's conclusion at xi 6. Perhaps the most obvious feature is that of the change in the subject
matter from the preceding section with its focus on the wise and the fool. Replacing that concern is a new one which draws upon examples from the natural world. Reference is made to sea, earth, clouds, rain, trees, wind, the morning and evening, as well as there being in v. 5 specific reference to the Creator. The change in subject matter signals a change in theme: natural phenomena within the created world provide us with considerable information which may guide conduct. In vv. 7-8 there are also references to light, darkness and the sun, so that it is possible, on the basis of the references to nature, that Zimmerli is correct in extending that unit to include those two verses.¹

A second observation about these verses is that xi 1, 2, 6 contain verbs mostly in the imperative mood. These provide the general ethos of the section. Such verb forms do not extend beyond xi 6.

As for the other rhetorical features found to commence with xi 1, we note that in vv. 1-4 there are three sets of paired sentences each in parallel form, while v. 5 could be described as exhibiting “ascending parallelism”. V. 6 follows a sentence form similar to vv. 1-2 with its imperatives and motive clause. This reiterated sentence form, together with the fact that v. 6 contains what is justifiably viewed as concluding advice, points clearly to this being the point at which the unit should be ended.

One further piece of evidence, and perhaps the most important, is that vv. 1-2 on the one hand speak of what man is able to discover from observation of the created world, and on the other indicate what he cannot know. This introductory statement of twin themes is a device we have already found used by Qoheleth in ix 17-18. Here in xi 1ff. those themes of what is knowable and what is not are exemplified in vv. 3-5. Situations which one can “read” to advantage are set forward in vv. 3-4, while v. 5 demonstrates that other matters are beyond one’s powers of observation. By way of response to this situation, v. 6 suggests that man should apply himself to act according to what he is able to know, without undue concern for what is unknowable. The themes of man’s knowledge and its limitations carried by the verb (l5) ydc do not extend beyond v. 6.

The above factors lead to the conclusion that rhetorical evidence of structure and theme determines the limits of our unit as vv. 1-6,

¹ Das Buch des Predigers Salomo (2nd edn, Göttingen, 1967), pp. 239-42.