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The Curse of Work in Qoheleth: An Exposé of Genesis 3:17-19 in Ecclesiastes

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The purpose of this study is to explore the possibility that Qoheleth was dependent on the curse of Gn. 3:17-19 for the background to his leitmotif of work.¹ Many scholars see Qoheleth's clear dependence on the primeval history of Genesis, in particular, chapters 1-4.² Theological criticism³ is applied in order to aid the linguistic evidence for such

¹ Cf. R.N. Whybray, 'Qoheleth—Preacher of Joy?', *JSOT* 23, 1982, 87-98. Whybray is one of a minority of scholars who argue that the essential nature of *Qoheleth* is one of joy not pessimism. Part of the problem with his treatment in the above mentioned paper is the fact that his methodology aligns all the positive things which Qoheleth had to say about living the good life—and then builds his case around that alignment. See also G. Ogden, *Qoheleth* (Sheffield, 1987), 1ff.; W. Brown, 'Character Reconstructed: Ecclesiastes', *Character in Crisis: A Fresh Approach to the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, 1996), 120-50.

The position that *Qoheleth* has essentially a message of joy has not been widely accepted by the scholarly community; though it is gaining momentum. See most commentaries and R.E. Murphy, 'Qoheleth and Theology?', *BTB* 21, 1991, 32. While Qoheleth certainly promoted the idea of joy and the enjoyment of life, it more often than not seems to be either as a failed *hevel* plan for meaning and happiness in life, or as a concession and relief from the stress of his pessimistic view of the way the world works. I find it very difficult to view *Qoheleth* with anything other than a pessimistic ethos. While I indeed hold that *Qoheleth* has a very positive message, it is not based in the ethos of the book or what the author said. Rather, it is by the 'effect' of what the author said, i.e., *Qoheleth* is positive not because the author had positive things to say but because of his willingness to tackle life head on in all its incongruity.

² C.C. Forman, 'Koheleth's Use of Genesis', *JSS* 5, 1960, 256-63; J.L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes* (London, 1988), 25; M.A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes* (Downers Grove, 1983), 46 and R. Gordis, *Koheleth—The Man and His World* (New York, 1976), 43. In fact, I have not come across a single scholar who denies Qoheleth's use of the Genesis material.

³ As far as I know, no other scholar has used the term 'theological criticism'. There are those who allude to this concept in biblical studies but none have specified it as a

intertextuality. Some notion of the Fall may provide the broader context of *Qoheleth*.⁴

I. A Literary Critical Analysis of Genesis 3 in Relationship with *Qoheleth*

In terms of literary criticism,⁵ Gn. 3 is an aetiological statement. Aetiological statements have the literary purpose to explain the origins and causes of certain phenomena which exist in the universe. Much of the primeval history of Genesis has the literary purpose to supply these aetiological statements.⁶

Gn. 3 is attempting to answer the question why the world is in such a mess, i.e., why corruption has entered an orderly and God declared good creation. Thus, Gn. 3 by its very nature as an aetiological statement must, by necessity, be a statement of the fall from a state of innocence to a state of original sin: it explains the origins and causes of sin and its effects in creation. Moreover, death is a part of that curse package in Gn. 3:17–19⁷ and must therefore be viewed as a curse—not natural. This is the only conclusion which can come from literary

3 (Cont'd) distinct discipline within biblical criticism. By 'theological criticism' I mean the 'science and art of discerning possible theological concepts and motifs of the Bible in relationship with one another'. There are many literary subtleties such as literary allusions to other texts in the Bible. Theological criticism, in conjunction with the artistic side of literary analysis, can help to bring up clues to textual interpretation, i.e., sometimes the opacity of a text or a text's literary or theological allusions to other texts can be obscure. Moreover, dogmatic considerations can illuminate the meaning of a text—when the text supports those considerations—and not simply as a proof-text.

⁴ The notion of theology in wisdom literature is a highly controversial issue—especially in *Qoheleth*. Many scholars view wisdom as a secular activity, i.e., cause and effect oriented observations—not theological statements. For an integrated study of scholars who hold this view, including Zimmerli, Koch, Brueggemann and others, see W.S. Towner, 'The Renewed Authority of Old Testament Wisdom for Contemporary Faith', *Canon and Authority* (Philadelphia, 1977), 132–47. Cf. H. Hertzberg, *Der Prediger* (Berlin, 1972), 228–33.

⁵ The term 'literary criticism' is often misused to refer to what is properly known as 'source criticism'. I am using the term 'literary criticism' from the artistic side of literary studies in the humanities.

⁶ J. Rogerson, *Genesis 1–11* (Sheffield, 1991), 53–55.

⁷ There is considerable debate in Genesis studies whether death is a part of the curse of Gn. 3:19c. The debate surrounds the implications of Gn. 2:17 and the subsequent disobedience of Adam and Eve. What is quite clear is that neither died immediately after partaking of the forbidden fruit. Some scholars have interpreted this to be an extension of grace by YHWH. However, many consider death to be the natural course of life. Furthermore, some scholars see Gn. 3:19c as referring to man's new consciousness of the natural course of his fate. Notwithstanding, some consider the implications of Gn. 3:19c to include all these elements. Cf. C. Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, trans. J.J. Scullion (London, 1984), 266–7; J. Skinner, *Genesis* (Edinburgh, 1930), 84–85; G. von Rad, *Genesis*, trans. J.H. Marks (London, 1961), 92–93.

critical analysis of what is obviously an aetiological statement: It explains why, how and when death entered life.

There is also considerable debate whether Gn. 2–3 is a wisdom text (and I would include Gn. 4 as a part of a literary unity with 2–3).⁸ If Gn. 2–4 is a wisdom text, it would make sense since so much of wisdom in the ancient Near East is preoccupied with creation theology and the nature of its order. This preoccupation with creation theology may explain why the author of *Qoheleth* had access to the Genesis material and why he makes use of it in his treatise. Furthermore, the Fall and original sin would explain to wisdom circles why an orderly universe, which was the basis for the ordering of a person's life, is corrupted—and why wisdom fails at times to deliver its promises. This is a major thrust in *Qoheleth*!

Qoheleth's linguistic dependence on the Genesis text is found in 3:20b: 'all come from dust, and to dust all return'; and 12:7: 'and the dust returns to the ground it came from'.⁹ Their counterpart is found in Gn. 3:19c: 'for dust you are and to dust you will return'. This direct linguistic connection leaves little doubt that *Qoheleth* was familiar with Gn. 3:17–19. The extensive use of 'adm (49 times) may be direct linguistic evidence but this is doubtful. The term is used linguistically as the generic for humanity. Much of *Qoheleth*'s treatise is concerned with the existential crisis of humanity in a hostile environment. However, the use of 'adm may be a theological allusion regarding the frailty of humanity taken from the ground ('admh). Death may well be the ultimate expression of the curse of Gn. 3:17–19 in *Qoheleth*.

There is a current trend amongst biblical scholars to hold that wisdom circles viewed death as 'natural'.¹⁰ However, it seems to me that this notion amongst scholars has taken on certain baggage which views 'death as natural' with benign psychological and emotional indifference. This betrays one essential factor built into the human psyche: the 'survival mechanism'.¹¹ Moreover, wisdom had the purpose to maintain and maximize life! Death was to be avoided at all cost. Long life was the blessing of the wise and righteous and short life was a curse of the foolish and wicked.¹²

⁸ See L. Alonso-Scholke, 'Sapiential and Covenant Themes in Genesis 2–3', *Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom*, ed. J.L. Crenshaw (New York, 1976), 468–480 and R. Davidson, *Wisdom in Worship* (London, 1990), 12.

⁹ All biblical quotations will be from the N.I.V. unless otherwise stated.

¹⁰ Cf. Otto Kaiser and Eduard Lohse, *Death and Life*, trans. John E. Steely (Nashville, 1981), 20–30 and 60–68.

¹¹ For an excellent and terse discussion of the survival mechanism, see J. Mark, G. Williams and I. Hargreaves, 'Anxiety and its Symptoms', *Companion Encyclopedia of Psychology* 2, ed. A.M. Colman (London, 1994), 885–86. See also J.C. Coleman, *Contemporary Psychology and Effective Behaviour* (London, 1979), 83.

¹² See Job 4:7–9; 11:13–20; 12:12; 33:26–30; Prov. 3:1–2, 13–18; 6:20–26; 7:21–27;

If by 'natural' it is meant that death is the 'natural course' or *end* of life, then quite clearly this is biblical wisdom's view. But no one views death with indifference—as if death is not a significant problem for human beings. Rather all people fear death, as a part of the survival mechanism, and human beings are traumatized by its physical and social effects. Qoheleth's view of death is extremely negative—and he included these physical and social effects!

Some scholars have made much of the fact that it is the ground which was cursed in Gn. 3:17–19 and not man.¹³ But distinctions of this sort may be artificial and a literalistic approach to the text. The ground did not disobey God; the humans did. It is quite clear that the ground was to be the means of cursing the man just as childbirth was for the woman.

Gn. 3:17 uses the term '*its-tsavon* from the root '*tsv*, which often relates to pain, but in some contexts to painful toil.¹⁴ Qoheleth was aware of the term and in fact used it in the context of general work in 10:9. This may be further linguistic evidence that Qoheleth was in fact drawing from Gn. 3:17–19.

The use of '*ml* (22 times) and '*m'sh* (14 times) totals 36 direct references to work or toil in *Qoheleth*. '*ml*, which can literally mean 'sin', may simply be a synonym for '*its-tsavon* in *Qoheleth*.¹⁵ Furthermore, the context of Gn. 3:17–19 clearly suggests laborious toil beyond what God had originally ordained in Gn. 2:15—and this is the concept advanced in *Qoheleth*.

The effects of the curse in Gn. 3:17–19 in the world should not be underestimated. Qoheleth certainly did not underestimate them. The whole chaotic dog-eat-dog world out there demonstrates the extreme power the effects of the curse have in frustrating every avenue of human endeavour. The competitive nature of work may be reflected in the rivalry of the thorns and weeds against the good fruit of the soil, as well as in the story of Cain and Abel in Gn. 4—a matter to be discussed in the next section.

¹² (Cont'd) 8:35–36; 10:27; 11:19; 15:24; 19:3, 23. For Qoheleth, death seemed to be an extremely bitter pill to swallow. The wisdom premise of long life for the righteous and short life of the wicked is also challenged—but death is still a curse to be avoided. See 2:14–26; 3:18–22; 5:12–19; 6:3–6, 12; 8:14–15; 9:1–10; 12:1–8. See especially 9:4–6, 10.

¹³ Von Rad, 91; Skinner, 83 and Westermann, 263.

¹⁴ Brown, *et al.*, eds., *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford, 1968), 780–81.

¹⁵ See M. V. Fox, *Qoheleth and His Contradictions* (Sheffield, 1989), 54–57. Fox deals with the linguistic implications of these Hebrew terms. He argues that '*ml* carries heavy negative connotations. It carries the notion of futile, arduous burdensomeness—or toil. It is activity which demands effort beyond its rewards—and as such does not adjust itself to reality. Therefore, it is an appropriate term for Qoheleth's treatise (54). This tends to support the thesis that '*ml* is a synonym in *Qoheleth* for '*its-tsavon* in Gn. 3:17.

Vawter explains Gn. 3:19 as an aetiological statement of the existential fact that all human work in the world is racked with problems, frustration and pain.¹⁶ Von Rad and Westermann would concur with these findings.¹⁷ However, it is the implications of the curse which determine the extent and potency of it in life. And this is what Qoheleth focuses on: the all-pervasive effects of the curse in Gn. 3:17–19 in the activities of humans 'under the sun'.

The concept advanced in Gn. 3:17–19 is not limited to agricultural activities. As Skinner points out, the clause 'by the sweat of your brow you will eat your food' may well be a metaphor for 'you will *earn your living* by the sweat of your brow'.¹⁸ The agricultural orientation of the curse is probably related to Gn. 2:15 and possibly has a literary connection to 2:17. Exclusion from the Garden and access to the Tree of Life—to a hostile environment outside, is also related to the curse.¹⁹ Moreover, agriculture was the first formal occupation of humans and to limit the curse strictly to agriculture would be contrary to the way the real world is and has always been. It is not only tough squeezing out a living by farming—it is also tough at the office!²⁰

The cataclysmic and universal effects of the Fall are scarcely denied by most scholars.²¹ This is not an abstract theory contrary to Hebrew

¹⁶ B. Vawter, *On Genesis: A New Reading* (London, 1977), 85.

¹⁷ Von Rad, 92 and Westermann, 265.

¹⁸ Skinner, 84, much the same way as '*kl lchm* in Am. 7:12 means 'earn your living'. Cf. U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem, 1961), 168. Cassuto also supports a broader understanding of the implications of the curse of Gn. 3:17–19 as labour in general.

¹⁹ W. Zimmerli, *Old Testament Theology in Outline*, trans. David E. Green (Edinburgh, 1978), 171.

²⁰ For redemptive reasons, and as an aetiological statement, von Rad (92) sees the theology of the curse of Gn. 3:17–19 as more comprehensive than just hardships in agriculture. It includes the whole wretchedness of human existence.

We need to remember the purpose of aetiological statements at this point: to explain the origins and causes of certain phenomena in the world. The author of this Genesis material must certainly have been aware of occupations other than agriculture which experience the same kinds of difficulties and frustrations in making a living! Qoheleth would have also been aware of the literary nature of Gn. 3 as an aetiological statement and why it would lend itself so nicely to his own literary and theological purposes.

²¹ Cf. W. Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta, 1982), 40–44. Brueggemann argues against any such concept as the Fall, the origin of evil and sin in the Genesis account. However, the existential crisis faced by all humans in this hostile environment tends to refute this thesis. It simply is an alternative interpretation of the text which is contrary to reality. To assert that the world and humanity are essentially good and free moral agents is to betray the way life really is and denies the basic point of the primeval history of Genesis.

Gn. 1 states God's total satisfaction with his creation. Gn. 2 outlines a paradise situation. Gn. 3 throws a wrench into this status. The rest of the primeval history of Genesis demonstrates an escalation of the sinful nature from that point. Gn. 4 begins

thought and the Hebrew Bible. Rather, it is a concrete aetiological statement of fact in keeping with Hebrew thought and expressed in the primeval history and the rest of the Hebrew Bible by concrete examples.²² Perhaps the curse of Genesis 3:14–19 is a metonym for the whole of creation—because the effects of the Fall seem to pervade every dimension of creation.²³

Qoheleth also had a highly developed view of the sinful nature in the operation of the world. He made use of several Hebrew terms for sin totaling 40 references in his book: *cht* (7 times),²⁴ *rsh* (12 times),²⁵ and *r''* (21 times).²⁶ Furthermore, his view of fools, sinners, folly and oppression may all be the quintessential and unrestrained expressions of the sinful nature.²⁷ That death constantly couples these concepts may be yet another clue that Qoheleth had the Gn. 3:17–19 curse as the background to the leitmotif of work.²⁸ Qoheleth made it quite clear that he viewed this world as one which has been corrupted by sin. On the basis of the aetiological statement of Gn. 3 and the state-of-affairs in the world, Qoheleth used and supported the doctrines of the Fall, original sin and a universe corrupted by sin.

II. The Relationship of Genesis 4 with Genesis 3 and the Book of Qoheleth

There may be added support for this view if Qoheleth was also drawing from Gn. 4—another condensed treatise on the subject of the effects

²¹ (Cont'd) with fratricide and ends with psychopathic violence. Chapter 6 expresses God's utter pain because of the sinful activity of his creatures. The situation just gets worse through to chapter 11. The basic point of the primeval history of Genesis is that humanity and their world has been totally corrupted from chapter 3 on. It seems difficult to miss this point. This is not an import to the text—it is the point the text wants to make!

²² See G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, trans. D. M. G. Stalker (Edinburgh, 1962), 154.

²³ As a Jewish midrashic, Paul seemed to endorse this understanding of Gn. 3. See Rom. 8:19–24.

²⁴ See 2:26; 5:5; 7:20, 26; 8:12; 9:2, 18. *cht* sometimes used a participle form for the noun 'sinner' (see 2:26; 7:26; 8:12; 9:2, 18). Total references to *cht* is 7 in 7 verses from chapters 2–9.

²⁵ See 3:16 (2x), 17; 7:15, 17, 25; 8:8, 10, 13, 14 (2x); 9:2. Qoheleth often used *rsh* in a participle form for the noun 'wicked', i.e., 'one who is evil', 'wicked', a 'sinner' (see 3:17; 7:15; 8:10, 13; 9:2). Total references to *rsh* is 12 in 10 verses from chapters 3–9.

²⁶ See 1:13; 2:18, 22; 3:10; 4:3, 8, 17; 5:12; 6:1, 2; 7:3; 8:3, 5, 6, 9, 11 (2x), 12; 9:3 (2x), 12 (2x); 10:5, 13; 12:14. Total references to *rsh* is 25 in 22 verses from chapters 1–12.

²⁷ See 2:1–3, 12–16, 19, 26; 3:16–17; 4:1, 4–6, 13–16; 5:2–6, 7; 6:8; 7:1–10, 15–17, 20, 25–29; 8:3–10, 9–14; 9:2–3, 18; 10:1–6, 12–18. Cf. E. Levine, 'Qoheleth's Fool: A Composite Portrait', *On Humour and Comedy in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. D. M. Gunn (Sheffield, 1990), 277–94.

²⁸ See 2:10–18; 4:1–3; 7:1–4, 15–17; 8:7–13; 9:1–6, 10–12; 12:1–8.

of the Fall and the curse of Gn. 3:17–19.²⁹ This story is about Cain, an agriculturist, and Abel, a shepherd. The name Abel may be significant. It is the same word that Qoheleth used as his connecting theme: *hevel*³⁰. God had originally breathed the breath of life into Adam (2:7). While the breath of life may be the basis for the name Abel, the author of Gn. 4 may have had a double literary purpose to demonstrate the ephemerality of life in a fallen world. Life was fleeting in a corrupt and threatening world. There is competition in the world now—just as the weeds and thorns compete against the good fruits of the land for the good nourishment of the soil. The life of Abel reflects the curse of Gn. 3:17–19 in Cain's work—the blood of Abel crying out from the ground—and death being the ultimate expression of it!³¹

The interesting aspect of YHWH's curse on Cain is the fact that he was driven from the soil, or 'agriculture', as a means of earning his living. As Rogerson points out, Gn. 4 is a demonstration of the effects of the Fall and the escalation of sin—both in terms of the proliferation of the population but also in terms of the spread of contamination into the metal trades (vv. 17–22).³² Just as the curse of Gn. 3:17–19 infects Cain's work, so too is Lamech's work infected by the curse—and death has an ever-present connection with him!

Just as the literary purpose of Gn. 4 is to show the escalating sinful nature, demonstrating the tenuous nature of life, so too *Qoheleth* is an extended and more detailed literary parallel on this theme. So there is not only more linguistic evidence in his use of *hevel*, but also thematic evidence that he was in fact drawing from this Genesis material. However, the focus of this study is to see how Qoheleth handled Gn. 3:17–19 in his text.

²⁹ Rogerson, 66–67.

³⁰ See *BDB*, 210–11, where the range of meanings for *hevel* is 'vapour', 'breath', 'empty'. Cf. Richard S. Hess, *Studies in the Personal Names of Genesis 1–11* (Kevelaer, 1993), 27. Hess translates *hevel* in Gn. 4 as 'Short-lived' (Abel = 'fleeting' [life]). Cf. also M. V. Fox, 'The Meaning of Hebel for Qohelet', *JBL* 105, 1986, 409–27 and *Qohelet*, 29–51. Fox discusses the linguistic implications of *hevel* as having these primary meanings but also that of 'ephemeral', 'meaningless', 'vapid'. Ultimately he argues for *hevel* meaning 'absurd' in *Qoheleth*. More will be said on this term later.

³¹ For an excellent discussion of the significance of Abel's name and the inter-relationships between Gn. 4 with Gn. 2–3, the ground, agriculture, the curse of Gn. 3.17–19, the blood of Abel crying from the ground—and death being the ultimate expression of Gn. 3.19, see E. van Wolde, 'The Story of Cain and Abel: A Narrative Study', *JSTOT* 52, 1991, 25–41. See especially 25, 29, 33–34, 37–38.

³² See Rogerson, 66–67. Cf. Gn. 4 with Eccl. 10:9 in the general context of work in 10:8–11.

III. The Theological Implications of Genesis 3:17–19 in Qoheleth

If Qoheleth was alluding to the curse of Gn. 3:17–19 in his leitmotif of work, it would have the functional purpose of helping to prove his thesis that 'everything is absurd', i.e., the frustrations of work are one concept which demonstrates why everything in life is full of 'futility' or 'absurdity'.³³ This would also explain the passionate driving theological force behind his work and his pessimistic worldview.

Much of *Qoheleth* deals with the frustrations of work. These can be either in general (1:3–11; 2:17–23, 26b; 3:1, 2b, 3b, 5a, 7a, 9–15, 22; 5:17–18; 8:15c–16; 9:9d–11), in intellectual pursuits (1:13–18; 7:23–25; 12:9–12), in business and achievements (2:4–26; 4:4–10; 5:9–16; 6:1–9; 11:1–6) or in politics³⁴ (3:15c–17; 4:1–3, 13–16; 5:6–7; 7:6–9; 8:1–10:20). Many of these activities overlap.

The one concept they all have in common is the sheer toilsomeness of their activities 'under the sun'. Everything is at utter odds with each other. Even when things work out, fate and death can and do overturn their *yithron*, i.e., their 'profit' or 'advantage'. For this reason, von Rad can say that what makes the life of work so wretched is that 'it is so threatened by failures and wastes of time and often enough comes to nothing, that its actual result usually has no relation to the effort expended'.³⁵ Qoheleth operated from exactly this premise. And it is for this reason that he cried with utter frustration at the way life is and the difficulties of earning a living, preserving achievements and an estate. Thus 'everything is absurd'!

Some examples of how Qoheleth saw the curse of Gn. 3:17–19 worked out in real life will now be examined from each of the above four categories.

³³ See n. 30 and Fox, 'The Meaning of Hebel for Qohelet', 409–27 and *Qohelet*, 29–51. Cf. D. C. Fredericks, *Coping with Transience: Ecclesiastes on Brevity in Life* (Sheffield, 1993), 1ff. We have already discussed the linguistic implications of *hebel*. The term is used thirty-eight times in *Qoheleth*. Qoheleth was definitely building his case around the term. There are many nuances of *hebel* but Qoheleth seemed to be suggesting that life is existentially absurd—especially in regard to the age-old adage of trying to get ahead in life. I would further add that Qoheleth may have used this term deliberately as a 'loaded' term, i.e., he used it with all of the various nuances implied—but ultimately intending it to mean that all of life is existentially 'absurd'. Cf. J. Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford, 1961), 106–09. Barr correctly argues that the meaning of a word is not only determined by its most basic meaning or etymological history—but by how the author used the word and intended it to be understood.

³⁴ See D. A. Garrett, 'Qoheleth on the Use and Abuse of Political Power', *TrinJ* 8, 1987, 159–77.

³⁵ Von Rad, *Genesis*, 92.

The Curse in General Work (1:3–11)

Obviously this passage has to do with creation. V. 3 may be injecting humanity into his environment (vv. 4–11). This would also be a proleptic introduction to what the creation experiences in its daily grind: just as humans work, the creation works. Furthermore, this daily grind appears to be futile, meaningless and purposeless. The sun rises, the sun sets. The wind blows but who knows where and for what purpose? Streams flow to the sea but the sea is a bottomless pit. The whole rhythm of the poem mimics the course of creation and the plight of human existence. Thus, v. 8a concludes that 'all things are [monotonously] weary'.³⁶ Even the creation is subjected to the curse of toil which yields little or no benefits.

The point of this passage is to provide a universal context for humanity's existence and their absurd working conditions. Qoheleth's epistemology and the universal nature of his thought³⁷ demonstrates his awareness of the curse's comprehensive and inter-relatedness of all matters pertaining to work. He will go on to address the basis of his universal observations in the next section—namely intellectual pursuits. Work of any sort requires previous thought by necessity. Qoheleth's epistemology, in this universal context and with the comprehensive effects of the curse in mind, severely questions and challenges humanity's vain epistemological abilities versus their realistic limitations (vv. 8b–11). The creation becomes a means of proving this point.

Furthermore, this context underlines the permanence of the creation over humanity. Human existence will not be remembered (v. 11) because death, the ultimate expression of the curse, will be swallowed up by the creation as they return to the dust (cf. 3:20 and 12:7). This passage sets humanity and their work in a universal context. Humanity works, the creation provides the context of their work and itself works—but the frustrations of the curse render it all absurd!

The Curse in Intellectual Work (1:12–18)

Many scholars recognize *Qoheleth's* quasi-philosophical nature.³⁸ *Qoheleth* 1:12–18 introduces the reader to the author's quest to under-

³⁶ See the discussion on the literary structure of v. 8 in D. A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs* (Nashville, 1993), 45–47.

³⁷ The view of wisdom as an empirically based activity evidenced in most cultures, and Qoheleth's broader context in the ancient Near East, led to universal axioms of the way life is and the way it works. Cf. Towner, 132–34 and R.N. Whybray, *Two Jewish Theologies: Job and Ecclesiastes* (Hull, 1980), 3, 6.

³⁸ G. A. Barton, *The Book of Ecclesiastes* (Edinburgh, 1959), 32–42; R. B. Y. Scott, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes* (New York, 1982), 196–204 and Gordis, 89–90.

stand the mechanics and purpose for everything done under the heavens. However, he asserts in v. 13 that this intellectual work is 'a heavy burden God has laid on men!' (literally: 'an *evil affliction* God gave the sons of man to afflict him with'). This evil affliction of work is really a curse laid on humanity by God. This must surely go back to Gn. 3:17–19. Furthermore, his proleptic conclusion of intellectual work in v. 14 is that 'everything is absurd and a vexation of spirit'. Everything is absurd, futile—an insult to reason.³⁹ Moreover, intellectual work causes human beings to have a vexation of spirit.⁴⁰ This vexation is repeated in v. 17 to reinforce the comprehensive pain of toil in the totality of human beings: intellectually, physically and emotionally.⁴¹ These again must be seen as theological allusions to Gn. 3:17–19, which in turn has broader theological implications than just farming.

The linguistic construction in Hebrew of v. 13 buttresses Qoheleth's determination to 'know it all' by saying: 'I devoted myself to study and explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven'.⁴² This was no half-hearted attempt to understand the mechanics and purpose of life—but a well thought out and vigorously executed scheme (an empirically based experiment). Nevertheless, all his hard work was for naught. Even in intellectual work humanity is cursed with toil, and toil which yields no advantage (cf. 7:23–24 and 12:12). Philosophy = *hevel*/absurdity.

³⁹ See Fox, *Qohelet*, 35 and 'The Meaning of Hebel for Qohelet', 413. Fox argues persuasively that 'absurd' is an appropriate rendering of *hevel* because it is not that many of the concepts discussed in *Qoheleth* are incomprehensible but that they are contrary to reason, or the epistemological system of reason which humanity uses. See also n. 40 below.

⁴⁰ See Fox, *Qohelet*, 48–51. Fox again argues persuasively that *r'uth ruch* relates to the psycho-emotional dimension of the intellectual understanding of the *hevel* statements. The basic rationale behind his argument is that *r'uth ruch* cannot possibly refer to a 'chasing after the wind' because the activities in *Qoheleth* do achieve their goals; though there is probably a word-play here. For example, a person can work hard and be wise in all their dealings—building a substantial estate; but must in turn surrender it in death to one who has not worked for it nor earned it—and who may also be a fool with it. See 2:17–23. This is a comprehensible scenario—we can understand the mechanics behind it. The problem is that it is just psychologically and emotionally vexing! Therefore *r'uth ruch* in *Qoheleth* must refer to the other legitimate linguistic rendering as a 'vexation of spirit'.

⁴¹ The word *lev* used in 1:12–18 to explain Qoheleth's quest for understanding the way the world works, can mean 'heart', 'will', 'mind' or all of the above. However, these overall nuances can mean the totality of human being.

⁴² Both Crenshaw, 72 and Gordis, 209 think that *ldrush* refers to the 'depth' of intellectual work (investigation) and *lhwur* refers to 'investigating a matter from all sides'. Thus the intellectual scope of Qoheleth's quest is comprehensive. They also see the beth of *bchkmh* as the means of instrumentality beth.

This idea of arduous and painful intellectual toil is further reinforced by vv. 17–18. Qoheleth sought out to understand wisdom and knowledge, and also madness and folly. But what he learned was that the only thing this intellectual understanding through hard intellectual work yielded was a vexed spirit. He sought a lot of wisdom—but along with that wisdom he experienced much grief.

The last clause of v. 18 is very pregnant statement. Qoheleth said that: ‘the more knowledge, the more grief’. The use of the hiphil with *ysph* is significant. It implies a causative relationship between Qoheleth’s hard toil for knowledge and wisdom in direct proportion to the mental or ‘psychological pain’ (*k’v*; NIV ‘grief’)⁴³ caused by acquiring it. This seems to reaffirm Qoheleth’s dependence on the curse of Gn. 3:17–19 for the leitmotif of work. The theological allusions are overwhelming and the practical expression of the curse in *Qoheleth* seem staggering. Or as one scholar has put it, referring to Qoheleth’s use of Genesis:

In both books God creates man of dust and to limit the power of man he imposes upon him toil—only in Genesis it is physical while in Ecclesiastes it is intellectual toil!—and finally death is the sentence decreed for all creatures.

Man’s overpowered by the hunger for knowledge in Genesis; in Ecclesiastes the same restless, searching spirit is manifest. But in the latter there is no comfort derived from the fruits of knowledge, for what knowledge does come to man only further reveals his creaturely limitations and the insignificance of his place in the universe.⁴⁴ Humans wanted the fruits of knowledge in the Garden—but ended up with the frustrated knowledge that it is a jungle out there!

The Curse in Business and Achievements (2:4–23)

This passage has more to do with achievements than business *per se*. However, Qoheleth’s ability to achieve, in this case through mega building projects, implies business dealings and finesse.⁴⁵

The arguments surrounding Qoheleth’s identity as or allusion to Solomonic identity are legion. Nevertheless, the author’s identity as or use of Solomonic identity was for the purpose of discussing, with credibility, the subject of wealth and all that goes with it. In this case, the ability to wheel and deal and achieve monumental building projects.

⁴³ See *BDB*, 456. I prefer to render *k’v* anachronistically as ‘psychological pain’.

⁴⁴ C. C. Forman, ‘The Pessimism of Ecclesiastes’, *JSS* 3, 1958, 341.

⁴⁵ For a more detailed discussion of Qoheleth’s business dealings and wealth, see J. L. Kugel, ‘Qohelet and Money’, *CBQ* 51, 1989, 32–49.

The use of Solomonic identity and the pericope at hand are probably an allusion to Solomon's building program encompassed in I Kgs. 4–10 and II Chron. 1–9. This would also imply Solomon's astute foreign affairs policy which insured substantial business transactions with king Hiram of Tyre (I Kgs. 5; 7:13–50 and II Chron. 2). No doubt this building project utilized slave labour and the imposition of tribute (I Kgs. 4:21–27; 9:15–23 and II Chron. 2:17–18; 8:7–8). Nevertheless, this would entail massive administrative work. Solomon also had extensive business dealings with the ancient world (I Kgs. 9:26–28 and 10:1–22). All of these factors would be necessary to undertake the monumental building project described in 2:4–11 and are probably implied in the text.

The conclusion of the pursuit of pleasure via business and achievements, proleptically announced in v. 1,⁴⁶ is reaffirmed in vv. 10–11. The metaphors of the eyes and the heart may be a merismos for the external and internal experiences⁴⁷ of life and pleasure—or the totality of life experiences.

Vv. 10–11 also manifest the use of 'ml and m'sh, which may, in this case, be reflecting the nuance of 'earnings' or material means for Qoheleth's experiment in pleasure via business and achievements. However, this remains doubtful because the *hevel* and 'vexation of spirit' statement clearly has business and achievements as its antecedent.⁴⁸ Business and achievements as work are just as frustrated and racked with pain even when the material results are good (though the actual process still remains thorn infested).

Vv. 12–16 may be alluding back to the curse in Gn. 3.17–19 as related to work.⁴⁹ Whether one does one's work with wisdom or foolishness, the results have the same frustrated yield and conclusion: Death is the ultimate expression of the curse.

Vv. 17–23 give the final verdict on work, business and achieve-

⁴⁶ Vv. 1–3 properly belong with vv. 4–11 as indicated by *hgdthty* in v. 4. It lacks any *waw* conjunction and is therefore symptomatic of continuing narrative. While *waw* conjunctions can also demonstrate continuing narrative, the lack thereof certainly removes any clue of discontinuity. However, vv. 4–11 may well be a discourse in the 'means' of pleasure.

⁴⁷ See Crenshaw, 81 and Eaton, 67.

⁴⁸ See the discussion regarding Fox on 'ml in n. 15. Fox suggests that 'ml and m'sh also have financial and materialistic overtones.

⁴⁹ There are some grammatical problems with including vv. 12–16 with 2:4–11, 17–26. V. 12 opens with *wphnythy* in which the *waw* conjunction may have a temporal force implying a new pericope. However, this would mean that vv. 12–16 are an ellipsis in the discourse on pleasure via business and achievements. It seems more logical to view them as further elaboration on work methodology in the same frustrated theme.

ment.⁵⁰ Qoheleth said in v. 17: 'So I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous ["evil affliction"] to me'. This is a very strong statement indeed! He has hated life because of grievous work he has had to do. This is further reinforced by another *hevel* and 'vexation of spirit' statement. However, this paragraph's elaboration on business and achievement demonstrate again that even if there are material benefits to one's work—they are often frustrated by foolish inheritors. The curse of Gn. 3:17–19 is perpetual—and Qoheleth's observations of this are still true to this day.

Vv. 20–23 could be Qoheleth's most acute allusion to the curse in Gn. 3:17–19 as evidenced in his own experience. The compound use of *'ml* is found six times in these four short verses concluding with a *hevel* statement. V. 21 may be another reference to methodology in business and achievements which are only cursed as 'absurd and much evil', or as the NIV translates it: a 'meaningless and great misfortune'. Finally, in v. 23, Qoheleth made it clear that all his days of work, reflected in his business dealings and achievements, were 'psychological pain' (*k'v*) and 'vexed affliction' (*k's 'nh*). This is a compound statement of the painful and vexing affliction of work—and must be seen as a theological allusion back to the curse in Gn. 3:17–19.

The Curse in Political Work (8:1–10:20)

This passage on hand is primarily concerned with politics.⁵¹ Politics by necessity has inter-related mechanics with justice, administration and industry. How Qoheleth viewed the curse of Gn. 3:17–19 in the inter-relationship between politics and work will be the focus of this section. Qoheleth now deals with perhaps the most corrupt and frustrating part of work related to the curse in Gn. 3:17–19: the work of the politician or bureaucrat.

8:6 is an interesting reference to the problems of political work. This verse has created several interesting comments.⁵² The basic idea

⁵⁰ Vv. 24–26 properly belong to this discourse—but not along the same theme as the curse of Gn. 3:17–19 in *Qoheleth*. They may well be Qoheleth's hope of God's grace in spite of the difficult circumstances of work. However, v. 26 ends with another *hevel* and 'vexation of spirit' statement—for a combined total of eight statements in chapter 2.

⁵¹ Refer to Garrett, 'Qoheleth on Political Power'. Garrett has this extended passage broken up into smaller pericopes (8:1–8; 8:9–9:6; 9:13–10:20). The arguments for the political divisions of *Qoheleth* are complex and the article should be consulted. He obviously views 9:7–12 as an ellipsis in what is an extensive treatment of politics. However, this may be in question.

⁵² Cf. Gordis, 289–90; Crenshaw, 151–52; Eaton, 119–20; Garrett, *Ecclesiastes*, 140 and 'Qoheleth on Political Power', 170.

espoused by some commentators is that 6b explains the moral evil or inherent moral weakness of humanity: 'though a man's misery weighs heavily upon him' (NIV) or 'though humanity's evil is much upon him'. The implications may be twofold. One, the conscientious politician is concerned about the moral problems facing society. Or two, the work of the politician is difficult, hard work. It seems that the best understanding of 6b is to see it as an explanatory clause which may encompass the moral dilemma of humanity—but more immediately refers to the frustrating work of the politician. Nonetheless, most commentators see a more comprehensive sense of frustration in humanity's existential crisis—whether as a citizen or a politician (cf. 4:13–16 and 9:13–18). Death is lurking around the corner anyways (v. 8).

9:9d–10, may well be part of a larger ellipsis (9:7–12) in Qoheleth's political treatise in 8:1–10:20. But 9:7 begins with imperatives: 'Go, eat and drink'. This would seem a strange way to begin another pericope—unless it is a concessionary statement relative to Qoheleth's previous discourse. There was a reason why he used imperatives here. Qoheleth may have become so disgusted with the political scene that he turns to a somewhat hedonistic alternative.⁵⁵ While he consistently urges wisdom as an antidote to the frustration and folly of life, he also sees validity in the enjoyment of life and work insofar as it is possible in this dark and hostile environment called the world. Nevertheless, Qoheleth returned to the theme of hard, toilsome labour by the use of a compound emphatic '*ml*' in 9d.

V. 10 recommends hard work by the compound use of '*sh*'. The reason is, again, because death is lurking around the corner—and there is no planning, knowledge or wisdom in the grave—and *you are going there!* While there may be some enjoyable aspects of work in the world, it is ultimately frustrated by death.

The axiom of 10:5–7 can be seen any night on the BBC News at Six. Cabinet shuffles come and go—and no one remembers the players or the circumstances—but the frustrating work of the politician goes on (cf. 1:11; 2:16; 4:13–16 and 8:1–10:20).

The frustrations of political work has its effects in the bungling work of politicians and society as a whole. Politicians are frustrated by their hard work—but the people suffer the consequences of their frustrated work and are in turn frustrated. The comprehensive effects of the curse in Gn. 3:17–19 in political work, as evidenced in *Qoheleth*, can scarcely be denied.

⁵⁵ The term 'hedonistic' may be too strong for Qoheleth. He always embraced balance and moderation as the wise course for life. See 7:15–18 and Garrett, *Ecclesiastes*, 128–32.

IV. Conclusion

Qoheleth's dependence on the Genesis text has, for the most part, reached scholarly consensus. However, none have specified his use of Gn. 3:17–19 in a detailed way. Nevertheless, he has quoted a substantial part of it which indicates his familiarity with it. The Fall may provide the broader context of *Qoheleth*. The overlap of so many themes and concepts between Gn. 2–4 and *Qoheleth* is too great to be considered a coincidence.

It seems likely that the curse of Gn. 3:17–19 explains how *Qoheleth* understood life's problems and the frustrations of work in general, intellectual pursuits, business and achievements, and politics. While *Qoheleth* may be alluding to the curse of Gn. 3:17–19 as an aetiological statement of the existential crisis of humanity in a hostile environment, he was describing its effects as he existentially encountered them in his life and in his observations of the way life works. But his observations may provide a theological explanation for why life and work continue to be so troublesome for us today and in the future.

Abstract

The frustrations of work are a major leitmotif in *Qoheleth*. This paper takes an intertextual approach and applies theological criticism to *Qoheleth* in an attempt to see if the author was dependent upon Gn. 3:17–19 for the background to his leitmotif of work. An apology for the traditional interpretation of the universal Fall and original sin in Genesis 3 is provided on the basis of literary critical analysis. Test cases from four categories were used in an attempt to prove *Qoheleth's* dependence on Gn. 3:17–19: work in general (1:3–11), intellectual pursuits (1:12–18), business and achievements (2:4–23) and in politics (8:1–10:20).

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