

WHAT DO WE GAIN FROM ALL OUR TOIL?

(The Demystification of Wealth in the Wisdom of Israel)

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A frequently aired television commercial for a well-known brand of storage containers pictures a prosperous American family nearly buried inside their large American home beneath all the "stuff" they have managed to accumulate. The commercial shows us how their problem can be solved: they need only to buy a certain number of brand-name containers in which to store their "stuff" safely away. In the final scene, the members of this typical middle-class American family look around their house with surprise. It seems neat and clean and . . . empty. They all rush away, in various directions, exclaiming happily, "Now we can buy some more stuff!"

Can any of us resist this commonly felt and commercially encouraged "need" to have more stuff? It may be debatable whether or not the urge to "store up for ourselves treasures on earth" could be called a universal impulse of "fallen" humanity. But few would disagree with the assertion that acquisitiveness is a persistent and widespread ethos which is closely woven into the fabric of the "American way of life."

In Good News to the Poor: John Wesley's Evangelical Economics (Abingdon, 1990), Theodore W. Jennings asserts that "No prophetic critique of this dominant ethos or of the ideology that supports it can make much headway unless wealth and power are themselves demystified" (p. 32). In this paper I would like to suggest that the biblical book known as Ecclesiastes or

Qohelet (the Hebrew name or nickname of the principle speaker within the twelve short chapters of the book) is capable of providing the community of faith with Scriptural resources for a sustained and forceful attack on the "mystique" of wealth.

Unfortunately, however, the traditional way of translating the thematic statement of Ecclesiastes into English seems to give modern American readers permission to dismiss the book as too cynical or too faithless to warrant serious consideration. In fact, I would argue, Qohelet is neither a cynic nor a heretic. The thematic word hebel, which RSV translates as "vanity," occurs 38 times in Ecclesiastes, compared to only 35 other uses in all of the rest of the Old Testament. In its simplest and most basic sense, hebel means "a puff of air," "a breath" or "vapor." This sense of hebel can be seen in the RSV in Isaiah 57:13, "The wind will carry them off, a breath (hebel) will take them away."

The Anchor Bible's translation of Ecclesiastes preserves this concrete, basic sense of hebel when it translates Eccl. 1:2, as "Breath of a breath! . . . The slightest breath! All is a breath." This translation enables English readers to see that the phrase "all is hebel" is actually a metaphor. The powerful thematic statement of Ecclesiastes is expressed in its original language as a figure of speech: "Everything (under the sun) is a puff of air." But many modern versions of Ecclesiastes have chosen to obscure the metaphorical nature of the original statement and replace the concrete, non-judgmental phrase ("breath" or "a puff of air") with various abstract terms -- all

of which have decidedly negative connotations in English. For example, TEV says "Everything is useless," NIV uses "meaningless" and NEB says "All is empty." Even if a case could be made for replacing a metaphor with an adjective or a descriptive phrase, there are legitimate grounds for challenging the negative connotations of the words which many modern translators use to translate hebel in Ecclesiastes.

When we look closely at the ways in which the word is used in other parts of the Old Testament, it becomes clear that the essential quality to which hebel refers is lack of permanence rather than lack of worth or value. A breath, after all, is of considerable value to the one who breathes it. However, it is not something one can hang on to for long. It is air-like, fleeting, transitory, and elusive rather than meaningless. A number of psalms use hebel to describe the brevity of human life and the transitory nature of human concerns compared to the eternity of God and the durability of God's concerns (e.g., Pss. 39:5,11; 62:9; 78:33; 94:11; 144:4), as does Job 7:16.

Of course, if one tries to depend too heavily upon something which is essentially fleeting, one may suffer negative consequences. Thus Isaiah warns his contemporaries against depending too heavily upon Egypt as an ally, "for Egypt's help is hebel (fleeting) and empty," (Isa. 30:7). Similarly, one might say that to worship or to give ultimate value to anything which is transitory is the essence of idolatry (Ps. 31:6). Thus idols are "air-like", transitory and lacking in substance (as in

Jer. 10:8), and those who "go after" hebel (transitory-ness) will certainly "become hebel" (transitory), as Jeremiah 2:5 and 2 Kings 17:15 point out.

While we cannot locate a precise historical setting for Qohelet or his (implied) audience, clues in the text support some speculations about the social location of those to whom Qohelet's remarks originally were addressed, and most commentators conclude that Qohelet speaks as one of the affluent to others whose resources exceed their needs. Thus it seems to me that when the word hebel is correctly translated, the book of Ecclesiastes is quite capable of persuading middle-class and affluent audiences that the things which they are so preoccupied with acquiring are all "breath-like" -- ephemeral, insubstantial, and impermanent.

The material I think speaks most pertinently to the task at hand is found primarily in the first half of the book of Ecclesiastes. All of chapters one through six can be grouped rather loosely under the larger topic of "What is good [or worthwhile] for humans to do during their brief lives on earth?" This is what Qohelet says he set out to discover (in 2:3), and this is the question which closes the discussion in 6:12. Qohelet spends the better part of six chapters considering the types of "goods" people work hardest to attain and he argues that toiling painfully and miserably day after day simply for the purpose of accumulating wealth is useless, because wealth cannot be relied upon to endure (5:13-17), it cannot be taken with us

when we die (3:19-21; 4:7-8), and it cannot be controlled by us after we are gone (2:18-21).

The question Qohelet raises in 1:3 is not whether there is any value in what happens "under the sun" but whether there is any permanence, anything which can be grasped and kept ("gained"). In 1:4-11 Qohelet uses the observable phenomena of nature and the human senses to point towards an answer to his question. The evidence which comes from the observation of natural processes indicates that nothing is left over from one cycle of nature to another. A generation of human beings comes and goes much as the sun rises and sets, or as the wind blows or as streams flow. No sunshine is left over from day to day -- the sun needs to do its work over and over. All the processes of creation on earth are transitory or fleeting (hebel). Only the earth itself, the stage upon which these processes take place, "remains forever."

The RSV translation in 1:8 ("all things are full of weariness") is misleading. The Hebrew debarim can mean both "words" and "things". Since the rest of the verse has to do with seeing and hearing, it would be better to translate this phrase as a parallel having to do with speaking. The sense of the whole seems to be that no one can say everything there is to be said because words, like sights and sounds are hebel or "breath-like." Speaking, seeing and hearing are all things which have to be done over and over again. Our eyes and our ears can't fill up with the sights we see or the sounds we hear because sights and sounds

can't be grasped and kept, anymore than words which are uttered can be stored up or left-over. In 1:9-11, Qohelet claims that everything "under the sun" is recycled. Those things which seem new to us have merely been forgotten as previous generations passed away. Furthermore, Qohelet declares, future generations will not remember what happened in our time. Nothing under the sun (no process of nature and no product of human endeavor or ingenuity) is permanent.

Many readers will be disconcerted by this assertion that we gain nothing permanent from all our labor. Does Qohelet's argument take away human incentives for work (as some critics have said) or does it merely place our human ambitions in a realistic perspective with relation to the rest of the cosmos? Many of us hope we will leave a permanent mark on the world by our presence in it. Qohelet gently but firmly depresses our pretensions. Since this entire section of Ecclesiastes opens with a question about human achievements ("What do humans gain from all their toil?"), there is no reason to conclude that Qohelet is projecting limits to what God might do. Qohelet doesn't include God's activities in the category of what is done "under the sun."

In 1:12-18 Qohelet uses the facts of Solomon's life (which would have been well-known to his audience through their traditions) to argue that even one who had all the wisdom and wealth of Solomon would come to the same conclusions as Qohelet has: "all is breath-like."

The first eleven verses of the second chapter contain the "confessions" of a conspicuous consumer who has discovered that hard work is useless if one does it only to acquire material possessions. Qohelet is still considering the question posed in 1:3 (Is there anything which can be grasped and kept from all the hard work we do under the sun?), but here in the second chapter, Qohelet turns from pointing to natural phenomena (which everyone can see) as evidence for his argument, to a more confessional mode. The first three verses serve as a framework for the "journaling" which follows. Qohelet tells us that he has experimented with various forms of human activity, to see whether he could find out "what was good" for humans to do during their brief lives "under heaven" (2:3). And the results of his experimentation lead him to conclude that the only value hard work has is the pleasure one feels in doing it (2:10). No amount of work can produce material benefits that can be grasped and permanently gained "under the sun" (2:11).

Qohelet tells us what his experimentation and his wisdom helped him discover: human effort cannot create anything which may be relied upon to endure. His observations have led him to the conclusion that excessive work, "toil and strain," will produce little other than insomnia and pain (2:23). It may be true in some circumstances that "the hand of the diligent makes rich" (Prov. 10:4), but Qohelet concludes that even if you drive yourself to the point where your work becomes nothing more to you

than "vexation" and pain, the results of your labors will still be hebel, as transitory as a breath.

The title of Harold Kushner's book about Ecclesiastes (When All You've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough) is an accurate summary of the contents of Ecclesiastes 2:1-11. Someone like Solomon, who could be said to have done almost anything he wanted to do and to have possessed everything his eyes and his heart desired, makes a convincing witness to the ultimate lack of satisfaction such things give to the one who has them.

In 2:17-23, Qohelet tells us how depressed he was when he realized that everything he had worked so hard to acquire would have to be left behind him when he died, "to be enjoyed by someone who did not toil for it" (2:21). But, he adds, his disappointment turned to acceptance when he learned to appreciate the ability God gives us to find enjoyment in our work. Qohelet concludes, using reason based on experience, that God intends for us to get sustenance and satisfaction from our labors and nothing more (2:24-25). Furthermore, Qohelet asserts that the ability to find value and joy in the work we do is a gift from God. Ironically, Qohelet suggests that it is not the righteous who have the most to show from their labors. Those who are frantically engaged in gathering and heaping up possessions are actually "sinners" (from the Hebrew word hata, meaning they have "missed the mark"). The fruits of such frantic labor will be given to someone who pleases God (2:26).

The second chapter ends with the enigmatic phrase "This too is hebel and a striving after wind." The antecedent of "this" is unclear, but it may mean that however one acquires an abundance of possessions (either by one's own labors or as an unearned gift), these possessions are "a breath" which cannot be relied upon to endure.

The next section of text relevant to our discussion is found in chapter four. In the RSV, 4:4 is translated as if it were a conclusion drawn from the reasoning in 4:1-3 ("then I saw . . ."). But in Hebrew the literal sense of "And I saw . . ." marks a change of subject, from that of injustice (in 4:1-3) back to the topic of work or "toil." Both 4:4 and 4:6 give a negative valuation to excessive work. Verse 4 asserts that hard work done out of envy for one's neighbor is hebel. And v. 6 declares that "a handful of quietness" is better than "two hands full of toil" towards an unreachable goal. However, v. 5 tempers what might otherwise seem to be absolute claims. In what appears to be a traditional proverb, someone (either a glossator or Qohelet himself) reminds us that failure or refusal to work at all can have negative consequences, too. Excessive toil may be foolish and counter-productive, but we are also fools if we fold our hands and starve to death. In Qohelet's opinion, neither the proverbial "sluggard" nor the compulsive worker trying to outshine his or her neighbor is worthy of emulation.

As it now stands, 4:7 seems incomplete: it serves only as a heading for 4:8, in which Qohelet gives an example of what he

means by the hebel quality of working to pile up riches. This ancient description of an individual who has no living heir but who works hard and lives frugally in order to amass wealth resonates with reality in the contemporary world. Again, in Qohelet's opinion, the accumulation of wealth is not an adequate reason for depriving oneself of the simpler pleasures in life. The energies of the solitary miser would be put to better use in looking for companionship, in finding someone with whom to share the rewards of his labors.

In accord with these sentiments, 4:9-12 list some of the advantages of living in community: support (v. 10), warmth (v. 11), and strength (v. 12). The concluding statement in v. 12, "a threefold cord is not quickly broken," has the aura of a traditional proverb. Apparently some activities are less hebel than others, in Qohelet's experience. Working to achieve community seems to promise more lasting rewards than simply working to become rich.

In 5:8-9 Qohelet makes a pertinent comment upon the way hierarchical systems often work to the disadvantage of the poor. "Do not be amazed," Qohelet tells his listener in 5:8, when you see graft in high places. In hierarchical systems of government, the poor are oppressed and their rights are denied to them, because at each level of authority, officials are only concerned with pleasing those who are higher than they are. The RSV translation of 5:9 twists the sense of the Hebrew text. In reality, the text reads "the profit of the land is [shared] by

them all," using the word yitron, which means "profit" or "what is left over" (as in 1:3). The phrase means that all the officials, from the king on down, take a portion of the profits from the farmer's field. Thus Qohelet's opinion of the source of poverty is the same as that expressed in Prov. 13:23 ("The fallow ground of the poor yields much food but it is swept away through injustice"). Both Qohelet and the speaker in Prov. 13:23 refuse to allow sayings such as "He who tills his land will have plenty of bread" (Prov. 28:19) or "A slack hand causes poverty" (Prov. 10:4) to be universalized into absolute truths.

The rather cynical (though many would say realistic) observations about "trickle-down" economics in 5:8-9 are followed by a series of proverbial-type sayings in 5:10-12 and a short narrative in 5:13-17 which all deal with the topic of piling up riches. According to 5:10, those who love money or wealth will never feel satisfied with what they have. "This" (either wealth itself or the love of it) is also hebel, "a breath" (5:10). It is not something to lean on. It does not endure.

"When goods increase they increase who eat them" (5:11) may be another reason why those who love money are never satiated with it or with what it can buy. The more you have, the more it takes to hang on to it. After a certain point, one who has accumulated excess wealth can do little with it other than look at it. The "surfeit of the rich" may also keep them from sleeping peacefully at night. Unlike the "laborer" (the servant, the slave, or the one who tills the soil), the rich may lay awake

nights worrying about how to hang on to all of their possessions (5:12).

The narrative in 5:13-17 is introduced once more as a reflection of Qohelet's personal experiences. The term behind the RSV's "grievous evil" is difficult to translate, but probably means something less drastic than this English phrase implies. The early Greek translators understood the words to mean a "sickness," which is a better translation. Qohelet is speaking about a twisted or unhealthy attitude towards wealth. Qohelet says that he has seen people who have accumulated and hoarded up riches at great sacrifice to themselves, apparently hoping to pass their wealth on to their heirs, only to have their fortunes wiped out in a single bad venture (5:13-14). They, like all other mortals, must go to their graves as "naked" as they were when they came from their mothers' wombs, without anything concrete to show for all the hard work they have done (5:15-16), and their heirs will be none the richer for all the scrimping and saving they had done. Thus, Qohelet asks himself and his listener(s), "what gain [yitron] has he" (5:16) for all the time he spent slaving away "in much vexation and sickness and resentment?" (5:17).

Qohelet wants us to consider how we human beings can most profitably spend the brief period of time we are allotted on earth, since (as his story in 5:13-17 demonstrates) we cannot really count on anything being left over from all our labors. Once again (as in 2:24 and 3:13) his own conclusion is that God

has given us the ability to find enjoyment in our work. What is good for a human being to do is "to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun" (5:18). Life itself may be brief and breath-like, but Qohelet assures us that the ability to be content with what you have in life and to find enjoyment in your work is a gift of God (5:19). Those who find joy in the daily activities of eating, drinking and working will neither notice nor worry about the brevity of life (5:20).

In 6:1-6 Qohelet refers to a hypothetical person who has everything anyone's heart could desire -- including wealth, possessions, and honor (v. 2), plus many children, and a long life (v. 3) -- but who lacks the ability (or the leisure?) to enjoy life's good things. Such a person, says Qohelet, is no better off than an aborted fetus or a stillborn child, which never sees the light or knows anything (vv. 4-5). It doesn't matter how much you own or how long you live, he assures us, if you are not capable of enjoying what you have while you are alive (v. 6).

In 6:7 Qohelet asserts that when we work for things which can be consumed, we will eventually find that such consumption is not ultimately satisfying. Just as "all streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full" (1:7), or as "the eye is not satisfied with seeing nor the ear filled with hearing" (1:8), so our human endeavors are all directed towards "our mouths," but our "appetites" are never satisfied. The words "to be full" and "to

be satisfied" are the same. The word translated "appetite" in 6:7 is also translated "desire" in 6:9 (RSV), but the Hebrew nephesh, meaning the whole person or the inner person would be better translated as "self" in both places. Thus Eccl. 6:7 seems to agree with Deut. 8:3 -- human beings cannot really "live" by what they put in their mouths alone.

To summarize: In the first six chapters of Ecclesiastes, Qohelet challenges his audience to think, first of all, about what they really gain from their work. Does there have to be something tangible "left over" from their labors in order to make them seem worthwhile? Using observations from nature, from general human experience, and from his own personal experiences, Qohelet argues that none of the good things we humans work so hard to acquire are permanent or enduring. This is not to say that work itself or the things which are gained through work are totally without value. They are like a breath, which is precious to the one who breathes it. But also like a breath they cannot be grasped and kept.

Like the "Parable of the Rich Fool" (Luke 12:16-20), Ecclesiastes ironically mocks those who store up treasures for themselves, thinking that their security or well-being is somehow enhanced by the accumulation of more "stuff" than they need. The lesson a modern audience might learn, as they accompany Qohelet in his meditations, is similar to that taught by the story of God's giving of manna to the people of Israel in the wilderness.

God intends for us to use and enjoy the gifts that we are given, not to hoard them or to store them up for the future.

In the liturgical tradition of Judaism, Ecclesiastes is read as a part of the religious observance of Sukkot (the Feast of Booths or "Tabernacles"), celebrated at the close of the harvest season (Deut. 16:13-15). It is a time set aside to give thanks to God for the abundance which the community has gathered in from the land. But by tradition it is also a time to remember when there were no crops and no harvest, when the people of God wandered in the wilderness, living in flimsy and temporary shelters (sukkot). At the very time when the people of Israel celebrated the bounty of the cultivated land, they were commanded to remember the days when they had no crops to harvest -- the time when they depended on God alone for sustenance of life (Lev. 23:33-44). Thus the words of Qohelet are read, as a reminder to those who are in the midst of their abundance that all of these material blessings are fleeting -- they are as transitory as a breath of wind. Like life, they are gifts of God to be used and enjoyed, but not hoarded. Whether you celebrate Sukkot or not, whether you rejoice in a good harvest or a good business year or a good school year -- whenever you count your "blessings" -- reading the words of Qohelet will help you remember that your possessions, your wisdom, your loved ones, your youth, your health and your life are all transitory. They are hebel, a breath -- lacking in permanence -- and reliance upon such non-durable goods is the essence of idolatry.