

Checkmating the Human Drive for Life

A Biblical-Theological Examination of Genesis 5,
Ecclesiastes 1, and 1 Corinthians 15:50-58¹

by

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Abstract

The major premise of this essay is that since the dawn of time, the human drive for life has been checkmated by death. A Biblical-theological examination of Genesis 5 and Ecclesiastes 1 indicates that despite the efforts of people both individually and collectively to extend the realms of human existence, their efforts are ultimately ambushed (in a manner of speaking) by the end of life. Moreover, while each generation appears to be making incremental strides—sometimes even laudable gains—the reality of death neutralizes these advances and in some cases entirely wipes them out. An examination of 1 Corinthians 15:50-58 informs people of faith that only in Christ can work and leisure be enjoyable, beneficial, and fulfilling.

¹ The idea for the present article came from Fishbane (1998:37), who said concerning the “overall teaching of the primeval cycle in Genesis” that the “unchecked expression of the drive for life is ultimately counterproductive and results in death, destruction, and isolation.”

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1. Introduction

Chess is a game in which two players begin with 16 pieces strategically placed on a checkered board. Both of them follow precise rules to capture each other's pieces. The object of the game is to put the opponent's king under a direct attack from which escape is impossible. As a matter of fact, the term "checkmate," which is used to refer to this situation, comes from a Persian word that literally means "the king is left unable to escape." More generally, "checkmate" denotes a circumstance in which someone or something has been thwarted or completely countered.

The major premise of this essay is that since the dawn of time, the human drive for life has been checkmated by death. A biblical-theological examination of Genesis 5 and Ecclesiastes 1 indicates that despite the efforts of people both individually and collectively to extend the realms of human existence, their efforts are ultimately ambushed (in a manner of speaking) by the end of life. Moreover, while each generation appears to be making incremental strides—sometimes even laudable gains—the reality of death neutralizes these advances and in some cases entirely wipes them out. An examination of 1 Corinthians 15:50-58 informs people of faith that only in Christ can work and leisure be enjoyable, beneficial, and fulfilling.

2. Life and Death from the Perspective of Genesis 5

2.1 The Tōlēdôt Sections of Genesis

Extensive scholarly activity has focused on the Hebrew noun *tōlēdôt*, which is rendered "account" in the TNIV (Gen 5:1; cf. Hendel 1992:2:935-936; Turner 2003:350-351; Woudstra 1970:184-189). The noun is derived from a verb that means "to bear" or "to generate." Accordingly, the phrase "this is the written account of" is more literally rendered "this is the book of the generations (or descendants) of." However, in Genesis the noun introduces more than genealogies. *Tōlēdôt* can also point to biographical material as well as summarize a series of important events.

The literary importance of this Hebrew noun (which occurs 10 times in Genesis) should not be overlooked, for its repetition throughout the book can help the reader discern how the author organized and arranged his information (cf. Gen 2:4; 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10; 11:27; 25:12, 19; 36:1; 37:2). Particularly, *tôlēdôt* signals the beginning of a narrative sequence in which the history of an individual or entity is discussed, in some places briefly while in other places extensively. For instance, 5:1-6:8 contains the genealogy from Adam to Noah. This section also discusses how the presence of sin and death within the human race checkmated the efforts of each successive generation to fulfil the creation mandate.

As each *tôlēdôt* section unfolds, the focus of attention increasingly narrows. Genesis begins with God commanding the universe into existence and then zeros in on His creation of humankind. After the account of the worldwide Flood, the aperture closes in on the origins of the Hebrew race, giving particular attention to key events associated with the lives of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This literary development makes sense, for God established His covenant with the patriarchs and their descendants.

2.2 Genesis 5 and the Human Drive for Life

Starting with Genesis 5:1, the question of what became of Adam's descendants is addressed (Ross 1988:171). Fretheim (1994:1:380) suggests that "after the murder perpetrated by Cain and the vengeful response of Lamech, Genesis 5 may represent a fresh start, building upon the reference to the worship of Yahweh at the end of chapter 4." Genesis 5:1-2 has clear thematic and linguistic links with the creation account recorded in 1:26-27 (Cassuto 1978:249-250; Hamilton 1990:255; Sailhamer 1990:2:70; Sailhamer 1992:117). Each set of verses reveals that God created both male and female genders of the human race in His image.

There is a longstanding debate concerning what this means, with the bulk of the views stressing either the nature or function of human life. Most likely, the biblical text affirms each emphasis. This implies the divine likeness is a special quality/character and a role/task entrusted to people (Lioy 2005:50-51). The ability of human beings to reason and make ethical decisions are

noteworthy ways in which people give creative expression to the “likeness of God” (5:1) within them. Moreover, the divine “mandate for people to govern the world as benevolent vice-regents of the true and living God is a reflection of His image in them.” By doing so “in a responsible fashion,” they “bear witness to the divine likeness placed within humanity” (Lioy 2005:51).

As 1:26 states, the jurisdiction of human beings extended to the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, and animals on the land (whether small or large, wild or domesticated). Also, as 1:28 and 5:2 reveal, the blessing of God on humankind was the key to them being able to fulfil the creation mandate (Hamilton 1990:255; Roop 1987:60; Sailhamer 1990:2:70-71; Sailhamer 1992:117-118). The Hebrew term rendered “blessed” (5:2) “conveys the idea of endowing something with productivity or fruitfulness” (Lioy 2005:48). With respect to the human race, the extent to which they enjoyed the favour of God on their lives determined the degree of their success in being able to actualize God’s will on earth.

The remainder of Genesis 5 records the efforts of humanity to “flourish and be successful in serving as [God’s] vice-regents” (Lioy 2005:52). Despite the continued and vigorous attempts on the part of people to fulfil the creation mandate, each generation is checkmated by death. This is indicated by the sad refrain “and then he died,” which appears throughout the chapter (vv. 8, 11, 14, 17, 20, 27, 31; Keil and Delitzsch 1981:124; Kidner 1967:79-80; Leupold 1982:236). The “reign of death” contrasts sharply with the “desire of God” for human beings to flourish (Ross 1988:171). Von Rad (1972:69) encourages the reader to “understand man’s slowly diminishing life span ... as a gradual deterioration of his original, wonderful vitality, a deterioration corresponding to his increasing distance from his starting point at creation.”

The pattern is only broken with the account of Enoch (Sailhamer 1990:2:73; Sailhamer 1992:118), in which the biblical text twice says he “walked faithfully with God” (vv. 22, 24). The idea is that throughout Enoch’s 365 years on earth, he stood out as someone who lived in close fellowship with God (Helfmeyer 1978:3:394; Keil and Delitzsch 1981:125; Leupold 1982:241-242; Roop 1987:60; von Rad 1972:71). Because Enoch’s life was one of superlative devotion and piety, he escaped the clutches of death (Fretheim 1994:1:380; Kidner 1967:80-81). Expressed differently, when God

removed Enoch from the face of the planet, death was overruled (Ross 1988:174; cf. Heb 11:5).

This oasis of grace is surrounded by a wasteland of death. There are 10 literary panels in Genesis 5, one for each generation of Adam's descendants through Seth. According to Brueggemann (1982:67), the "genealogy of ten generations is primarily for purposes of continuity, to show the linkage of humankind from its wholesome beginning to its shameful arrival at the flood." A new biological group of fallen human beings appears for a span of time and procreates sons and daughters in their own imperfect image (Keil and Delitzsch 1981:241; Leupold 1982:234-235). Moreover, the duration of life is remarkable—at least by today's standards (Cassuto 1978:252-253; Hamilton 1990:256). Among these antediluvian centenarians, Methuselah lived the longest—969 years; and yet, even he eventually succumbed to death.

Back in the Garden of Eden, God warned Adam of the sobering prospect of death. The first man learned that if he violated the divine prohibition against eating from "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" (2:17), he would "certainly die." Then, when he subsequently disobeyed the Creator, Adam's transgression resulted in sin entering the world. Moreover, death entered the realm of human experience and "came to all people" (Rom 5:12). Indeed, death became the payoff of sin (6:23).

The presence and reign of death extended beyond humankind to all of creation. In Genesis 3:17-19, God declared that because of Adam's transgression, the ground from which he was created would be cursed. This means it would no longer be as fruitful in its yield as it could have been before sin entered creation. Furthermore, the spectre of death would shunt the blessing of God on humankind.

In Romans 8:20, Paul said all of the creation was subjected to frustration. The Greek word rendered "frustration" carries the ideas of futility and decay. Adam had been assigned to a position of authority over creation as God's representative (cf. Gen 1:26-30; 2:8, 15). Hence, when God's judgment came against humanity in the Garden of Eden, all of creation was affected. Indeed, creation was subjected as a result of the Lord's judgment, "not by its own choice" (Rom. 8:20), but according to the righteous will of God.

Theologians generally believe that people would have been immortal if Adam had not eaten the forbidden fruit. This means that death was introduced as part of the judgment of sin. Physical death does not result in extinction; rather, the outcome is separation from the realm of the living. Likewise, spiritual death does not result in annihilation; instead, the consequence is eternal separation from the living God.

Along with Enoch, Noah is a ray of hope for the future against the dark backdrop of sin and death in Genesis 5. Verses 28 and 29 state that when Lamech was 182, he had a son, whom he named “Noah.” Though the etymology of this name remains a matter of debate (cf. Hamilton 1990:258-259; Kraeling 1929:138-143), some think it is related the Hebrew verb *nuach*, which means “to rest.” “Noah” is similar in sound to the Hebrew verb for “to comfort” and reflects Lamech’s belief that his son would bring humankind relief from the struggle of having to eek out an existence from the ground, which the Lord placed under a curse (Keil and Delitzsch 1981:126-127; Leupold 1982:245-246; Roop 1987:60; Ross 1988:176). Sailhamer (1990:2:74) notes that when Genesis 8:21 is considered, the comfort Noah provided included the deliverance of humankind by means of the ark, along with “the reinstatement of the sacrifice after the Flood.” In this way, Noah “averted any future destruction” of the human race (cf. Brueggemann 1982:69-70; Sailhamer 1992:119; von Rad 1972:72).

3. Life and Death from the Perspective of Ecclesiastes

3.1 The Inspired Perspective of Ecclesiastes

Like Genesis 5, Ecclesiastes 1 deals with the stark reality of death. On the surface, though, the frank, unvarnished perspective presented in latter can leave readers wondering why this book has been included in the canon of Scripture (Fuerst 1975:91). Moreover, some struggle to accept the author’s verdict that apart from God everything in life is absolutely futile and absurd, a declaration that appears throughout the author’s treatise (cf. 1:2, 14; 2:11, 17, 26; 12:8; Ranger 1989:2). As a result, they conjecture that the sentiments of the author represent an inferior perspective, one that allegedly is supplanted by

more inspired views, such as those found in the New Testament. This orientation is a grossly inaccurate misrepresentation of Ecclesiastes (Caneday 1994:85-86; Castellino 1994:31-32; Johnston 1994:134-135; Leupold 1983:28-31; Wright 1994a:19-20). As the research of de Jong affirms, the theology of the book is “located within the mainstream of the Old Testament” (1997:154).

Despite the brevity of Ecclesiastes, it explores a vast range of problems concerning human existence (Atkins 1991:5.21). The author examined the activities and ambitions of human beings, including wisdom, pleasure, work, progress, and wealth. One finds that among the writers of the Old Testament, the author of Ecclesiastes was the “least comfortable with conventional wisdom, and the most willing to challenge unexamined assumptions” (Towner 1997:5.267-268). He was also willing to hold in dynamic tension the unresolved paradoxes of life (Miller 2000:220, 233). In point of fact, the book presents the reflections of a man who boldly faced the complex questions of existence and who “understood the reality of the curse of God placed upon life” (Shank 1994:71; cf. Caneday 1994:90-91, 110-111; Parsons 2003b:296-297).

Based on the analysis of his findings, the author of Ecclesiastes reported that no matter what people strive to attain in life, they all meet the same destiny; in other words, all people die and are forgotten by others. In this way, the author did not try to hide the futility that people face. Indeed, he taught that all goals of human beings have limitations—even wisdom. Thus, it is useless for them to pretend as if they are the masters of their own destinies. At the end of the author’s discourse, he concluded that true meaning and joy come solely from God. In response to the cry of despair found throughout the author’s essay, the writer declared that meaning and wisdom in life can only be found in fearing God and keeping His commandments (12:13; Birch, Brueggemann, Fretheim, and Petersen 2005:419-420; Keil and Delitzsch 1982:183; LaSor, Hubbard, and Bush 1996:501).

The writer’s candid view of existence sets the stage for the underlying hope in Ecclesiastes. Although every human striving will eventually fail, God’s purposes will never be thwarted. Based on the author’s wide-ranging experiences and observations, he concluded that God has ordered life

according to His purposes. Thus, the best approach to existence on earth as human beings is for people of faith to accept and enjoy the life God has given them. When Ecclesiastes is approached in this way, the book is seen to have the canon of Scripture as its theological mooring (Hubbard 1991:29). It truly is a brilliant and inspired discourse that should encourage believers to work diligently toward a God-centred view of life (Hill and Walton 2000:369; Wright 1994b:169, 172).

3.2 Ecclesiastes 1 and the Human Drive for Life

Ecclesiastes 1 can be divided into two main sections. In verses 1-2, the Teacher introduced himself and stated his main theme in the form of a preamble (Keil and Delitzsch 1982:218). Then, in verses 3-18, he described the limitations of work and wisdom. This second section can be further divided as follows: verses 3 through 11 deal with the repetitive cycles of creation, while verses 12 through 18 discuss the futility of human labour and understanding. This introductory chapter of the book discloses that there is some value to human endeavours, including enjoyment, satisfaction, and security. In the end, however, the gains represented by such achievements are checkmated by death. This view is a theological affirmation of the mournful refrain “and then he died” that appears throughout Genesis 5 (Forman 1960:261-262).

“Teacher” (v. 1) in the TNIV renders the Hebrew participle *qōhelet*. The corresponding verb *qāhal* means “to assemble” or “to summon” and is derived from the noun *qāhal*, which means “assembly.” This suggests such meanings for *qōhelet* as “member of the assembly,” “convener of the assembly,” or “leader of the assembly.” This might imply that the teachings recorded in Ecclesiastes were to be delivered publicly, perhaps in an outer court of the temple or a palace (Kaiser 1979:24-25; Leupold 1983:7, 38). In other portions of Ecclesiastes where *qōhelet* appears, the author identified himself as Israel’s king (v. 12), attested to his status as a verbal and written source of wisdom (12:9-10), and made pronouncements about the meaning of life (1:2; 7:27; 12:8). Perhaps “sage” best captures the range of meanings for *qōhelet*, implying that the writer was a profoundly wise philosopher, thinker, and

scholar (Caneday 1994:113; Castellino 1994:40; Garrett 1993:264; Rankin 1991:5:3-4; Towner 1997:5:269, 272).

King Solomon, who reigned over Israel for 40 years (about 970-930 B.C.), traditionally has been identified as the author of Ecclesiastes. The strongest evidence is that the writer referred to himself as the “son of David, king in Jerusalem” (1:1). Again, after a poetic interlude about the futility of life, he made the same reference, this time adding that he was the reigning monarch over Israel (v. 12). This person would seem to be no other than Solomon (Kaiser 1979:26-29).

Others, however, argue that any king of Judah might have identified himself in this way. Supposedly, there is evidence that the Hebrew of Ecclesiastes comes from a later time period than the tenth century B.C. Also, it is claimed that many of the opinions in the book could not have come from Solomon. Moreover, some experts conjecture that the book had as many as three authors: a pessimist who wrote an impious draft of the book; an orthodox Jewish believer, who added more religiously proper views to the writings of the first author; and a sage who added a series of proverbs to the final draft of the document (Kaiser 1979:11-12; Wright 1991, 5:1138; Wright 1994a:18-19; 1994b:160).

Despite the innovativeness of these theories, there are too many factors—such as the book’s unity of style, theme, and purpose—which indicate that Ecclesiastes had a single author who wrestled with various approaches to life. This person was a king and unparalleled in wisdom. Indeed, the bulk of the evidence conclusively points to Solomon as the sole author of the book and the person referred to in verse 1. It is also possible that a secretary wrote down the words of the Teacher as he presented to an assembly his philosophical treatise on the futility of life without God.

The Teacher apparently intended for his pronouncements to be read, not just by those people who were devoted to the Lord, but by a more general, secular audience as well. This would explain why Ecclesiastes is sometimes seen as more worldly than the other books in the Bible (Rankin 1991:5:10). It was meant to step outside of the place of worship and meet common people as they lived out their earthly existence. In many respects, this book is addressed to

people who live selfishly for the moment, as if all that mattered in life were amassing possessions and mimicking the behaviour and customs of the world (Hubbard 1991:46; Kaiser 1979:32-37; Wright 1994b:172).

Ecclesiastes begins by presenting the problem that will be addressed throughout the remainder of the book, namely, the issue of human existence in this fallen world. According to Fuerst (1975:91), the Teacher “poses harder questions, raises graver doubts, and arrives at more despairing conclusions than any other book” of the Old Testament. The trajectory of the sage’s essay shows how a life without God at its centre is chaotic, meaningless, and discontented. Because existence detached from the Creator is absolutely futile, all forms of human arrogance are inappropriate (de Jong 1997:167). Accordingly, the Teacher commended his hearers to a God-centered life by critiquing various lifestyles and life pursuits in which the Lord is left out (Parsons 2003a:166; 2003b:301). The grimness connected with this latter alternative is vividly spelled out in verses 3 through 11.

Verse 2 serves as the gateway to the rest of the book and conveys the central premise of the author’s treatise (Gordis 1994:177; Hubbard 1991:43; Towner 1997:5:290; Wright 1994b:168). He lamented that life for the godless “lacked profit and therefore was totally absurd” (Crenshaw 1992:2:273; cf. Birch, Brueggemann, Fretheim, and Petersen 2005:420; Fox 1986:409). The Hebrew noun *hebel*, which the TNIV renders as “meaningless,” is pivotal to the author’s thesis. In more literal contexts, *hebel* is used to refer to the wind, a person’s breath, and vapour, all of which are fleeting in nature (cf. Psa 144:4; Prov 21:6; Isa 57:13). Metaphorically, *hebel* can refer to whatever is temporary, incongruous, without substance, or utterly fruitless (Caneday 1994:95-96; Farmer 1994:224-225; Fox 1986:411-414; Leupold 1983:40-41; Longman 1998:62-64; Ogden 1994:227-228; Shank 1994:74-75).

The Teacher argued in Ecclesiastes that the human drive for life apart from God is filled with anxiety and frustration and “amounts to a huge zero” (Crenshaw 1992:2:272). They have no hope beyond this earthly existence because they have divorced themselves from their Creator. All they have is what they work for now, and soon every aspect of it will pass away. It would be incorrect to conclude from this declaration that absolutely everything in life is futile (Seow 2001:243). As the “haunting and melancholy poem” (Towner

1997:5:292) recorded in verses 3-11 indicates, the focus is on profane human endeavour. This contrasts with the eternal value of revering God and appreciating the temporal blessings of life He gives (2:24-26; 11:9-10; 12:13-14; Hubbard 1991:21; Zuck 1994:215, 217).

The sage illustrated his point by observing how nature works. In fact, as Fox (1987:137) notes, the Teacher adopted an “empirical methodology” in which he sought “both to derive knowledge from experience and to validate ideas experientially” (cf. Parsons 2003b:285). The author framed his remarks in terms of the “gain” (1:3) people obtain from all their “hard physical labour” (Garrett 1993:284). This is the language of profit and loss, which ironically is how many people typically see life (Hubbard 1991:45; Johnston 1994:143; Leupold 1983:43-44). They strive for earthly attainments, often inconsiderate of whom they have to push aside to get it; but in the end, their decisions result in complete frustration and failure, all because they have not taken into consideration obedience to God.

“Toil” sums up an approach to life that is self-centred and shortsighted. Though the impious labour tirelessly “under the sun” (that is, on earth; Longman 1998:66), such efforts prove exhausting. From the perspective of eternity, nothing of lasting value or ultimate good results from this endless labour. The curse of sin is at the heart of why the endeavours of life can feel so wearisome (Gen. 3:17-19). People of faith recognize that only in Christ can work and leisure be enjoyable, beneficial, and fulfilling (Dillard and Longman 1994:255). This truth will be explored further in the concluding section of this essay dealing with 1 Corinthians 15:50-58.

Ecclesiastes 1:4 begins the sombre look at human existence and nature (Atkins 1991:26-27). By highlighting the basic elements of the created order, the Teacher sought to depict in lyrical fashion the seemingly endless cycle of humanity’s futile pursuits (Crenshaw 1994:241-242, 248; Whybray 1994:234, 236). First, he noted the continual, uninterrupted succession of generations that parade across the stage of history. Like the created realm itself, each new wave of humanity is a beehive of activity; yet despite their ceaseless striving and accomplishments, nothing of real or lasting change results.

Moreover, just as the cycle of human life continues unabated on its seemingly meaningless course, so does the earth. This truth points out the relative shortness of a person's life, especially when compared to the apparent permanence of the earth. As Leupold (1983:45) observes, there is "something tragic about having man, the noble creature derived from the earth, continually pass away while the 'earth,' the crude material from which he is made, continues." According to von Ehrenkrook (2002:16), the theme of "death has long been recognized as an important, perhaps even controlling principle in the perplexing message of Ecclesiastes" (cf. Burkes 1999:45-80; Clemens 1994:5-8; Crenshaw 1978:206-211; Machinist 1995:159, 165-175; Parsons 2003b:297; Schoors 1985:295-303).

Second, the Teacher addressed the cycle of the sun. This celestial object seems to follow an endless pattern of rising, setting, and hastening back to where it first arose (v. 5). Here the author may have implied that the sun actually grew weary of its incessant journey across the sky. If so, the sun is a fitting reminder of how the day-to-day aspects of life soon become tiresome. People grind through an ever-repeating, monotonous cycle of life. Sadly, despite all their efforts, nothing really changes and nothing of lasting value results.

Third, the sage observed that the wind blows to the south, circles around to the north, and then repeats this vicious cycle of swirling motion (v. 6). Like the individual lives of people, the wind seems to churn ceaselessly in every direction without ever veering from its determined course; and yet nothing radical, new, or different is accomplished. The implication for humanity is that we live and die without any power to break the endless cycle.

Fourth, the Teacher described the constant flow of water from rivers into the sea, and yet the sea is never full (v. 7). Consider the Dead Sea, which receives waters from the Jordan River to the north; and even though no river exits from the Dead Sea, the depth of the water it contains never seems to increase (Longman 1998:70). While verse 7 is not specifically talking about the evaporation cycle or the return of water to underground streams (Whybray 1994:237-238; Garrett 1993:285), these two recurring phenomena in nature parallel what the author described. Like the earth, the sun, and the wind, the constant movement of water seems to produce nothing new or lasting.

Understandably, it is vain to look to nature for a “fixed point of reference” for one’s “own meaning” (Kaiser 1979:50).

It bears repeating that in this portion of Ecclesiastes, the sage adopted a counterintuitive view of nature, one that would have felt jarring to his peers. The community of faith recognized that everything in the world is a testimony to the Creator. The Teacher, however, intentionally described how nature appeared to those who think there is no God (Dillard and Longman 1994:255). For the impious, there is no loving Creator behind nature, and thus life becomes one long humdrum repetition. Indeed, as verse 8 states, all this monotony is so wearisome that it exceeds human ability to describe, fathom, and bear.

While the human mind keeps searching for meaning and striving for understanding, it will never find it in nature alone. Moreover, as long as people determinedly reject or deny God, they cannot break through the cycle of time and repetition to discover the One who is permanent and absolute—God Himself. Hebrews 11:6 reveals that those who come to God must believe that He exists. People of faith also understand that the universe was “formed at God’s command” (v. 3). In contrast, the irreligious foolishly assert “there is no God” (Psa 14:1) and end their lives in frustration and futility.

As long as the profane hold to an agnostic or atheistic mindset, the only conclusion they can draw is that history repeats itself. Indeed, for them what has been done before on earth will be done again. This implies there is nothing truly new under the sun (Eccl 1:9). Longman (1998:72) offers this assessment: “History, like the earth, appears to change, but in actuality it stays the same. Nothing new ever happens.” From this perspective, nothing people do really matters, for it has been done before. Moreover, it has no more meaning now than it did in the past or when it will be repeated in the future. Clearly, when God is left out of the equation, the human drive for life is checkmated.

In verses 10 and 11, the Teacher restated his main premise about the utter futility of life, though this time he looked ahead to the future. He asked whether people can genuinely claim that something is distinctive or novel. The answer is no, for it existed in some form or fashion in the distant past. The author’s statement does not deny that people can be creative and innovative,

just that what they attain finds parallels with what others have achieved in previous generations. For instance, while the Apollo 11 landing on the moon was a stellar feat, it did not necessarily trump similar events, such as the discovery of the Americas. In both cases, while the circumstances were vastly different, the results of their exploits were comparable.

Furthermore, the Teacher noted that as generations of people come and go, neither they nor their achievements are remembered. He stated that people of old have already been forgotten. Even more sobering is the realization that in future generations, those living then will not remember what people are doing now (v. 11). Indeed, what each generation regards as being radical or revolutionary has its counterpart in the actions and accomplishments of those from the past. As a result, each new group of humanity that comes on the scene has to “confront its own present without historically liberating legacies and, in turn, face the prospect of committing the same errors as past generations” (Tamez 2001:252).

Regrettably, many today become so preoccupied with themselves or with the pursuit of wealth, fame, and pleasure that they fail to stop and consider what their life is all about. Though some people deceive themselves into living as if their earthly existence will never end, they cannot escape the inevitability of death (cf. Heb 9:27). The sombre repetition in Genesis 5 of the phrase “and then he died” serves as a reminder that the efforts of mortals to extend the realms of existence are checkmated by death. Put another way, “death cancels all human achievements” (Crenshaw 1992:2:277). Indeed, as Forman noted (1960:262), the “loss of immortality is the blighting fact of existence.”

Accordingly, it is best for people of faith to maintain a heavenly, eternal perspective, rather than a limited, earthly one. With the Teacher, they must face the fact that the life the Creator has given to people on earth sooner or later ends. Like sandcastles on a stretch of beach, each person’s life is eventually washed away by the incoming waves of time. This sombre truth should prompt believers to consider how to best invest the fleeting existence God gives them (Farmer 1994:226; Zuck 1994:220-221).

After his opening statements about the meaninglessness of life without God, the Teacher told about his own personal experiences in Ecclesiastes 1:12-18.

He explained how he had tried to find meaning in various ways—through the pursuit of wisdom, pleasure, work, success, and wealth (to name a few examples). As the king of Israel (v. 12), he had the ability and resources to use wisdom to examine in a careful and thorough manner all that people have accomplished on earth (v. 13). While his investigation could never be exhaustive, this did not undermine the legitimacy of his empirical observations, analysis, and conclusions. What mattered most was for him to be comprehensive and objective.

As a result of the author's inquiry, he reached two conclusions. First, he learned that God had given people a burdensome task, one that kept them preoccupied. The Hebrew of verse 13 literally reads "the sons of the man" and may be an allusion to "Adam and the effects of the Fall" (Kaiser 1979:53; cf. Caneday 1994:90-91, 101-102, 110-111; Garrett 1994:157; Kidner 1994:250; Shank 1994:71, 73). In fact, Clemens (1994:5) thinks that Ecclesiastes is "best understood as an arresting but thoroughly orthodox exposition of Genesis 1-3." He notes that "in both texts, the painful consequences of the fall are central."

The nature of fallen humanity's onerous, heavy burden in Ecclesiastes 1:13 is unclear. Some suggest the "task is evil because no solution can be found after much hard work" (Longman 1998:78). Another possibility is that the Teacher was referring to the higher awareness God gave human beings, namely, intelligence that distinguishes people from animals. The idea is that, because humans are created in the image of God, they sense there is more to life than simple physical existence and survival. They realize there must be meaning for their lives, that there needs to be an ideal for which to strive. Put another way, God has given people the unpleasant business of living with their conscience. This then is what drives humans to find significance and purpose in life (Wright 1991, 5:1154-1155).

The second conclusion the Teacher reached as a result of his study is that all the toil and activity to which people devoted themselves proved futile. In fact, their accomplishments were as senseless as chasing after the wind (v. 14). The attainments of the unrighteous, no matter how commendable they might seem, were pointless because they had no lasting impact on the world. Moreover, all

earthbound goals, regardless of the effort expended to attain them, ended up being as transient as the momentary presence of a swirling gust of air.

Even the Teacher's exhaustive efforts to fathom the mysteries of life were ultimately crushed by the sheer enormity of the task. It is reasonable to suppose that he worked long and hard to conquer knowledge and wisdom on his own. In the end, though, he was unable to explain the enigmas of life, right its wrongs, and remedy its deficiencies. Furthermore, just when the sage thought he had pondered every contingency, something else came along to make him realize people lack ultimate meaning (v. 15). As Garrett (1993:290) fittingly notes, the "implication behind this is that God's ways are inscrutable" (cf. Isa. 40:12-14; Rom. 11:33-36; Birch, Brueggemann, Fretheim, and Petersen 2005:416; Brueggemann 1997:395; Seow 2001:248).

The Teacher claimed that none of his predecessors who ruled over Jerusalem excelled him in wisdom. He was in a unique position as Israel's monarch, for unlike those who came before him, he had access to people and records that were previously unavailable (v. 16). Moreover, the king spared no effort to discern the value of wisdom and knowledge over foolhardy ideas and actions; yet despite his efforts, the Teacher concluded that even this endeavour eluded his grasp. Indeed, regardless of how hard he tried to achieve his lofty objective, it proved to be as futile as chasing the wind (v. 17).

It must have been humbling for the wisest, most knowledgeable person of the day to admit that not even he could "resolve the riddle of human existence" (Ranger 1989:11; cf. 277-278). Indeed, the more discerning and aware the sage became, the more grief and frustration he experienced. Generally speaking, those who grew in their comprehension of life were vexed by increased heartache (v. 18). All such efforts to place the attainment of understanding as the supreme end of life—without the love of a caring God—simply brought more sorrow. In turn, the enormity of this grief stymied ongoing attempts to advance the frontiers of human understanding (Keil and Delitzsch 1982:231-232).

4. Conclusion and Afterword

A biblical-theological examination of Genesis 5 and Ecclesiastes 1 has shown that the reality of death hangs like a funeral pall over the coffin of life. Moreover, these two chapters jointly indicate that for the unsaved, the end of life checkmates all they have sought to attain. Even their most noteworthy achievements are neutralized by death and washed away by the ocean waves of time. Regrettably, generations in the distant future will not even remember the individual and collective efforts of their predecessors to extend the realms of human existence.

For believers, the sting of death is overcome by the hope of the Resurrection, a truth made clear in 1 Corinthians 15:50-58 (Sampley 1997:10.988-989). In this “lyrical passage,” Morris (2001:227) notes, “the apostle exults in the triumph Christ has won over death itself.” Paul repeated in plain terms that natural, earthly bodies are not suited to a spiritual, heavenly existence. Indeed, that which is subject to death and decomposition could never receive as an inheritance that which is eternal and glorious in nature (v. 50; Fee 1987:797-799). The good news is that living as well as deceased believers will have their bodies transformed at the Messiah’s return (v. 51; Bruce 1986:154).

Not all will “sleep” (that is, die), for some Christians will be alive at the Saviour’s return (Prior 1985:275). These along with deceased believers will be “changed” (v. 52), meaning they all will have their bodies glorified (Thiselton 2000:1295). This will happen instantaneously—“in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye”—when the consummation of history occurs (Mare 1976:10:291). In Old Testament times, the people of God would sound trumpets to signal the start of great feasts and other significant religious events (Barrett 1968:381; cf. Num. 10:10). The sounding of the last trumpet mentioned in 1 Corinthians 15:52 will signal the occurrence of the resurrection (Fee 1987:801-802).

Because perishable, mortal bodies are unfit to inhabit heaven, they need to be transformed into imperishable, immortal ones (v. 53; Grosheide 1984:393). This does not mean that the earthly and heavenly bodies are completely different (Godet 1977:869), for there is a “fundamental continuity of identity” between the old and new (Furnish 2003:116). It is like a person’s putting on a new robe (v. 54; Morris 2001:229). When that happens, the long-anticipated

defeat of death will occur. Paul quoted Isaiah 25:8 to indicate that the sovereign Lord will completely checkmate death. In 1 Corinthians 15:55, the apostle quoted Hosea 13:14 as if to taunt death, which is a loser and does not have ultimate power to inflict harm on God's people (Thiselton 2000:1298-1299).

Death is like a poisonous hornet or scorpion whose stinger has been pulled (Prior 1985:276). By Jesus' own atoning sacrifice on the cross and resurrection from the grave, He dealt a fatal blow to death. As this essay has maintained, all people must die; but when the Messiah returns, He will raise all who have trusted in Him for eternal life, and they will be rescued from death forever. In this way, the arch-adversary of all humanity is "destined to be completely overwhelmed by God's invincible power" (Furnish 2003:116).

In 1 Corinthians 15:56, Paul told his readers that it was through the presence of sin that death received its power to hurt believers (Grosheide 1984:394). After Adam disobeyed God's command, death invaded his life and the life of all his descendants (Bruce 1986:156; cf. Rom. 5:12). Sin gains its power from the law by using God's commands to produce all sorts of wrong desires in people and to seduce them into disobeying the Creator (Barrett 1968:383-384; cf. 7:7-11). As is clear from Genesis 5 and Ecclesiastes 1, people who reject the Lord are powerless to resist sin or overcome death. Paul gave thanks to the Father for the triumph available through faith in the Son (1 Cor 15:57).

The apostle exhorted his dear friends to remain steadfast in his teaching and resolute in the faith, for they had ultimate victory in the Redeemer (v. 58; Mare 1976:10:291). The hope of the Resurrection was meant to spur them on to serve the Lord diligently and wholeheartedly (Sampley 1997, 10:990). Their efforts would never be wasted, since in Christ they would bear eternal fruit and reap a heavenly reward. From this it is clear that only in Christ can work and leisure be enjoyable, beneficial, and fulfilling for people of faith.

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