



Qohelet's Story  
The Keeper of Riches

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## Qohelet's Story of the Keeper of Riches

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## Qohelet's Story of the 'Keeper of Riches'

### Chapter 5:13-17

- 13 *There is a grievous evil which I have seen under the sun:  
riches were kept by their owner to his hurt,*  
14 *and those riches were lost in a bad venture;  
and he is father of a son, but he has nothing in his hand.*  
15 *As he came from his mother's womb he shall go again,  
naked as he came, and shall take nothing for his toil,  
which he may carry away in his hand.*  
16 *This is also a grievous evil: just as he came, so shall he go;  
And what gain has he that he toiled for the wind,*  
17 *and spent all his days in darkness and grief,  
in much vexation and sickness and resentment?*

Qohelet begins his story with the word evil as the focus of his first line. The evil is 'grievous', Qohelet has observed this evil, and it has taken place under the sun. In the introductory poem of Qohelet (1:2-11) the created order has a permanency while humanity whom reflects the divine image is found to be temporary. Qohelet is communicating that evil lies not in the constant cycles of creation, but in the affairs of living. Qohelet is an existentialist and finds in the artistic communication of poetry, and in the skillfully told story, the ability to communicate broad strokes with a small brush. The evil is described as being 'grievous' from the verb חוֹלָהּ a Qal active participle feminine singular. חוֹלָהּ or 'grievous' is used as an adjective, and associates the word evil with illness and weakness which is its principle meaning. What is the evil that Qohelet described as חוֹלָהּ, that he has 'seen' (רָאִיתִי), and that has taken place under the sun?

Qohelet now delivers the next line, '*riches were kept by their owner to his hurt*'. Riches would be perceived as a blessing, but Qohelet has associated them in his story with evil. The riches have an owner, and the riches have brought hurt to the owner. Qohelet has previously protested the excess of Solomon as an unsatisfying experiment that was not the best use of either wealth or wisdom. The answer to the question, "What is the grievous evil that Qohelet refers to?" is found in the line under consideration. The '*riches were kept by their owner...*', he did not enjoy his riches or spend them or give them away or do any good with them – he kept them – he did not enjoy them or spend them.

The next line takes the reader further into the evil that Qohelet has seen, or observed, '*and those riches were lost in a bad venture*'. Because of his desire to keep his riches the owner's desire to keep, to own, has driven him to a risky business venture in which he loses what he failed to enjoy. The owner was possessed by his riches, and they held power over him, thus he failed to enjoy what they could bring. <sup>1</sup>The line of verse 14

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<sup>1</sup> There is no indication in the language that the birth of the son is recent (the perfect form of the verb), thus the interpretation that I offer views the father as an older man and the son as matured enough to reject his father, or the father has rejected the son due to something like illegitimate birth. The RSV translation agrees with the Hiphil pf. 3m.s. form of חוֹלָהּ in verse 14.

says, ‘and he is father of a son’. <sup>2</sup>This should be good news, a son would be understood as a blessing in the ears of the Hebrews. The last line of verse 14 holds the answer, ‘*but he has nothing in his hand*’. The storyteller has teased us and ripped at our hearts for not only has the evil power of riches bound the father, but he has also lost his son as a result of his powerlessness over his riches. The word hand preceded by the preposition כ (in) denotes the authority, and fits a contextual interpretation of the story. The owner has nothing in his authority, including his son. The ‘owner’ through his desire to keep his riches has lost both riches and his son. The evil of greed has grown from hurting not only the owner, but it has caused the man to lose his son. A translation following the Hebrew word order of the last line of verse 14 is helpful for delivering the intended impact by the storyteller, “*and there is not in his authority anything*”. <sup>3</sup> The last word delivery of ‘*anything*’ is an intentional placement by Qohelet. It serves as a stinging epitaph which is exactly what follows as Qohelet concludes.

**15** *As he came from his mother’s womb he shall go again,  
naked as he came, and shall take nothing for his toil,  
which he may carry away in his hand.*

The epitaph bears similarity to Job, however in the prologue Job is prepared to depart with the words;

*‘The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away;  
blessed be the name of the LORD.’*

The man that desired to keep his riches will not return exactly as Job, for there is no blessing upon his lips with which he departs, only the silence of despair over what was temporary.

In verse 16 Qohelet once again utilizes the phrase ‘grievous evil’. Qohelet states the grievous evil to be, ‘*just as he came, so shall he go*’. Without any profit the man departs completely barren of anything. Qohelet complains against temporality throughout his writing. I will take the rest of the piece through verse 17 as a unit.

*and what gain has he that he toiled for the wind,  
18 and spent all his days in darkness and grief,  
in much vexation and sickness and resentment?*

In response to the statement ‘*just as he came so shall he go*’ is the question, and the answer to the question (‘*and what gain has he that he toiled for the wind*’) is ‘nothing’. The meaning to the statements of verse 17 is that his toil to ‘keep’ his riches brought him a life spent in days of darkness and grief, with vexation and sickness and resentment. It is important to understand that in the teaching of “Qohelet toil without enjoyment results in ‘absurdity’, that is ‘vanity’ or הַבֵּל. The ‘owner’s’ keeping of his riches produced the result of ‘absurdity’ in his life prior to the loss of his riches by the ‘evil’ business venture. It is correct to say that the condition of the owner in verse 17 is not the result of the loss

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<sup>2</sup> The story is about the father not the son so the line ‘*he has nothing in his hand*’ speaks of the father’s condition and includes his son.

<sup>3</sup> Qohelet in 7:14 and 9:5 also uses the word תֵּאַרְמִיָּה at the end of a line to increase the verbal impact upon the hearer. תֵּאַרְמִיָּה meaning to negate and translated as anything in a negative sentence.

of his riches, but the condition of the ‘owner’ throughout his life. His lack of enjoyment and his greed (which was his toil) brought him all of the ailments of verse 17. <sup>4</sup>Verse 17 does not say that he spent the remainder (רֵשֶׁתְּךָ) of his days, but ‘all’ of his days suffering the listed ailments. After this heart wrenching story of a man blessed with both riches and a son, but by his own ‘hand’ suffers a negation of life, Qohelet gives his advice with a response to his story.

### *Qohelets Response to His Story*

#### **Chapter 5:18-20**

**18** *Behold, what I have seen to be good and to be fitting is to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of his life which God has given him, for this is his lot.*

**19** *Every man also to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them, and to accept his lot and find enjoyment in his toil – this is the gift of God.*

**20** *For he will not much remember the days of his life because God keeps him occupied with joy in his heart.*

Qohelet does follow the wisdom school tradition’s method of study by utilizing observation. Qohelet’s observations are born of his life experience and either reflect his observances or his actual life experience. Qohelet also speaks with the heart of a philosopher that believes in God. Qohelet’s recognition of God is linked to the identification of what is good and brings joy. This is but one of the ways that Qohelet expresses faith in God, consider his earlier proverb;

*Consider the work of God;  
who can make straight  
what he has made crooked?  
Qohelet 7:13*

Qohelet responds to the heart – wrenching story of , ‘The Keeper of Riches’ in 5:13-17 by giving advice from his own observations and experience.

Verse 18 begins with a measure of enthusiasm through use of the word (הִנֵּה) ‘behold’, which can be used to denote positive emotion as in Psalm 133:1. The advice of Qohelet is built upon certain principles that reflect his realist view of life. The pursuit of enjoyment begins with the acceptance of a persons’s ‘lot’ in life. Qohelet finds eating and drinking to be the reward of toil, and a source of joy. This advice certainly has a strong appeal to the poor that are unduly burdened with the daily care of sustenance and deprived of riches. At the same time that he acknowledges the brevity of life, he considers life to be a gift from God. In verse 19 Qohelet addresses persons that have

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<sup>4</sup> The first part of verse 17 translates literally, ‘Also all his days he eats in darkness and grief’. The literal translation agrees with Qohlet’s continual advice to enjoy eating and drinking.

been given wealth and possessions. He adds to wealth and possessions ‘the power to enjoy them’ – in the next story (6:1-6) he will explore the evil of a man with wealth and possessions yet deprived by God of the power to enjoy them.

An appropriate question to bring to the text at this point is to ask what is meant by ‘the power to enjoy them’? The answer will require a careful reading of both stories; (5:13-17 ‘The Keeper of Riches’ and 6:1-6 ‘The Man Without Power’). Since Qohelet’s response to the story in 13-17 is found in 18-20, and the response in 18-20 is linked to the second story through the words ‘power to enjoy them’, the possibility arises that the second story (6:1-6) is drawn from the first. In the first story my interpretation reveals that the ‘owner’ did not possess his riches but they possessed him. The riches held power over the man, rather than the man holding power over the riches.

Continuing in verse 19 Qohelet again admonishes the acceptance of a person’s ‘lot’ in life, and to find enjoyment in his toil, and concludes by declaring that ‘this is the gift of God’. In verse 20 Qohelet finds the lot of the wealthy ‘empowered’ to enjoy their possessions, recipients of a God given joy. Their joy is still dependent upon their acceptance of their lot in life coupled with finding fulfillment in their toil. In the first story the ‘owner’ has not been given by God the power to enjoy his riches. Qohelet’s complaint and observation of this ‘grievous evil’ includes God not rescuing the ‘owner’ from his own selfishness. In Qohelet’s thought God did not empower the ‘owner’ to possess riches. The following statement will sit in contradiction to the last two sentences, however this is a problem that Qohelet is comfortable with because his monotheism sits in tension with his belief that human beings are capable of choices that make a difference in life. Qohelet’s wisdom teaching is thus validated because if the ‘owner’ had accepted his ‘lot’ in life, and learned to enjoy his wealth, he would have found the empowerment to possess his riches, instead of the riches possessing him. Herein I find the effective power of Qohelet’s teaching. God’s ways remain past finding out, but man can learn to live and experience joy from God if he will listen to Qohelet’s advice. Qohelet’s advice in verse 19 agrees with my assessment.

*19 Every man also to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them, and to accept his lot and find enjoyment in his toil- this is the gift of God.*

In verse 19 God gives, but man must also accept in order to receive the ‘gift of God’. Qohelet’s teaching seems to say that God could overpower a man and help him in spite of himself, but because he doesn’t ‘grievous evil’ results. The ‘grievous evil’ is also that the power was always available to the ‘owner’ through the use of wisdom, but the ‘owner’ did not practice wisdom, rather he fell victim to greed.

*Qohelet’s Story of;  
The Man Without Power*

**Chapter 6:1-6**

*1 There is an evil which I have seen under the sun, and it lies heavy upon men:*

*2 a man to whom God gives wealth, possessions, and honor, so that he lacks nothing of all that he desires, yet God does not give him power to enjoy them, but a stranger enjoys them; this is vanity; it is a sore affliction.*

*3 If a man begets a hundred children, and lives many years, so that the days of his years are many, but he does not enjoy life's good things, and also has no burial, I say that an untimely birth is better off than he.*

*4 For it comes into vanity and goes into darkness, and in darkness its name is covered;*

*5 moreover it has not seen the sun or known anything; yet it finds rest rather than he.*

*6 Even though he should live a thousand years twice told, yet enjoy no good – do not all go to the one place?*

The second story like the first is a product of an actual event that Qohelet saw. The second story as non-fiction runs through verses 1 and 2. I have argued that the problem of the 'owner' in the first story was greed. I have also argued that God did not give him power to enjoy his wealth, because God chose not to overcome the 'owner's' failure to practice wisdom and accept his 'lot' in life. The second story introduces another character that is referred to as a stranger, or foreigner (גֵּר). Is the 'foreigner' the one to whom the 'owner' in the first story lost his wealth? This seems to be a real possibility, in part due to the subjects of discussion in 6:3-6. Qohelet begins verse 3 with the hypothetical particle 'if'. Verse 3 is written in response to the first story where the 'owner' has only one son. The Hebrew reader would have thought that more children might have helped the 'owner' for surely they would not all have abandoned him. Qohelet makes his point very clear even a hundred children and a long life cannot offset the loss of the gift of God that is –contentment (joy) found in enjoying life's good things.

Qohelet also introduces the possibility of an end without a burial. More children might have rescued the 'owner' from his destitute situation through their own good fortune. Qohelet however wants to reveal that the 'owner's' biggest problem was that he was spiritually bankrupt. The statement could belong with either story, 5:13-20 or 6:1-2. If the second story is a continuation of the first it reveals that the 'owner' in the first story lost his wealth to a 'foreigner'. I have concluded that the 'owner' of the first story lost also his son, thus left without anyone to see to his proper burial. At least an untimely birth would have someone to mourn over him/her and give him/her a proper burial. The untimely birth is said to have found rest, whereas the man who failed to live without the power to enjoy his wealth and good fortune does not. The life of the man is not living, but a negation of life, a condition worse than that of an untimely birth. In verse 6 Qohelet finds that the man's long life holds no value for he failed to enjoy the good. Qohelet concludes his story telling with the question –do not all go to one place?

Qohelet poses a question concerning the after life in 6:6 and in 3:21.

*Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down to the earth? 3:21*

*Even though he should live a thousand years twice told, yet enjoy no good – do not all go to the one place?*

In each case the very nature of the question poses the possibility for an outcome contrary to what is known, (or believed). It is important to remember that Qohelet lives prior to the resurrection. Nonetheless he on occasion gives glimpses of an alternative contrary to what wisdom can observe.

Qohelet 3:16 and 17

*16 Moreover I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, even there was wickedness, and in the place of righteousness, even there was wickedness.*

*17 I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for he has appointed a time for every matter, and for every work.*

Chapter 3 verse 17 follows Qohelet's testimony to the unfair nature of human living in verse 16. Yet verse 17 turns to a hope in God that speaks of a judgment that must come at a certain time – the time being unknown, unspoken, undetected, yet the thought looks forward to a time. However Qohelet will argue his point from the perspective of belief in Sheol. Still for Qohelet Sheol cannot be a place where there is a shadowy, dusty, sort of existence, rather Sheol is a place where life is extinguished.

Qohelet 9:10

*Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might; for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going.*

Qohelet's belief about Sheol does not allow the interpreter to draw upon the rich beliefs and practices of Israelites concerning proper burial when reading this story, even proper burial and remembrance of the deceased finds no place once death has come. The untimely birth having experienced living finds rest over the 'owner' of the first story who 'spent' his days in darkness and grief. Qohelet reveals the power of a man to negate life when he does not follow the wisdom that Qohelet teaches.

### *Conclusion*

The exegesis of 5:13-6:6 began pointing out the first line's focus upon the 'grievous evil'. My conclusion likewise focuses upon the 'grievous evil' that is the center of Qohelet's attention. The negation of life is a 'grievous evil', an evil that God allows, and man creates by not following wisdom. In Qohelet's thought God could have empowered the 'owner' or the 'man' to enjoy his 'lot', however God did not do so. Qohelet's wisdom is thus validated because through Qohelet's teaching the man would have found his empowerment. The empowerment would have still been from God, for Qohelet's wisdom is based in his belief in God's gift to mankind- joy and contentment. I find the story of 'The Man Without Power' to be drawn from the same real event that birthed the story of 'The Keeper of Riches'. The response to the first story found in 5:18-20 is connected to the second story by the phrase in 5:18 *and given him power* (וְהִשְׁלִיטוֹ) found



negated in 6:2 (וְלֹא־יִשְׁלַח־נֹרָא) *and does not give him power*. The rarity of use for the word translated here as power calls the reader's attention to the author's intent to connect the two stories.