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ARE 'TAUTUA' AND 'BATTLING' *HEBEL*?

A Cross Cultural reading of Ecclesiastes 2:18-23 in light of the theme of 'toiling'

A Thesis presented to the Faculty of
Malua Theological College
Apia, Samoa

In partial fulfilment of the
Requirements of the Degree of
Bachelor of Divinity

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by
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October, 2012

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ABSTRACT

Ecclesiastes is a rather controversial book which cl
Israelite wisdom, particularly with the author's musings re
toiling and the vanity or meaninglessness of life and wisd
in other readers' cultural understanding, life, wisdom and
as vanity. I would like to employ cross cultural hermeneut
order to engage in dialogue with my selected text: Ecclesi
Georg Gadamer terms as, "a fusion of two horizons." By
identity as a hermeneutical tool, I will analyse the author'
and vanity and illustrate how this dialogue may generate a
Ecclesiastes 2:18-23, and how such a dialogue may highli
cultural background in the art of hermeneutics.

DECLARATION

I declare that this work has not used without due acknowledgment of any material that has been previously submitted for a degree or diploma in another institution. I also declare that the work has not used any material, heard or read, without proper acknowledgment of the source.

Signed: _____

Date: _____

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work in memory of my late Grandfather Fiu Safune Tulia Kolia, who persuaded me to come to Malua

and also

To my wife Tanaria Ta'alefili Kolia

and

My son Elichai Tupu Kolia
for following me there

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יברכהשמאותך

Brian Fanolua Fiu Kolia

List of abbreviations

ANE:	Ancient Near Eastern
BDB:	The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament
BHS:	*Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*
KJV:	King James Version of the Bible
NIB:	The New Interpreter's Bible
NICOT:	The New International Commentary on the Old Testament
NRSV:	New Revised Standard Version of the Bible
NT:	New Testament
OT:	Old Testament
PIC:	Pacific Islander's Church
TM:	Truth and Method
WBC:	Word Biblical Commentary

INTRODUCTION

Ecclesiastes is one of those books that I have come to appreciate for its thought-provoking insights on life, and how things are. Reading it is like conversing with an old man, who sits observingly on his front porch, eyes wrinkled yet steely, watching the sun go down, and then up again. He is fed up with how people try and explain life, when we should really just focus on living it, and when you try and argue with him, he will counter it with the whole "Ahhh … it's all vanity!" response. I tend to agree with him, seemingly out of respect, but more so out of logic. Yet, for all the wisdom he holds, he stops me on one point. He says to me, "You know how you work day in day out? It's a waste of time! You're not gonna enjoy the fruits of your labour. I see that son of yours … you're gonna do all the work and he's gonna reap your rewards." I look at him, upset and disappointed. How can an old man so wise, be so cunning and so straight-forwardly harsh about my work? I work for the benefit of my family which I cherish, and yet the old man tells me it is all 'vanity'!

This challenged me to write this paper, for surely the author of Ecclesiastes had purpose for a communal context than a personal lament. Labelling toil as הבל *(hebel)* or *vanity* on the basis of some experiential knowledge would all but discard the communal context which wisdom literature directs its attention to. Specifically, the view of 'toil' as 'vanity' labelling it *hebel* thus creates a rather mind-boggling dilemma. Why would a sage like Qoheleth[1] discourage toiling?It infers that Qoheleth

[1]For the purposes of the paper, I will designate the author of the book of Ecclesiastes as Qoheleth, which is the common designation as prescribed by Biblical scholars. Further explanation as to the name of the author will be discussed in Chapter 2.

does not follow conventional wisdom, choosing rather to voice his frustrations based on his experience.

Toiling isconsidered worthwhile in my hybrid culture as a Samoan Australian and immediately, I had problems with Qoheleth's understanding.So this paper is a cross-cultural reading of my selected text, Ecclesiastes 2:18-23.My main inquiry thus is to close the cultural gap between my culture and the culture of the text, and answer whether or not toiling is in fact '*vanity*'. Does the author of Ecclesiastes have a communal concern, or is he focused on the complacency of the society he lived in? Can *hebel* actually mean something else to the reader? These questions are only a handful of some of the questions which will form the fabric of my argument and research. Because the crux of my inquiry stems from my belief that Qoheleth's view on toiling is different, particularly through the lens of a *Samoan Aussie Battler*.

This thesis is divided into four chapters. The first chapter will be a discussion of 'cross cultural hermeneutics' and defining my own hybrid culture as a Samoan Australian. Further to this, I will discuss what toiling means in my context and the significance it holds in my own culture as a Samoan Australian. By the end of the chapter, I would also have explained my own unique hermeneutical lens as a *Samoan Aussie Battler*.

Chapter Two will entail exegesis on the book of Ecclesiastes, and how it relates to Wisdom Literature. Some of the main themes will be discussedas highlighted by scholars such as James Crenshaw, Roland Murphy, Roger N Whybray, Choon Leong Seow, Michael Fox, Tremper Longman III, Graham Ogden and others. The purpose of this chapter therefore is to present the author's context, and show how Ecclesiastes stands as a different brand of wisdom to the more conventional types such as the books of Proverbs and Psalms. I will also look specifically into the text,

Ecclesiastes 2:18-23 and conducting exegetical work to state how Qoheleth's views are brought about by this passage.

Chapter Three will then see *Cross Cultural Hermeneutics* applied to the text, and expose the conflicts between the culture of the text and my own culture. Through this methodology, I will attempt to ascertain a newer understanding of Qoheleth's thinking by allowing the two horizons to engage in a "transformative" relationship, as opposed to being "manipulative".

I will conclude my research in Chapter Four, by bringing forth key discussion points that had materialised from Chapter Three, and determining whether or not this particular reading was helpful in understanding the text. I will also discuss the pros and cons of the methodology used, and regulate how one could adopt this methodology in Biblical studies and Christian scholarship.

CHAPTER 1
THE HERMENEUTICAL LENS OF A SAMOAN 'AUSSIE' BATTLER

In this Chapter, I willfirst present my cultural background as a *Samoan Australian* which I intend to employ as a hermeneutical tool. I willthen define the methodology of choice, that being, Cross Cultural Hermeneutics, and why it will be applied in this discussion. From this, I will explain the significance of 'toiling' in my cultural context. The significance of the discussion on toiling in my context will assist in expounding this very same theme in my selected text of Ecclesiastes in the next chapter. By the end of this chapter, I will have also provided my hermeneutical framework to work with throughout this paper, or as the title suggests, a 'hermeneutical lens'.

1.1 Beginnings – The journey from Samoa to Australia

I was born on the 13th October 1981, in King George's Hospital in Camperdown, Sydney Australia. My father is Kolia, and my mother is Sootuli. My parents had migrated from Samoa during the late 1970s. My father was born in Samoa in the village of Sili on the island of Savaii[2] in 1957. He graduated from Leulumoega Fou College in 1976, and later worked for Samoa Customs and the Polynesian Airlines. My mother on the other hand was born on the island of Upolu, in the village of Satapuala in 1956. My father and mother met at Satapuala after my father, who was a renowned for Samoan cultural dancing and Samoan comedy or *faleaitu*, had been asked to lead Satapuala in a cultural performance of Samoan dancing and singing.

[2] Samoa consists of four main islands. The two larger islands are Savaii, and Upolu where the nation's capital Apia is located. The two smaller islands consist of Manono and Apolima.

My mother was the first of my parents to migrate overseas heading to New Zealand at the age of 19. She lived with her uncle, a minister at Ranui PIC in Auckland. She worked as a kitchen hand and various odd jobs. After a few years, she headed to Australia, hoping for further work opportunities.My father, on the other hand, migrated direct to Australia arriving in Sydney in 1980 wherehe reunited with my mother. My father's intention was to start a family with my mother while providing his family back in Samoa with financial support.

My parents married in August, 1981 in a small ceremony, and two months later, I was born. Life in Sydney was a struggle for my parents as it was for many migrant families because they lacked the necessary skills for higher-paid jobs and so were forced to work double-shifts and more than one job just to make ends meet. In 1982, my parents decided to head south to Melbourne, hoping for more job opportunities but to also escape the high cost of living in Sydney.

However, it did not alleviate the pressures of living in a new context where paying rent replaced living for free on inherited land as in Samoa; and paying for education, water and electricity bills, mortgages and life insurance were major priorities in Australian life. Not to mention the high living costs and sending remittances to family back in Samoa. In these movements, it became apparent that my parents were indeed toiling for the benefit of our small family and the extended family back in Samoa.

1.2 Attitude towards immigrants

Difficulties did not just exist financially. There was another aspect to the life of an immigrant family which my parents experienced. It was not long before my parents realised the unequal status of immigrant families relative to the "white folk".

Immigrant families such as ours, faced the reality of being treated as "second-rate citizens". The predominant Anglo-Saxon makeup of the workforce failed to reflect the multiculturalism that defined Australian society. Roger Bell notes that "[b]y the early 1990's almost 40 per cent of Australia's population of 18 million were immigrants or children of immigrants."[3] However, he adds that "it was the increased social complexity of its population, rather than its numerical growth, which was the most significant feature—and determinant—of the fundamental transformation of modern Australia."[4]

This transformation of Australian society had not quite made its way into the workforce. Five years of hard work as an accountant in a Sydney Law Firm did not materialise into a promotion, in spite of the fact that I had my Masters. The acceptance of other ethnic groups as Bell notes,"never had broad popular support [as] a poll conducted in 1994 found that 61 per cent still disapproved of the policy."[5]In other words, Australia was a multicultural society in theory, but not in practice.

The struggle for ascendancy in the workforce added a new dimension for immigrants to succeed, and toiling became all that more important. Samoan culture holds the belief that hard work results in reward, however, the negative attitude of peopletowards ethnic groups seemed to have put a "stumbling block" in our progress to succeed. There was a need for us immigrants to adopt the culture of the new context we had migrated to. It was not a blatant disregard for our ethnicity, but a call

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[3]Roger Bell, "'Race'/Ethnicity: Cultural Difference." *Australian Cultural History* 28 (2010): 272.

[4]Bell, "'Race'/Ethnicity," 272.

[5]WencheOmmundsen, "'She'll be right, mate': multiculturalism and the culture of benign neglect." *Australian Cultural History* 28 (2010): 133-134. C.f. Mark Lopez, *The Origins of Multiculturalism in Australian Politics 1945–1975*, (Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2000), 5–6.

to adapt. This distance between the culture of our ethnicity and the new culture we had arrived to is known as the 'cultural gap', and we needed to bridge this gap.

It is these differences of interpretation and meaning which make*cross-cultural theory* important. In other words, it is the recognition of the existence of a cultural gap and the need to fuse the two cultures together. Culture therefore becomes a necessary point of coming together, a point accentuated byHugh T. Kerr in his Editorial to *Theology Today* titled *"Where are you from?"*[6]He notes the significance of one's background in formulating perception.[7] Kerr uses examples of people, Biblical and non-Biblical,to highlight where that person came from and the changes they experienced to get to their final destination. Ultimately, it is Kerr's point to address the importance of one's background as a starting point in conversation, as he states in this example:

> Norman Vincent Peale tells that when his airplane seatmate asked him ["where are you from?"], he replied, "I'm in the life insurance business."… Theological professors are sure to be asked, "what*is* theology, and what do *you* teach?" But it's the first question, "where are you from?," that starts the conversation.[8]

1.3The need for a Cross-Cultural Hermeneutic

The process thus far involves an invitation to read texts from one's own cultural standpoint.This is the essence of Cross-Cultural Hermeneutics. It is to claim one's own cultural standpoint as a valid means of reading a text. Whenreading texts there is an obvious need to formulate an interpretation, and this foregrounds the gap between the culture of the text, of the author and of the reader.

I find that a tension exists in my selected text Ecclesiastes 2:18-23, between Qoheleth's cultural context and my background as a Samoan Australian. Henceforth, I

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[6]Hugh T. Kerr, "Where are you from?" *Theology Today* 47 (1991): 362.
[7]Kerr, "Where are you from?" 362.
[8] Kerr, "Where are you from?" 361.

have chosen the cross-cultural methodologyin order to illumine the main differences between my culture and the culture of the text, where the meaning and understanding of "toiling" is concerned.

Khiok-KhngYeo, writing from a Chinese background, acknowledges an obvious distance between the interpreter and the text [both] "spatially and temporally."[9] He has discovered this distance in his attempt to dialogue with the book of Corinthians and with the NT for that matter, which signifies that Yeo's method is congruent to Gadamer's dialogical process.[10] Hence, this purports the need for a cross-cultural hermeneutic. Yeo supports Hans-Georg Gadamer's approach to fuse the horizons of the reader and the text in the art of interpretation, which is the backbone of cross-cultural hermeneutics.[11]He writes:

> My interpretation of the text therefore is to bridge between the original intent of the author as inferred from the text and the temporary relevance of the text. As such, the ancient and the modern horizons of interpretation meet.[12]

My horizon and that of Ecclesiastes must engage in similar fashion, justifying the need for a cross-cultural hermeneutic in this inquiry.In order to proceed I must define the concepts of hermeneutics and culture.

1.3.1 Definition of 'hermeneutics'

Fred Dallmayr provides a conclusive definition of hermeneutics, where he states:

> [H]ermeneutics means the theory, or rather the practice or art of interpretation. In its primary and traditional sense, interpretation means textual interpretation, that is, the encounter

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[9]Khiok-Khng Yeo,*Rhetorical Interaction in 1 Corinthians 8 and 10: A Formal Analysis With Preliminary Suggestions for a Chinese, Cross-Cultural Hermeneutic* (Leiden: E.J Brill, 1995), 23.

[10]Yeo, *Rhetorical*, 24. Yeo's method is a rhetorical hermeneutical approach, however, his methodology infer the necessary implications for a cross-cultural hermeneutic

[11]Yeo, *Rhetorical*, 18.

[12]Yeo, *Rhetorical*, 20.

> between a reader and a text. In this encounter, something has to happen, some work has to be done: the reader needs to discover the meaning of the text, a meaning which usually is far from self-evident.[13]

From this, I can say that hermeneutics is performed every day, even when we do not realise we are doing it. For example, it is second-nature for us to come to a complete stop when we come across a red light at a set of traffic lights. The understanding of how we move in traffic is derived from our understanding of the colour of traffic lights. Our minds are at work when we see or hear things, and it is our perceptions which then influence our actions. Gadamer in his classic work *Truth and Method* makes the extremely valid claim that "[h]ermeneutics is an *art* and not a mechanical process"[14] thus implicating hermeneutics as having a certain freedom for the reader to decipher the meaning of the text. Gadamer's explication of hermeneutics effectively states that understanding is to be crafted by the reader's context, cultural background and whatever external and internal factors which may influence the reader's insight.

1.3.2 Definition of 'culture'

Culture is one of the many factors which influence our perceptions and Clifford Geertz identifies culture as

> an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men (sic) communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life.[15]

Geertz makes an important point with regards to the 'historicity' of culture, implying that interpretation and understanding accumulates over time.[16] This is an important

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[13]Fred Dallmayr, "Hermeneutics and inter-cultural dialog: linking theory and practice." *Ethics & Global Politics* 2 (2009): 23.

[14]Hans-Georg Gadamer,*Truth and Method.* 2nd Revised. trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G Marshall (London: Continuum Publishing Group, 1989), 190.

[15]Clifford Geertz,*Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic, 1973), 89.

[16]C.f. William A Dyrness, *Invitation to Cross-Cultural Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 25.

point as the significance of culture lies not only in its dynamic nature, but also in the realisation that culture has a history and did not simply exist out of thin air.This then gives a unique framework on how one views life and its anomalies.

Culture, henceforth,is not a free-thinking perception but an attitude which has been developed over time, taking shape through the experiences of the harsh realities and the influences of the context which one lives in. A context based on structure and patterned behaviour as Geertz addresses.

1.3.3 Working definition of cross cultural hermeneutics and its necessity

Understanding 'culture' is important to understanding the process of cross cultural hermeneutics because when we talk about horizons in this discussion we are talking culture. So, cross cultural hermeneutics ultimately is the process of engaging one's cultural background in dialogue with the text. This process sees an understanding of the text crafted through the reader's cultural context, but also allowsfor the reader's cultural context to be judged by the text. As Anthony C. Thiselton affirms:

> … in Gadamer, for example, there is a two-way movement between the horizons of the text and those of the interpreter, in which the interpreter listens and *is* judged as well as judging.[17]

The dialogical nature of this process is emphasised, because as Thiselton states, it is a "two-way movement".

The process then cannot simply move without a tension between the horizon of the interpreter and that of the text, as Gadamer writes: "The hermeneutic task consists in not covering up this tension by attempting a naïve assimilation of the two

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[17] Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer and Wittgenstein,* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980), 73.

but in consciously bringing it out."[18] "Bringing it out" is thus the aim of cross cultural hermeneutics in order to ascertain an understanding on why this tension exists. This inquiry is henceforth foregrounded by the tension that exists between my understanding of toiling, and Qoheleth's. Cross cultural hermeneutics will thus see a dialogue between my horizon and that of the text, to bring out the tension.

1.4 What is toiling in my context?

1.4.1 Toiling in the Samoan context

The Samoan culture is known as *fa'aSamoa* (the Samoan way). Seiuli Luama Sauni points out the significance *fa'aSamoa* holds for the *aiga* (family), as he writes:

> [*F*]*a'asamoa*is dominated by the concepts of the extended family (*aiga potopoto*), chiefly structure (*fa'amatai*), and ceremonial gift giving and exchanging (*fefa'asoaiga/fesuiaiga*). These can be identified as foundational experiences of spirituality for Samoan people …[19]

Aiga grasps a deeper meaning than the ordinary sense of the English word 'family'. The *aiga* in the Samoan context is sacred. It is not merely a demographical category as is the case with many Westernized cultures. It refers to inheritance, identity, religion, village, status, power, responsibilities to the village, and in some cases, it refers to chiefly titles.

Significantly, there is a connection between*aiga* and the land. Vanya Taule'alo reflects that "In Samoa the *aiga* (extended family) is the core of the society, it binds the individual to the group and the soil …"[20]Our family land in Sili, Savaii which we are connected to is called *Malaesuatia* which is most valued to our family due to its ancestral links and chiefly titles.

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[18] Gadamer, *TM*, 305.

[19]Seiuli Luama Sauni, "Samoan research methodology: The Ula - A New Paradigm." *The Journal of the Pacific Circle Consortium for Education* 23 (2011): 55.

[20]VanyaTaule'alo, "Ua sii le matalalaga: Creating new patterns in Pacific art." *Australia Art Monthly*, (July 1999): 2.

Our connection to the land, regardless of where we go, means that we carry with us the significance of *Malaesuatia*. This is known as *maota-tau-ave*, which literally means, 'house which is carried'. Betterment for the *aiga* is therefore upheld, and toiling for one's *aiga* is considered honourable.

1.4.1.3 Toiling as "tautua"

The Samoan word for 'Toiling' is '*galuega'* but it can also be translated as '*tautua'*. Tautua as Loretta Young explains means "service performed to support the *aiga*".[21] A Samoan proverb which signifies the importance of *tautua* is: *"O le ala i le pule o le tautua"* which is translated as "The path to authority is service/work/toiling."

This means that becoming a *matai* cannot be achieved without hard work and service. For the male *matai* they must become a *taulealea* first. As a *taulealea* they are required to serve the family and the village. They serve the family and village,and protect and defend family members and property, and the village.

All this service is done voluntarily and is part of his responsibility as a *taulealea.* At some stage, provided the *aiga* and senior *matai* agree, the *taulealea* as a result of hisservice, will be rewarded with a *matai* title. It is a prodigious reward as all the hard work and toil equates to this position of high authority and prestige. Ultimately, the *aiga* benefits as well, as its own status is lifted with the bestowal of the new *matai* title.

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[21]Loretta Young, "Gapatia i Faanoanoaga: An art installation reflecting on burden and loss through a migrant experience."(Auckland University of Technology: Unpublished Thesis, 2007), 6. Also c.f. FeretiTutuila, "A Critical Analysis of the Meaning of Tautua (Service) in the lives of Faife'au Samoa (Samoan Ministers): Congregational Christian Church of Samoa (CCCS)." (University of Auckland: Unpublished Thesis, 2009), 15.

So when a family member strives for success through hard toil, the *aiga* is at the forefront of his/her psyche. The sentiments that Samoans have for their *aiga* form the impetus for them to provide *tautua* to their *aiga.* The *aiga* defines who they are, and how they act in any society which they may live in. It also encouragesSamoans to work harder, and a big factor into why my parents, and why I, toiled.

1.4.2 Toiling in the Australian context

1.4.2.1 The "Aussie Battler"

The *Aussie Battler* similarly upholds the necessity of hard work. Growing up in Australia I have heard this term many times as a compliment to those who toil.

Helen Jonsen has this definition of an *Aussie Battler*:

> An Aussie battler *(bat-ler)* is the average working person who's always trying to get ahead, to get more out of life, to get more from his salary, but never quite gets out from behind the eight ball. He keeps battling away. The battler means a great deal to Australians – probably from their colonial roots – men fighting a system that was harder, tougher and crueller than they were; men fighting nature which was stronger and fiercer than they.[22]

From Jonsen's definition, the *Aussie Battler* maintains a high work ethic as he or she endeavours to improve beyond their usually struggling status. Toiling therefore is a given, and it is hence illumined and considered admirable in Australian culture.[23]

1.5 The Samoan Aussie Battler

It is with this that I consider myself a *Samoan Aussie Battler*. I am an individual who is embedded in the Samoan culture but has been brought up in the tough working conditions of working-class Australia. I am an *Aussie Battler* with a

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[22]Helen Jonsen, *Kangaroo's Comments & Wallaby Words: Revised Edition.*(New York: Hippocrene Books, Inc, 1999), 45.

[23] Noriko Sekiya, "Aussie 'battler' as a cultural keyword in Australian English." Griffith Working Papers in Pragmatics and Intercultural Communication, 2008, 22.

difference. My family as well as my own struggle as a Samoan-Australian defines who I am, and this makes me a *Samoan Aussie Battler*.

My main intention thus is to close the cultural gap between my culture and the culture of the text, and inquire into whether or not toiling is in fact vanity. Can *hebel* actually mean something else to the reader? Can Qoheleth's understanding of toiling transform my own understanding of *tautua*? These questions are only a handful of some of the questions which will form the fabric of my argument and research. The conclusion will no doubt give a telling take on Ecclesiastes 2:18-23, through the lens of a *Samoan Aussie Battler*.

1.6 Summary

Closing the gap is my intention, or as Gadamer states, a 'fusion of horizons'.Such a fusion is pointless without 'tension', and this tension occurs between the horizons of the reader and of the text. As a starting point, I explained my context as a *Samoan Australian* thus projecting my own horizon. This led to a discussion of Cross Cultural hermeneutics, as a means of fusing the horizons. Cross Cultural hermeneutics as determined acknowledges that there is a cultural gap (in the form of a tension) and thus aims to bridge the gap between my horizon and the horizon of Qoheleth, or Biblical texts for that matter.Lastly, in attempting to describe the 'tension', I explained how 'toiling' – a constant theme in the book of Ecclesiastes – is perceived in my cultural context, for the purpose of understanding my horizon even further, before a dialogue occurs.

CHAPTER 2
EXEGETICAL WORK ON THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES

The aim of this Chapter is to give an overview of the exegesis of Ecclesiastes as conducted by prominent scholarship. The first step is to introduce Wisdom Literature and its place in the Hebrew Bible and where Ecclesiastes fits in. I will also endeavour to talk about the main themes of the book of Ecclesiastes, in particular, the themes of 'toiling' ('*ml*) and 'vanity' (*hebel*).

2.1 Wisdom: An Introduction

The goal of Biblical wisdom tradition according to James L. Crenshaw is best summed up in one word: "life"[24]. Life is relative to the purpose of wisdom literature, as it aims to comprehend the world in which humanity lives and survives. Wisdom for all its psychological, emotional and spiritual benefits serves a greater purpose – as the sages would have anticipated – and that was to maintain the status quo and to maintain order in communal and individual life.

Israelite Wisdom Literature according to scholars such as Tremper Longman and Arthur J. Bellinzoni finds its roots in ANE Literature. According to Longman, Israelite wisdom and ANE wisdom are similar in style, form and content as well as thematic concerns.[25] Bellizoni elaborates further by stating Israelite wisdom literature akin to Egyptian and Akkadian literature.[26] Bellizoni points out particular elements in the Egyptian and Akkadian literatures which parallel with Ecclesiastes, such as:

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[24]James L. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom, An Introduction.*(Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 62.

[25]TremperLongman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, NICOT,(Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 18-19 C.f. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom,* 144.

[26]Arthur J. Bellinzoni, *The Old Testamemt: An Introduction to Biblical Scholarship.*(New York: Prometheus Books, 2009), 273.

> *The Song of Harper*, an Egyptian text found in the tomb of Inherkhawy which dates back to around 300 BCE, seems to have its theme *carpe diem* or "seize of the day" just like Ecclesiastes … A Mesopotamian psalm of lament known as *I Will Praise the Lord of Wisdom*, probably from about 1100 BCE, expresses similar motifs of pessimism, skepticism, and doubt in verse II.1 and II.39
>
> I look about me: evil upon evil! (II.1)
> He who was living yesterday has died today (II.39)[27]

Itis evident that Israelite wisdom literature was influenced by ANE Literature. The themes of scepticism and *carpe diem*found in earlier ANEtexts parallel the themes in Ecclesiastes. Israelite Wisdomon the other hand is rather unique in its own way due to the fact that it is foregrounded by the 'Deuteronomic formula' which will be discussed later in this chapter.

2.1.1 Ecclesiastes – Form/Structure/Authorship

The book of Ecclesiastes falls under the section of the Hebrew Bible known as *Ketubim* or "Writings".[28] In the Protestant Canon, it is listed under "Wisdom Literature".[29] The name 'Ecclesiastes' is a Greek rendering in the Septuagint of the Hebrew author "Qoheleth".[30]According to John Joseph Collins, the meaning of the name can be problematic as the root word is assumed to come from the Hebrew root '*qhl*' meaning 'assembly'.[31] It implies that Qoheleth may have instructed in front of an assembly. The problematic nature of the name is highlighted further in the superscription in 1:1. The superscription designates the author as "the son of David" (1:1),yet it is commonly agreed that the author was a sage (12:9) who adopted the identity of King Solomon. Murphy considers this as "intelligible" for wisdom is

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[27]Bellinzoni, *The Old Testament*, 273-274.
[28]Roland E. Murphy,*Ecclesiastes*,WBC, (Dallas: Word Books, 2002), xxiii.
[29]W. Sibley Towner,*The Book of Ecclesiastes: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections*, Vol. V, in *NIB*,(Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 273-274.
[30]Murphy,*Ecclesiastes*, xx.
[31] John Joseph Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 262.

normally associated with royalty,[32] and henceforth the pseudonymous identity of the author gives the book credibility.

Furthermore, Murphy comments that Qoheleth's attitude was distant to what kingship was all about.[33] It is clear then, that Qoheleth was no king at all. And it is from this that we come across a lot of contradictions and inconsistencies found in the whole book. Particularly as one tries to ascribe what is written in Ecclesiastes to the identity of King Solomon. To understand why such contradictions and inconsistencies exist is to understand the culture of Qoheleth. The culture however is still open to debate. This is due to the question surrounding the date of the book. Murphy believes the author to have

> … formed some kind of school, perhaps after the manner of Ben Sira a century later (Sir 51:23), and the present work would have been edited by his disciple or disciples. A date around 300 B.C.E. is generally suggested for the author; … If this date of 300 B.C.E. is reasonable, the question of Hellenistic influence on both Qoheleth's language and thought immediately arises.[34]

What Murphy incites here, is that Qoheleth was an Israelite sage in the 3rd Century B.C.E. who may have been influenced by the Hellenistic culture. Crenshaw adds that the language which is "closest to Mishnaic Hebrew"[35] affirms a third century date.

The outline of the book then is structured around the musings and deliberations of Qoheleth. W. Sibley Towner gives a definitive outline which I have summarised as follows:

I. Ecclesiastes 1.1 Superscription
II. Ecclesiastes 1:2 – 12:8 The Deliberations of Qoheleth
   a. 1:2, Theme
   b. 1:3 – 2:26, Illustrations of the Theme of Absurdity

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[32]Murphy,*Ecclesiastes*, xx Also c.f. Towner, "The Book of Ecclesiastes", 272.
[33]Murphy,*Ecclesiastes*, xx.
[34]Roland E. Murphy, *The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature.* 3rd. (Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2002), 49.
[35]Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom*, 147.

c. 3:1 – 15, Reflections on the Meaning of Time
d. 3:16 – 4:8, Reflections on Justice and Death
e. 4:9 – 6:12, Aphorisms
f. 7:1 – 8:17, A first Miscellany
g. 9:1-12, Time and Chance befall all
h. 9:13 – 11:6, A second Miscellany
i. 11:7 – 12:8, Instructions for a young person and conclusion

III. Ecclesiastes 12:9-14, The Epilogues [36]

The outline above allows the reader to then see how Qoheleth's thought process develops throughout the book. The purpose it serves for this paper however is that we can see where exactly Qoheleth is speaking around certain themes and issues.

The most common of those themes is the theme of 'absurdity' or 'vanity' (KJV) which is a common translation of the Hebrew word '*hebel*'. This theme will be one of the main themes to be discussed in this paper, as will the theme of 'toiling' or its Hebrew equivalent עמל "*'ml*" which comes under the theme of 'vanity'. Such themes will assist us when discussing the various issues which Qoheleth seems to struggle with. One of those issues is the concern over whether or not the Deuteronomic formula, where righteousness equals wealth (blessing) and wickedness equals poverty (curse), is still valid, especially in its Jewish context.

2.1.2 Deuteronomic formula

Biblical wisdom has very much been transcribed under the formula of 'wisdom equates to righteousness' while 'folly equates to wickedness'. Those who are wise are considered to be walking in the path of righteousness, and are consequently blessed. On the other hand, those who are foolish are considered to be walking in the

[36]Towner, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 286

path of wickedness and are thus cursed. This is known as the "Deuteronomic formula".[37]

It is intriguing then to see how one seeks to obtain a good life. Does Qoheleth imply an alternative way of obtaining a good life or is the book of Ecclesiastes merely a critique of the Deuteronomic formula?[38] It may seem that Qoheleth may be echoing the sentiments of what had occurred in Jewish history with regards to Rehoboam's failure to replicate the mighty kingdom which his father Solomon had famously built. (c.f. 1 Kings 14:21-31) It thus becomes a probing question of the vanity of life when material wealth and power is passed on wastefully to undeserving inheritance.

2.1.3 Solomon as pseudonym

Most of the scholarship on Ecclesiastes, such as the likes of Longman III, Murphy, Crenshaw,and Limburg,[39]have long supported that Solomon is not the actual author of this book as claimed in the prologue.[40]Christianson, who does not disagree with the former, but in admission of Solomon's significance as a pseudonymous author, states that "Ancient Jewish readers recognized in 2:17-19 the voice of Solomon regretting the loss of his kingdom to two foolish sons …"[41] It is significant to understand, whether we believe in Solomonic authorship or not, that one cannot ignore the voice of Solomon, especially with regards to the theme of 'inheritance'.

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[37] This is the centre of Jewish morality. It is reflected heavily in the Book of Deuteronomy and the formula thus is given as: Righteousness equals blessing (wealth), Wickedness equals curse (poverty). C.f. Walter Brueggemann,*Solomon: Israel's Ironic Icon of Human Achievement,*(Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2005), 38.

[38]Bernhard W. Anderson, *TheLiving World of the Old Testament: Third Edition.*(London: Longman Group Ltd, 1979), 542.

[39] C.f. Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 57; Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, xx; James L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes: A Commentary*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1987), 33; James Limburg, *Encountering Ecclesiastes: A Book For Our Time*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2006), 9.

[40] C.f. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom*, 146-148; Murphy, *The Tree of Life*, 49.

[41]Eric S. Christianson, *Ecclesiastes through the ages.* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 162.

The significance of Solomonic authorship thus, should not be taken seriouslyin the historical sense, but in the spiritual and religious sense.Greenwood alludes to the fact that such spiritual and religious significance may have been a by-product of the author's intent in speaking in the voice of Solomon, i.e. "[Qoheleth] speaks in the voice of the great and wise king as a means of reflecting on Solomon's misguided wisdom."[42]

Further to the question of inheritance is the question of wisdom itself. What use is it? Craig G. Bartholomew and Ryan P.O'Dowd accentuate this point, concluding that Qoheleth's view of wisdom is

> … by an epistemology dependent on reason, observation and experience *alone*. He does not begin, as Proverbs insists we must, with the fear of the LORD! By contrast, the great characteristic of Ecclesiastes is Qohelet's continual use of the first-person pronoun "I," which indicates his dependence on *himself* rather than the LORD for an answer to the perplexing meaning of life.[43]

It thus becomes apparent, that Qoheleth's search for the meaning of wisdom transforms into a personal attack on wisdom. Israelite culture places YHWH at the heart of wisdom, yet Qoheleth according to Bernhard W. Anderson implicates YHWH as hidden.[44] Perhaps this is the reason behind the interpretation that Qoheleth belittles wisdom and thus toiling as vanity.

2.2 Translation (Ecclesiastes 2:18-23)

18 וְשָׂנֵאתִי אֲנִי אֶת־כָּל־עֲמָלִי שֶׁאֲנִי עָמֵל תַּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ שֶׁאַנִּיחֶנּוּ לָאָדָם שֶׁיִּהְיֶה אַחֲרָי׃
19 וּמִי יוֹדֵעַ הֶחָכָם יִהְיֶה אוֹ סָכָל וְיִשְׁלַט בְּכָל־עֲמָלִי שֶׁעָמַלְתִּי וְשֶׁחָכַמְתִּי תַּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ גַּם־זֶה הָבֶל׃
20 וְסַבּוֹתִי אֲנִי לְיַאֵשׁ אֶת־לִבִּי עַל כָּל־הֶעָמָל שֶׁעָמַלְתִּי תַּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ׃

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[42] Kyle R. Greenwood, "Debating Wisdom: The Role of Voice in Ecclesiastes." *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 2012: 480

[43] Craig G. Bartholomew and Ryan P. O'Dowd,*Old Testament Wisdom Literature: A Theological Introduction*,(Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 199

[44] Anderson, *The Living World*, 547

21 כִּי־יֵ֣שׁ אָדָ֗ם שֶׁעֲמָלוֹ֙ בְּחָכְמָ֣ה וּבְדַ֔עַת וּבְכִשְׁר֖וֹן וּלְאָדָ֣ם שֶׁלֹּא־עָמַ֣ל בּ֔וֹ יִתְּנֶ֥נּוּ חֶלְקוֹ֙ גַּם־זֶ֣ה הֶ֔בֶל
וְרָעָ֖ה רַבָּֽה׃
22 כִּ֣י מֶֽה־הָוָ֣ה לָאָדָ֗ם בְּכָל־עֲמָלוֹ֙ וּבְרַעְי֣וֹן לִבּ֔וֹ שֶׁהוּא֙ עָמֵ֣ל תַּחַ֔ת הַשָּׁמֶֽשׁ׃
23 כִּ֣י כָל־יָמָ֗יו מַכְאֹבִ֤ים וְכַעַס֙ עִנְיָנ֔וֹ גַּם־בַּלַּ֖יְלָה לֹא־שָׁכַ֣ב לִבּ֑וֹ גַּם־זֶ֖ה הֶ֥בֶל הֽוּא׃[45]

Translation

18 *AndI hated all my toil which I had toiled under the sun which I shall leave him to man who he shall come to pass after me*

19 *And who knowing wise he will be or fool and he shall [have] authority in all my toil which I toiled and which I was wise under the sun, also this [is] vanity*

20 *And I turned about I to despair of my heart over all the toil which I toiled under the sun*

21 *Because [there] is man which to his toil in wisdom and in knowledge and in success and to man who not he toiled in him, he shall give him his portion, also this [is] vanity*

22 *that what to be to man in all his toil and in striving of his heart which he toiler under the sun*

23 *that all his days pains and vexation his experience even in night, not he lies down his heart, also this [is] vanity.*[46]

2.3 In Focus: Ecclesiastes 2:18-23

The theme of toiling is brought about in this passage, and it is apparent that

[45] BHS, Ecclesiastes 2:18–23

[46] All translations are my own unless otherwise stated

Qoheleth is not too pleased about toiling. The nature of 2:18-23 is repetitive,[47] which reflectsQoheleth's intent on repeating his frustration regarding human toil and how he deems it '*hebel*'. But as we can tell in verses 18, 19 and 21, there is a reason behind his frustration and it is 'inheritance.' The Hebrew words used to imply 'inheritance' is found at the end of verse 18, שֶׁיִּהְיֶה אַחֲרָיwhich is translated as *"who he shall come to pass after me"*. The uncertainty surrounding whether or not the heir will be foolish or wise (v.19) is the cause of frustration and hate (*šn'*) for Qoheleth. The repetitive nature of this passage thus accentuates the feeling even further, as Derek Kidner notes:

> The more he has toiled at his life's work (and verses 22 f. show how obsessive this toil can be), the more galling will be the thought of its fruit into other hands–and as likely as not, the wrong hands.[48]

As a result, Qoheleth has seemingly stigmatized the *offspring* as somewhat undeserving of the fruits of one's toil. The end clause of verses 19, 21 and 23 גַּם־זֶה הֶבֶל *"also, this [is] vanity"* confirms the stigmatization of *offspring*, but more so, it confirms Qoheleth's position regarding toil.

The question of inheritance will be further explained later in this chapter, yet what I find intriguing, and will also inquire about later on, is the use of the word *hebel.* In this passage it is mentioned three times, yet in the book of Ecclesiastes it occurs 38 times out of a total 73 times in the Bible as a whole. The word is commonly translated as '*vanity*' as seen in the NRSV and KJV, yet Choon-Leong Seow also mentions other meanings associated with *hebel*:

> The literal meaning of *hebel* is "air" or "vapour" (Ps 62:10; Isa 57:13 [// *rûaḥ* "wind"]) … So too, in Mishnaic Hebrew the word may refer to breath, air, steam, vapour, gas, and the like.[49]

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[47] Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 25

[48]Derek Kidner, *A Time to Mourn and a Time to Dance: Ecclesiastes and the way of the world,*The Bible Speaks Today Series,(Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1976), 35

The inquiry into the meaning of *hebel* and its possible meanings will be discussed, but the passage clearly states Qoheleth's feelings of frustration.

2.4 Why does Qoheleth hate?

But what is it exactly about toiling that Qoheleth 'hates'? The word שׂנא (*šn'*) translated as 'hate'[50] is often associated,as BDB holds it, to the hatred towards "sexual revulsion"[51] as to a harlot. It is also associated with the hate of wickedness and idolatry.[52] The scepticism of Qoheleth thus materialises into a belief that toiling is an abomination, an act which leaves the sage bitterly disgusted.

Furthermore, Murphy comments Qoheleth's individualistic nature as to why he 'hates' toiling:

> [Qoheleth] "hates" the fruits of his labor because he has to leave them to another who has not toiled for them … There is no feeling here for family identity or the community—feeling that is so typical of traditional Israelite thought.[53]

Murphy here highlights the anti-social nature of Qoheleth. Whybray connotes the idea that it may never have occurred to Qoheleth that toiling "might benefit future generations."[54]What is highlighted here by Murphy and Whybray is the individualism shown by Qoheleth.In other words, Qoheleth is not concerned with others but himself. This causes him to hate *'ml* and because of the strong connotation of *šn'* with the hate for "sexual revulsion"[55], this aligns *'ml* as somewhat of an abomination.

2.5 The other meaning of עמל *'ml*

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[49]Choon-Leong Seow,*Ecclesiastes: A New Translation with Introducation and Commentary*, Anchor Bible, Vol. 18, (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 102

[50]BDB, 971

[51]BDB, 971 (c.f. 1 Samuel 13:15)

[52]BDB, 971 (c.f. Psalm 11:5, Amos 5:21)

[53]Murphy, *Tree of Life*, 53

[54]R. N. Whybray,*Ecclesiastes*, (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989), 69

[55]BDB, 971

Perhaps there was more to dissatisfaction with the Deuteronomic formula than we as readers could be certain about. Doug Ingram connotes the negativity of *'ml* by pointing out that its particular usage in Chapter 2 is "very negative, and it therefore gives a decidedly negative answer to the question in 1:3."[56]The Hebrew word: ' *'ml'* not only means 'toiling' or 'labour' but it can also mean 'suffering'[57] and 'trouble'[58].David J.A. Clines identifies this other usage of *'ml* in the book of Job, as he states that it "is not generally, perhaps never, the emotional feeling of misery, but typically the objective situation of being hard at work or being oppressed."[59]

If we were to take this usage of *'ml*, then it would seem that Qoheleth's experience was one of great suffering and oppression, as though he was forced to toil. It could explain why Qoheleth may have hated life so much. It implies that Qoheleth's experience oflabour was driven by oppression.

2.6 The Question of "Inheritance"

According to scholars such as Michael V. Fox and Murphy, Qoheleth was frustrated with inheritance. Fox notes that "[i]n 2:18-26, Qohelet complains that the wealth he earned will go to someone else after his death, someone who did not work for it."[60]Murphy stresses that Qoheleth "exploits the theme [of inheritance] in bitter fashion."[61] However, family and culture are key facets of Jewish society, much so that Peter Enns states that

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[56]Doug Ingram,*Ambiguity in Ecclesiastes*, Library of Hebrew Bible, Vol. 431, (New York: T&T Clark International, 2006), 159

[57]BDB, 765 (c.f. Jeremiah 20:18)

[58] BDB, 765 (c.f. Numbers 23:21)

[59] David J. A. Clines, *Job 1-20,*WBC, Vol. 18, (Dallas: Word Books, 2002), 494

[60]Michael V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and A Time to Build Up,* (Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1999), 36; Also c.f. PeterEnns, *Ecclesiastes,*The Two Horizons Old Testament commentary,(Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2011), 49

[61]Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 25

> [t]here is a strong OT precedent for this line of thinking. The patriarchs, for example, found evidence of God's continued covenant faithfulness in seeing their offspring multiply and thrive in the land … it is through the offspring that the ancestor continues to live, even after his own death.[62]

However, Qoheleth shows little regard for it. Such disregard is further highlighted in Chapter 3 where Qoheleth believes that man is not much better than an animal, for death conquers all (3:18-22). This frustrated Qoheleth because all creatures enjoyed equality before God.[63]

Furthermore to the issue of "inheritance", Qoheleth may have lived in a society where youths and heirs to wealth and possessions were living recklessly and carelessly. Jennifer L. Koosed claims that this would have caused Qoheleth much pain, as he writes, "Qohelet acknowledges that one has only limited control over wisdom or foolishness of one's own offspring."[64] If righteousness equated to wealth, according to the Deuteronomic formula, then the sage may have experienced the contrary. Israelite wisdom was betrayed according to Qoheleth,so to Israelite culture which was entrenched with the wisdom teachings of the sages.The sages looked at maintaining the status quo[65] which implies an acceptance of the Deuteronomic formula.

Anderson advances his view: "[Qoheleth's] bold challenge to Judaism, with its simple "Deuteronomic" doctrine of rewards and punishments, offended the religious sensibilities of the more orthodox."[66] Arguing against the very foundation of Jewish

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[62]Enns, *Ecclesiastes*, 62

[63]James L. Crenshaw, "Chapter 10: The Human Dilemma and Literature of Dissent." In *Tradition and Theology in the Old Testament*, by Walter J. Harrellson, ed. Douglas A. Knight,(Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), 248

[64]Jennifer L. Koosed, *(Per)mutations of Qohelet: Reading the Body in the Book*, Library of Hebrew Bible, Vol. 429, (New York: T&T Clark International, 2006), 66

[65]Crenshaw, "Chapter 10: The Human Dilemma,"237.

[66]Anderson, *The Living World*, 542.

life is controversial. It would destroy the whole dynamic by which wisdom literature has taught Jewish society how to live.

2.7 The right to canonization

If such deliberations by Qoheleth would endanger Jewish spirituality as well as the Jewish teachings which embodied it, then how did Ecclesiastes come to be canonized? Qoheleth shows a consistent desire to question the relevance of certain aspects of Jewish life which the sages otherwise have expounded as being unadulterated. Crenshaw adds, "Naturally, Qoheleth thus struck at the heart of the tradition in which he had been nurtured."[67] Chapter 12: 9-14 –which is viewed by Murphy as an editor's addition[68]– seeks to bring the book of Ecclesiastes back into Jewish espousal in order to affirm its validity in the Hebrew Canon. However, when Chapter 12 is taken away, the pessimistic nature of Ecclesiastes is apparent.

2.8 Does הבל "hebel" necessarily mean "vanity"?

All throughout the book of Ecclesiastes, Qoheleth displays an intention of hate towards a variety of themes. He hates toil (2:18; 4:1-8), he hates life (2:17; 6:12) and hates wisdom(2:21; 7:4). It is all an indication of despair and disappointment due to a lack of sagacity in conventional wisdom. (1:18, 2:19) As it seems, there is a relationship between *šn'* and *hebel*, i.e. his judgment of *hebel* is caused by his hate.

Qoheleth, as it has been documented, may have validated his experience in that all hope in human toil and human effort is discarded as vanity. However, *hebel*

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[67]Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom*, 129.
[68]Murphy,*Ecclesiastes*, 124.

also means "breath"[69] (Is 57:13). This indicates a certain dubiety in Qoheleth's experience which gives an alternative exposition of *hebel* that may be valued.

2.8.1 The dualistic meaning of *hebel*

To be fair to the mainstream scholarship regarding *hebel* and its usage, the negative connotations as explained provide its core meaning. As *hebel* can mean "breath", Crenshaw states that *hebel* also alludes to "spirit" *reuth ruah*[70] (which also means 'wind'[71]). He states that "[i]n denying absolute value to feasting, toil, possessions, fame, and knowledge Qoheleth conceded that they do possess fleeting significance."[72]What this implies is that Qoheleth may not have regarded toiling as *hebel* in a negative sense. After all, Whybray concedes that:

> One of the main problems of the book is whether these apparently contradictory attitudes towards life represented by *hebel* and joy can be reconciled, and, if so, how: was Qoheleth, to put the matter simply, an optimist, a pessimist, or something between the two?[73]

This gives an indication to the dualistic nature to which Qoheleth displays in his thoughts throughout the book. Interestingly, Fox writes,

> It is difficult to distinguish the contextual meaning of *re'ut ruaḥ* from that of *hebel*, since in all but two of the nine times that the former occurs it is appended to a *hebel*-judgment and has precisely the same contexts and referents.[74]

This suggests that Qoheleth may have given a spiritual understanding to the word *hebel* as opposed to something transient.

Such dualism is also existent in the word *hebel.* Why does Qoheleth use *hebel* to mean worthlessness and vanity when in actual fact, the term in its literal sense

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[69]Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 102.
[70]Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom,* 129.
[71]BDB, 924.
[72]Crenshaw,*Old Testament Wisdom,* 129.Also c.f. Seow,*Ecclesiastes*, 102.
[73]Whybray,*Ecclesiastes,* 64.
[74]Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 45

means 'vapour' and 'breath'[75]? Bartholomew and O'Dowd believe that while *hebel* has a negative sense, in their opinion, "its core meaning is particularly foregrounded by the phrase that regularly accompanies it, namely "striving for the wind.""[76] What Bartholomew and O'Dowd imply here is that *hebel* is better defined as "enigmatic" reflecting something that cannot be grasped. It is not entirely negative, but Bartholomew and O'Dowd concede that Qoheleth never meant to be negative. Qoheleth, as affirmed by Martin Shuster, is seen as philosophical, and *hebel* alternatively is pertained to be a philosophical assessment of life.[77]

Alicia Suskin Ostricker on the other hand goes further into the double meaning of *hebel*. She writes:

> But the Hebrew *hevel* is more subtly layered, and carries even more pathos in its empty cup. *Hevel* may mean "vapor" or "mist," with a connotation of "breath," and so a suggestion simultaneously of that which is essential to life, and that which is utterly ephemeral. It may mean "wind." It may mean "emptiness" or "void" … Vanity is an abstraction, and the Hebrew *hevel* is not. Not quite, though close. As close as a breath.Something perhaps close to nothing, but not quite nothing.A reality, not an abstraction.[78]

Ostricker signifies a key point regarding the breath connotation associated with *hebel*. 'Breath' is similar to the sense used in Genesis 2as it connotes 'giving life' which is the sense identified by Ostricker. At this point, Ostricker points out the positive connotation associated with *hebel,* suggesting Qoheleth may have never implied "vanity" after all.

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[75]BDB, 210

[76]Bartholomew and O'Dowd,*Old Testament Wisdom,* 194

[77]Martin Shuster, "Being as Breath, Vapor as Joy: Using Martin Heidegger to Re-read the Book of Ecclesiastes." *JSOT* 33 (2008): 220

[78]Alicia SuskinOstricker,*For the love of God: The Bible as an Open Book.*(Piscataway: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 79-80. Note: *hevel*and *hebel*are the same word.

2.9 Qoheleth's intentions made clear

On this note, I believe that this may allude to the main intention of Qoheleth. Whilst scholars such as Jacques Ellul, Graham Ogden, and Murphy[79] conclude that Qoheleth implies *hebel* to mean vanity and its equivalents, a literal translation of the Hebrew word *hebel* as Ostricker demonstrates suggests otherwise. It is not as to render toil as utter vanity and hopelessness, but to consider *hebel* in a life-giving sense. For the root of *hebel* implies "breath" and "wind", henceforth connoting the idea of breathing life into a person. Thus, how one articulates *hebel* to mean "meaningless" and "uselessness" can be seen as perceiving Qoheleth speaking figuratively. This would be an assumption banking on Qoheleth being a pessimist and a renegade towards conventional wisdom. However, I concur with Murphy who makes a valid assessment of Qoheleth's intentions.

> [Qoheleth] never recommends folly … Yes, his was a deeply critical and even strident voice that did not sing in tune with the others; but the ancients made room for him among the sages.[80]

Qoheleth's unconventional voice was duly recognised among the sages, which indicated that such critical openness was valued. He was not an outcast, but someone who would make critical evaluations in order that the foundations of conventional wisdom were tested against.

2.10 Summary

Wisdom Literature as introduced at the beginning of this chapter is highly significant in Israelite culture. As Crenshaw advocated, the sages held a significant

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[79] C.f. Jacques, Ellul, *Reason for Being: A Meditation on Ecclesiastes*(Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1990), 55 – Here, Ellul states that *hebel* is aptly interpreted as 'vanity'. Also c.f. Ogden in Graham Ogden,*Qoheleth,*(Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987), 44-45 who defines *hebel* as a 'mystery' and 'frustration'. Murphy in Murphy,*Tree of Life,*53 who also uses the definition of 'vanity'

[80]Murphy, *Tree of Life*, 55

place in society, as their teachings provided instruction for living. Ecclesiastes, which is part of the Wisdom books, from first look may seem a rather unorthodox book and the author at times seems pessimistic. Yet, as mentioned in this chapter, Qoheleth never recommends folly and after exegetical work it can be determined that Qoheleth simply spoke existentially. Thematically speaking, Qoheleth's view on 'toiling' was questioned, and when considering the meaning of toiling or *'ml* in its various nuances, an understanding of Qoheleth's cultural context could be ascertained.But as 2:18 infers, Qoheleth experienced 'hate' or *šn'* of his toil, labelling it *hebel* and in relation to my inquiry, it was essential to investigate the possible reasons behind his *šn'*. Interestingly, *hebel* in its literal sense implies 'wind', 'vapour' or 'spirit', and in the next chapter, this meaning of *hebel* is vital in the dialogue. Ostricker presents an intriguing understanding of *hebel* as 'spirit', because it is a positive sense meaning 'life giving'. As a result, we the readers of the text, as Charles F. Melchert explains, are invited to engage in a "process of investigation, argumentation, use of evidence and testimony, and so on."[81] This then allows for us to offer our own "additional evidence to support or contest [Qoheleth's] conclusions.",[82]or in other words, engage in dialogue with the text.

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[81]Charles F. Melchert, *Wise Teaching: Biblical Wisdom and Educational Ministry,* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1998), 121-122

[82]Melchert, *Wise Teaching*, 121-122

CHAPTER 3
QOHELETH MEETS THE SAMOAN AUSSIE BATTLER

The aim of this chapter is to apply the methodology as discussed in Chapter 1, by engaging in a dialogue with the text of Ecclesiastes. The hope is to ascertain an understanding of '*'ml*' through the lens of a Samoan Australian Battler, and how this understanding is compared with Qoheleth's own understanding. As a result, Qoheleth may be understood in a different light to what has already been discussed about him by leading scholars. I will also utilise the Cross Cultural Hermeneutics methodology in trying to hear the voice of Qoheleth in relation to my own context.

3.1 The conflict between two horizons

The first thing which hit me when reading Ecclesiastes was the absurdity of a number of Qoheleth's judgments and predicaments. How could Scripture allow for such rash conclusions to be injected into the lives of its readers? In other words, how did Ecclesiastes come to be canonised as a book of the Hebrew Bible? Such questions are raised out of pure curiosity with no initial inclination to pursue as a point of research. The deliberations and musings of Qoheleth created tension in what I knew as a *Samoan Australian*; entrenched with the values of two cultures, both appreciating the principles of hard work and determination, with a reluctance to even consider the implications which Qoheleth dreads, that of death and an undeserving inheritance.

As I mentioned in Chapter 1, toiling or working is considered profound in the hearts of both Samoans and Australians. My own identity as a *Samoan Aussie Battler* harbours the notion that toiling is honourable, admirable, worshipped, and vitalising. Reading Ecclesiastes from this perspective denies the claim that toil is *hebel*, because to be quite frank, toiling and working in the Australian and the Samoan contexts are

far from being *hebel*, at least not in the sense it has often been translated. The various translations suggest *hebel* as being ""vanity', 'nothingness', 'worthlessness', 'futility', 'absurdity', 'mystery', 'impermanence""[83], and "enigmatic"[84] to name a few. This no doubt presents a rather precarious problem, as it is quite evident that a conflict ensues in the Australian and Samoan understandings of toiling and that of Qoheleth. Thus, the conflict here is a conflict of my hybrid culture as a Samoan Australian and the culture of the text.

The culture of the text is obviously Jewish as the book of Ecclesiastes belongs to the third part of the canon of the Hebrew Bible known as the "*Ketubim*" or "Writings."[85] However, there is an argument towards Hellenistic influences as scholars such as Whybray[86] point towards the date of the book to the postexilic period. There is still however much debate regarding the date of the book of Ecclesiastes. Murphy[87] and Towner[88]themselves are not convinced of when exactly Ecclesiastes was written. However, regardless of when Ecclesiastes was written and the likelihood of Hellenistic influence, it is still largely ancient Jewish literature.

There is a great difficulty with this, because of the spatial and temporal distance between myself as a modern reader and the ancient text. As Gadamer so famously prescribed, there is an essential need for a "fusion of the two horizons."[89] In other words, there should be an engaging by the modern reader into the horizon of the author in order to gain an understanding of that text from another time and place. The

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[83]Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 64
[84]Bartholomewand O'Dowd,*Old Testament Wisdom*, 194
[85] Towner, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 273
[86]Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 15-22
[87] Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, xxii
[88]Towner,"The Book of Ecclesiastes", 271. Although Towner does make somewhat of a calculated guess of the date to be around 250BCE
[89]Gadamer, *TM*, 305

question which emerges is: how do I, a Samoan Australian, read Ecclesiastes? In particular, how does a Samoan Australian perceive the view by Qoheleth that toiling is 'vanity'? Especially, as Samoans and Australians alike consider toiling to be the core of their respective cultures.

3.2 Redefining עמל''ml' as 'Tautua' and 'battling'

The first point of discussion thus is addressing the concept of toiling or *'ml*. As pointed out in the previous chapter, *'ml* in its basic sense means 'toil' or 'labour'. However, it also means 'suffering' or 'trouble' and this may explain Qoheleth's negative feeling towards toiling and why he labels it vanity. Toiling, in the Samoan context translates to '*tautua*'. *Tautua* can also mean 'service' and as Asofou So'o implies, *tautua* "governs the relationship between those in positions of authority and those who are likely to hold the same positions in the future."[90] Henceforth, *tautua* inclines that work and toil is performed towards a greater good, and this is agreed upon by Tutuila who writes:

> [A] person is serving a responsibility for a purpose. It also indicates a person's full participation in *tautua* where upon completion and recognition of *tautua*, is considered a particular achievement of *pule*. This relationship is based on love and respect and it can be a covenant between the two (responsibility=*tautua* and purpose=*pule*) in which neither of the two shall overstep the other but, they rely on each other for existence.[91]

So if Qoheleth considers '*tautua*' to be vanity then this is clearly problematic. Also, in the Australian context, hard work and the Australian notion of 'battling' defy Qoheleth's logic and also add to the ambiguous nature of his conclusions.

3.2.1 Correcting Qoheleth's notion of work: The significance of 'tautua' to becoming a 'matai'

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[90]Asofou So'o, *Democracy and Custom in Samoa: the uneasy alliance*, (Suva: IPS Publications, University of the South Pacific, 2008), 164

[91]Tutuila, "A Critical Analysis", 14

Tautua is a significant term in the Samoan culture, as it is the core of Samoan life. As the proverb: *"O le ala i le pule o le tautua."* (The path to authority is service) implies, toiling is rewarded within the *aiga* and the village with a *matai* title. Authority is valued greatly in Samoan culture, because the *matai* use it to maintain village and family order. Status is also significant because when a *matai* has gone through the hard work as a *taulealea*, they are respected, feared and revered by their family and village. Emma Kruse Va'ai indicates that reverence in the *matai* is further expounded by the belief that *matai* are divinely appointed, stating that the villagers and *aiga* "are under the power of and are cared for by the *matai* system which is adhered to and believed to be sanctioned by God."[92]

The Samoan Head of State Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Ta'isi Efi in his keynote address to the New Zealand Families Commission Pasifika Families' Fono in 2009 highlights the role *matai* play in the *aiga*:

> Ensuring that the good of the whole is always just requires competent and vigilant family heads, capable of commanding authority or *pule* on the one hand, and demonstrating grace and personal integrity on the other.[93]

Efi thus provides a clear relationship between the *matai* and the significance they play in the family and the village.

3.2.2 The pain of 'tautua' and its necessity

The significance of the *matai* translates into a necessity for hard work and labour. The nature of the work is arduous and at times painful because labour in the setting of a typical Samoan village constitutes heavy manual labour in the fields from

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[92]Emma Kruse Va'ai,*Producing the Text of Culture: The Appropriation of English in Contemporary Samoa,*(Lepapaigalagala: National University of Samoa, 2011), 25

[93]Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Ta'isi Efi, "O le e lave i tiga, o le ivi, le toto ma le aano: He who rallies in my hour of need is my kin." *New Zealand Families Commission Pasifika Families' Fono*, 2009, 2

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the early hours of the morning to the late hours of the afternoon. So going back to *'ml*, the understanding of *tautua* parallels its meaning. Qoheleth uses the term wisely as *'ml* denotes work which can also be painful and troublesome. It is this sense which I believe had led Qoheleth to conclude that '*ml* is *hebel*. However, the issue of "inheritance" as mentioned in Chapter Two seems to upset Qoheleth. It is this which causes him distress and why he perceives toiling in its negative sense. In other words, '*ml* is troublesome to Qoheleth because of the underserving heir who will inherit the fruits of such labour, as well as the limit that death places on all this because as Ingram concedes, it "offers no lasting gain because the wise person dies just like the fool."[94]

However, the Samoan context perceives toiling or *tautua* as 'trouble' because it is necessary for it to be so. To reach a position of authority and power in the Samoan context, one must go through the painful experience of *tautua*, i.e. serving the village and *aiga*.The word "*ala"* in the proverb translates to "way" or "path" which means that *tautua* or toiling will ultimately lead to *pule* or authority. The full sense of the word *tautua* must then be adhered to, including the suffering which comes along with it.

3.3 'Aiga': Far greater than inheritance

The question of 'inheritance' as Qoheleth argues against thus cannot be fully appreciated in the Samoan context because those (the *aiga*) who inherit the fruits of one's *tautua* are a different prospect to what Qoheleth perceives. The *aiga* embodies more than just kinship and inheritance for that matter, for the *aiga* encapsulates the Samoan's pride and reputation. Significantly, each *aiga* is marked by an honorific

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[94]Ingram,*Ambiguity*, 159

matai title representing the stature and authoritative position of the *aiga*, culminating in future success and prosperity. Therefore, the idea of *aiga* being animadverted as the cause of *hebel* is rather odious, and would not be an acceptable adjudication in the Samoan context. Now the reason I say this, is in counter-argument to Qoheleth's individualistic concern (2:13-16). As Whybray states,

> [W]e can also see the intense individualism of Qoheleth: the idea that the achievements of individuals might benefit future generations after their death never occurs to him.[95]

Such individualism shown by Qoheleth stirs up a cultural concern for mine, because Qoheleth lacks a spiritual understanding of the significance of toiling and inheritance. Whybray adds further,

> Qoheleth's assessment of human wisdom as ultimately valueless, despite its limited successes in particular cases, is closely connected with his preoccupation with human mortality.[96]

The Samoan argument is to ask the question of whether human mortality ever ends because the '*aiga*' pronounces human mortality as eternal. The Samoan '*aiga*' continues on through the generations and lives on through the family *matai* name and through the association with the land. This is where the spiritual significance lies that seems to evade Qoheleth. Again, it cannot be stressed enough how important Gadamer's thesis is, given the significance of bringing the two horizons together, as it materialises through this conflict.

3.4 The Aussie Battler keeps working: What about inheritance? She'll be right!

It is no different in the Australian sphere, particularly in the role that the *Aussie Battler* plays in Australian society. Hard work and determination in the fighting spirit are qualities of the *Aussie Battler* which the Australian public admire

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[95]Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 69 Also c.f. Bartholomew and O'Dowd's comments on Qoheleth's individualistic character by stressing Qoheleth's continual use of the pronoun "I" - Bartholomew and O'Dowd,*Old Testament Wisdom*, 199

[96]Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 69

and adore. Again, implying that these qualities are *hebel* would be incongruous with Australian cognition. However, if we go back to Bartholomew and O'Dowd, they write:

> It is not that the wind is unreal but that one cannot get ahold (sic) of it; hence our preference for translating *hebel* as, "enigma/enigmatic." Qohelet is not claiming that life is meaningless but that for all his effort he cannot locate the meaning of life amid what he observes and experiences; life is thoroughly enigmatic.[97]

Hebel in this nuance as 'enigma' supports a particular Australian idiom with regards to this uncertainty. In Australian culture, there is an idiom "She'll be right" which states that "whatever is wrong will right itself with time."[98] Thus, if toiling is enigmatic in Qoheleth's view as Bartholomew and O'Dowd connote, the Australian attitude on the other hand would suggest that if toiling *is* enigmatic, then in due time, everything should be right. As an Australian, such a predicament also reflects the greater concern that inheritance will take care of itself. The ideal is for one to work hard and battle it out, because the future is enigmatic, however, the spirit is for one to think positive in the sense that 'she'll be right.' The reading which Bartholomew and O'Dowd allude to reinforces the possibility that Qoheleth may not be implying 'vanity'. And it is a possibility which I concur fits well with the Australian and Samoan understanding of toiling.

3.5 Applying the methodology: Reconstructing 'hebel' as 'agaga'

Consequently, this allows for a different interpretation of 2:18 altogether. As mentioned in Chapter 2, the definition of *hebel* as 'vanity' banks on the assumption that Qoheleth was a pessimist. Yet, as Murphy inclines, Qoheleth was very much a recognised sage, and could not have possibly been a pessimist, as never does he

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[97]Bartholomew and O'Dowd,*Old Testament Wisdom*, 194

[98]Kate Burridge and Jean Gail Mulder, *English in Australia and New Zealand: An introduction to its history, structure and use*,(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 47

recommend folly.[99] Qoheleth would seem a pessimist if he had also recommended following the ways of the folly and the wicked. Yet, as the twists and turns of the book of Ecclesiastes reveal, Qoheleth was simply philosophical. So to assume that Qoheleth was pessimistic would be an ambiguous assumption, which further questions the translation of *hebel* as 'vanity.'

I would like to then direct our attention to the literal definition as provided by BDB, which translates *hebel* as 'breath' and 'vapour.' This understanding of *hebel* should enable us to enforce our own interpretation. For *hebel* has various other means, as implied according to the context.[100] Yet, if we take Crenshaw's position, who states that *hebel* is linked with the word *reuth ruah*[101] which means 'spirit', *hebel* could also be read in conjunction with my own context. Furthermore, Ostricker points out the significance of *hebel* connoting "that which is essential to life"[102] which contrasts with 'vanity'. I agree then with Crenshaw because he effectively establishes a connection between *hebel* and *ruah* through the meaning of 'breath'. Ostricker gives further meaning to this connection by inferring the life giving aspect of 'breath' as implied in Genesis 2:7.

The Samoan word for 'spirit' is *'agaga'* but like *hebel*, *agaga* can also mean 'breath'.[103] Ironically, *agaga* could also mean 'wisdom'.[104] Given the significance of *tautua* as already explained, the meaning of *hebel* as 'spirit' or *agaga* is fitting. Qoheleth's failure to understand God and wisdom would deem the concept *agaga*

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[99]Murphy, *Tree of Life*, 55

[100]T.R. Hobbs, *2 Kings*, WBC, Vol. 13, (Dallas: Word Books, 2002), 234. Hobbs provides one of many examples of the usage of *hebel* different to what is used in Ecclesiastes. In 2 Kings, Hobbs indicates the use of *hebel* in its literal sense.

[101] Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom,*129 Also, c.f. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 102

[102] Ostricker, *For the love*, 79-80

[103]Ama'amaleleTofaeono, *Eco-theology: Aiga – the household of life: a perspective from living myths*,(Erlangen: Erlanger Verlag für Mission und Ökumene, 2000), 167

[104]Tofaeono, *Eco-theology*, 167

necessary, for it coincides with Bartholomew and O'Dowd's perspective that toiling is enigmatic. The enigmatic nature of *agaga* is further explained by Ama'amalele Tofaeono, as he writes:

> *Aga* bespeaks the spiritual (when interpreted from *agaga* – spirits) character of the community, including the thinking process or the philosophy and psychology of a certain community. It includes their visions, dreams, anticipations, fears and hopes, or the way they conceive and face the ups and downs of life. This means that spiritual and social behaviors of the community are intimately interwoven to foster a specific ethos and a way of life of a society.[105]

Obviously, the dreams, visions, fears and hopes which Tofaeono lists enlighten the enigmatic nature of *agaga.* Significantly, particularly as Tofaeono has explicated, *agaga* ignites an alternative understanding of *hebel*. This enigmatic sense of *hebel* is also reflected in the spirit displayed by the *Aussie Battler*.

Intriguingly, *ruah* is translated as 'spirit' and as discussed prior, the word *ruah* is closely connected with *hebel*. The spirit of the *Aussie Battler* thusincorporates the same philosophy as Tofaeono predicates so to inhibit complications, I will use the term *'agaga'* as it represents the hybridity of my own understanding.

3.6 Is Qoheleth for 'real' about toiling?

So here is what I propose. The assumption that Qoheleth was a pessimist could easily be one of many assumptions that could have been made. In fact, Whybray has alluded to the supposition that assuming Qoheleth was a pessimist is "contradictory".[106] Yet, the purpose of this paper is not to contend with the pessimist position. Rather, as Douglas B. Miller defines in his work "What the Preacher Forgot: The Rhetoric of Ecclesiastes", my position is to promote a newer reading of

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[105]Tofaeono, *Eco-theology*, 28
[106]Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 64

Ecclesiastes which incites the ideals of what Miller calls the 'realist position'.[107] The realist position as explained by Miller means

> ... that Qoheleth can allow that some things in life are bizarre and defy explanation yet can avoid taking a cynical approach to the whole. Further, according to realist advocates Qoheleth does not merely allow for pockets of good in the midst of life's bleakness but actually holds together the uncertain and tragic with the good and deeply satisfying.[108]

What Miller does in *What the Preacher Forgot: The Rhetoric of Ecclesiastes*, is bring forth the various arguments in relation to the rhetorical sense of Ecclesiastes, as voiced by the prominent scholarship on Ecclesiastes based on the use of the verb *hebel*. These positions explain the various positions which enforced the interpretations that have been made of Ecclesiastes. As a result, the 'realist' position lays the foundational framework with which I base my argument.

The understanding of *hebel* as *agaga* thus allows for me to propose this: that the depth of meaning as *hebel* confirms my understanding of *tautua* whilst allowing Qoheleth to critique it. Qohelethcould not comprehend the 'spiritual' side of things. He could not comprehend the Divine, and as Murphy states in his essay titled "The Faith of Qoheleth": "He took God on God's terms. And God's terms were most mysterious for him. So difficult were they that he termed life futile."[109]

Essentially, as 2:24 indicates, there is some enjoyment to be experienced in one's toil. And this may seem confusing to the reader. The explanation then is to acknowledge that Qoheleth may critique toiling, but he may also see toiling as *ruah.* *Ruah* as discussed earlier is another understanding of *hebel* which effectively is spirit. Considering the significance of 'spirit' in Genesis 2 as life-giving, thus implies that Qoheleth may have had this in mind. After all, 2:21-22 identifies the heir as *adam*

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[107]Douglas B. Miller, "What the Preacher Forgot: The Rhetoric of Ecclesiastes," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*62 no.2, (2000): 220-221

[108] Miller, "What the Preacher Forgot," 220

[109]Murphy, "The Faith of Qoheleth," *Word & World* , 7 no.1,(1987), 259

which means 'man', a similar sense as found in the creation story in Genesis 2. Thus, the act of YHWH breathing life into man in Genesis 2, is somewhat replicated in Ec. 2:18-23.

Henceforth, according to the Cross Cultural methodology being employed, the term 'vanity' seems insufficient as a direct translation of *hebel*. The Samoan Bible translates *hebel* as "*faatauvaa*" whereby *faatauvaa* means "modest" or "of little importance"[110]. However, *faatauvaa* is insufficient as a Samoan translation of *hebel*. Encapsulating the life-giving sense as found in Genesis 2, the term *agaga* would be far more suitable. Thus, with the mechanisms of Cross Cultural Hermeneutics at play, the understanding that *hebel* is *agaga*, would then translate to say that according to Qoheleth, toiling is *agaga*. *Agaga* connotes the life-giving sense found in*hebel*, and this is the sense of the word which I find applicable in this inquiry.

Furthermore, as a Samoan growing up in Australia, I must acknowledge the Australian spirit which is exemplified through the *Aussie Battler*. The Australian spirit of the *AussieBattler* originated from colonial times, where low class citizens fought against a system that was corrupt and unjust. This spirit of never giving up permeated through to the Australian psyche where it was adopted in the life and struggles of the everyday Australian. Living in the Australian context, such was my own prerogative as I struggled to achieve above what society had expected of me. Such social expectations were low and were often magnified through media and were subtly realised in the work place. Sekiya comments on how the *battler* epitomises this spirit:

> From the 'toughness' cultural perspective, Australians admire *battlers* because Australians encourage people not to be overwhelmed by the harsh life which may face them but rather to

[110]G.B. Milner, *Samoan Dictionary*. (Auckland: Polynesian Press, 1993), 51

> 'bear up' and try to do something for themselves. Therefore, the 'fighting spirit' is highly respected in Australian culture.[111]

This is how the Aussie battler struggles, and this is how the spirit is manifested, by fighting above his or her weight to achieve what nobody else could expect would expect.

3.7 Fusing the two horizons

The mystifying aspect of the Australian and Samoan spirits contextualises the *hebel* that baffles Qoheleth. The fact that the spirit carries a certain mysticism thus creating a remarkably relevant rationale behind toiling is rather enigmatic; and having said that, it is clear that Miller's 'realist' position documents my own context. The 'realist' position reveals that the voice of Qoheleth has come to accept that there is a greater being who controls the fate of humankind.

It is not that Qoheleth considers toiling vain, but that an explanation behind the validity of toiling is something he cannot explain, because it is spiritual. I have therefore made a conclusion that in line with Qoheleth being a 'realist', he acknowledges that realistically speaking, YHWH has the answer that he does not have. Precisely, Qoheleth has come to the conclusion that *'ml* or *tautua* is better left unexplained, as the definition lies with the Divine. He does however implicate a positive sense in *hebel*, which is effectively translated as*agaga*.

Moreover, the concept of toiling which perplexes Qoheleth is better explained through the Samoan concept of *tautua* and the Australian notion of *battling*. *Tautua* and *battling* substantiate the phenomenon of pain as entailed in the Hebrew term *'ml*,cogitating it as a relevant undergoing for it leads to *pule* and success. This in turn

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[111]Sekiya, "Aussie 'battler'," 26

removes the element of vanity which had led scholars to define *hebel* accordingly. The nuance of ' *'ml'* is accentuated by the two terms, giving a 'positive feel' to the verb. The reading of *'ml* as *hebel* had only been done with a negative connotation, yet as the 'realist' position – which Miller promotes – endeavours to achieve, Qoheleth may have implied something more positive. From a Samoan Australian perspective, this reading is thus far more applicable.

3.8 Qoheleth's Critique of *Tautua*and *Battling*

The dialogical nature of Cross Cultural Hermeneutics on the other hand allows for Qoheleth's voice to be heard in my own context as a Samoan Australian. So we ask the question, what does Qoheleth say about *tautua* and *battling*? Perhaps Qoheleth could be heard through the voice of struggling immigrant families in Australia. Lenore Manderson points out that for all one's toiling, a person is disadvantaged upon migration. As Manderson writes:

> [I]mmigrant communities are disadvantaged by the loss of certain networks through migration and by the loss of salience of the networks they retain. While cultural capital may be something that one can carry around all the time—language, customs and cultural practices, beliefs and values—social capital only has value in given places and at certain times, and must be re-acquired with relocation. If so, then those who are secure and best educated will inevitably be ahead.[112]

Thus, in my experience as a Samoan Australian, I concur with Manderson's findings, because this is the nature of the situation in Australia. Co-existing with the rest of society when one is an immigrant is successful should there be a maintenance of cultural networks in the new setting, i.e. Australia. However, through my personal experience, I would have to disagree with Manderson's statement that "those who are … best educated will inevitably be ahead."[113] Education, according to Manderson,

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[112]Lenore Manderson, "Social capital and inclusion: locating wellbeing in community." *Australian Cultural History*28, no. 2,(2010), 248

[113]Manderson, "Social capital", 248

should have resulted in me receiving a work promotion, but unfortunately, in spite of having my Masters and five years working experience, a promotion never materialised. Education itself thus seems to be insufficient to 'be ahead' and Qoheleth probably implies this when he states in 2:22, "What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun?" (NRSV). Qoheleth thus acknowledges the frustration and pain I felt with regards to my hard work and my educational background being mysteriously disregarded by my employers. (c.f. 2:23)

Furthermore, Qoheleth's thoughts may also enforce the question of whether or not I am toiling by force, in order to maintain the status quo of a working society and at the same time, upholding the cultural ideology of working towards *pule*.[114] The idea of *tautua* and *battling* is to work and serve voluntarily, but ideologically, it perhaps serves as a way of getting us as Samoans and Australians to maintain a hard work ethic as it translates to a highly efficient society. Also, the Samoan *pule* may seem inviting, and perhaps inevitable. But as seen in some situations where a *matai* title is conferred on certain members of the *aiga* who reside overseas, who have not served or performed *tautua* to the *aiga* and village in Samoa, then as Qoheleth rightly states, "What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun?" (2:22 NRSV)

Qoheleth's voice is thus significant in translating our own frustrations in our own cultural context, because this is where the full extent of Cross Cultural Hermeneutics lies. It is not simply an opportunity for one to engage in eisegesis with the text, but it is allowing for the text to transform our own cultural perspective. This

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[114] C.f. So'o, *Democracy and Custom*, 164

is because Cross Cultural Hermeneutics is a dialogical process and not a pathway for one-way reading.[115]

[115] C.f. Dallmayr, "Hermeneutics," 24

CHAPTER 4
TRANSFORMING ONE'S HORIZON

After the discussion in Chapter 3 which involved applying the methodology to the text, certain key points derived from the discussion. The aim of this chapter therefore is to address these points and the implications they have for generating a newer understanding of Ecclesiastes, and my own cultural concept of toiling. And evaluate Cross Cultural Hermeneutics and the role it has played in this inquiry.

4.1 Can the real Qoheleth please stand up?

The book of Ecclesiastes is clearly a controversial book. When perceiving the thematic concerns of a book from another time and another place, controversy is imminent. Controversy even existed in the *sitz im leben* of Qoheleth according to Fox.[116] However, from what has been said in the previous chapters, it can be concluded that Qoheleth may have not been the controversial character he has been made out to be.

A Samoan Australian immediately has trouble with Qoheleth when he says that toiling is vanity, and I have a strong belief, that this is also the case in many other cultures. The challenge lies therefore in interpreting Ecclesiastes in a manner which is meaningful and relevant for the reader, because the problematic nature of the assertion that toiling is vanity is too great to bypass. A newer reading to what has already been said by scholars is needed.

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[116]C.f. Michael V. Fox, *Ecclesiastes*,The JPS Bible Commentary,(Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2004), ix

As the prior chapters entail, the voice of Qoheleth begins to emerge more clearly. It is through my Samoan Australian lens that I can first point out a discrepancy with the theme of 'toiling'. Yet, it also becomes apparent that the discrepancy is a result of the frailties of eisegesis. The word *hebel* simply means 'breath', 'wind' or 'spirit', yet the reading of one's own ideas into the text has oozed out its most famous interpretation as 'vanity'. Such a definition is figurative as indicated by BDB.

The problem with figurative speech is the existential factor behind understanding it. One must be able to relate to the context in order to understand the figurative meaning of a word. I hence fail to comprehend toiling is 'vanity' for my context suggests otherwise, and thus follows the other meanings of *hebel* as mentioned. It is my prerogative therefore to be able to read my own culture into the text of Ecclesiastes, in order to make sense of what Qoheleth is saying.

Significantly, as Miller hasargued, the view of Qoheleth as a skeptic is problematic as it fails to account for his positive admonitions.[117] The skeptic perception seems to be the rationale behind translating *hebel* as 'vanity' and its other related translations. However, as Miller states, Qoheleth is a 'realist' as he writes:

> The exhortations to enjoy life, to be wise, and to find good in one's work are not secondary to Qoheleth's main concern (the position of those who consider Qoheleth a repentant king or an ascetic). They are not half-hearted, wishful thinking, later additions to the book, or inconsistencies in Qoheleth's thought (the position of those who consider him a cynic). Nor are they something to do even though life is actually totally absurd (the position of those who consider him a preacher of joy). Rather, they are exhortations to the elements which, along with the fear of God, constitute the lifestyle which Qoheleth has been advocating all along through a process of destabilization and restabilization. He dispels the false hope that any of them can in themselves be a source of security or satisfaction, and he allows his readers to receive them as a gift from a benevolent, if mysterious deity. As gifts, they may be enjoyed for what they can legitimately provide.[118]

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[117]Miller, "What the Preacher Forgot," 220
[118]Miller, "What the Preacher Forgot," 234

It is a conclusion which parallels with the understanding which has been generated through the cross-cultural methodology that I have utilized. The understanding of *hebel* as a term which explains 'vanity', 'meaninglessness', 'nothingness' is a result of perceiving Qoheleth in a negative sense. Whybray clearly makes this judgment when he suggests that "*hebel*, whatever its precise meaning for him, denoted something which was fundamentally unsatisfactory and was the cause of a sense of deep frustration."[119]Yet this position denotes one of many meanings of *hebel.* 'Vanity' in particular is fabricated by assumptions as to Qoheleth's supposed frustrations and the negativity which he supposedly portrays.

The cross-cultural methodology thus opens up an awareness as to what the term *hebel* actually means. The English translation, 'vanity', in my view is insufficient, and fails to grasp the meaning of *hebel* which Qoheleth constantly voices.[120] So the question is: who is the real pessimist? Is it Qoheleth? Or is it the reader? Or was he as Miller suggests, a 'realist'?

4.2 Is this reading helpful or is it *hebel*?

As a Samoan Australian, the conclusion of is validated for I believe *hebel* is more aptly defined as *agaga*. The limitation of the English translation has been exposed accordingly, and for non-Jewish readers of Ecclesiastes, this presents a rather precarious conundrum. For if the English language is insufficient in translating the original Hebrew, how then do we come to understand the nuances of the Hebrew words as the author originally means? Seow is well aware of this problem and

reiterates the point that *hebel* is difficult to determine due to the fact that it can mean a

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[119]Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*,64.
[120]C.f. Bartholomew and O'Dowd, *Old Testament Wisdom,* 194.

number of things according to its context.[121] The term *agaga* thus presents one meaning, as Qoheleth's personal dilemma with *'ml* is understood clearly in the Samoan Australian context. This places Qoheleth's conclusions about *'ml* in the understanding that it can only be explained by the divine (c.f 3:10-12; 1:4-11; 610:12; 7:13-14)[122], and because *hebel* literally means 'spirit', the full sense of the word *hebel* as Seow mentions, can never be fully grasped by 'vanity'. *Agaga*thusacts a term which accounts for the divine understanding needed to contemplate the meaning of *'ml*. It also definesthe silence of Qoheleth over divine matters, as interpreted by Krüger.[123]

As determined earlier, *Agaga*, the Samoan term for 'spirit', as well as the Australian notion of the 'fighting spirit' as epitomised by the *Aussie Battler*, are terms which parallel Ostricker's proposal of *hebel* as life-giving. Thus toiling as *agaga* says that toiling is life-giving. Furthermore, the interpretation of the term *'ml* is better translated by the Samoan term *tautua* and the Australian concept of *battling* for these terms parallel the nuances of 'trouble' and 'suffering'[124] associated with work and toil. As the terms *tautua* and *battling* help bring out, suffering and trouble is necessary for future success and authority.

This is the essence of the methodology used in this paper, the fact that terms and concepts within one's own cultural context are able to bring out the true and precise meaning of the text. Significantly, the rationale behind Gadamer's 'fusion of two horizons' is made clear, because we as readers of the text are asked to bring our

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[121]Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 102.

[122] C.f. Joel S Burnett, *Where is God? Divine absence in the Hebrew Bible.* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 112

[123] C.f. Thomas Krüger, *Qoheleth: A Commentary,* ed. Klaus Baltzer. trans. Orville Cole Dean, (Ausburg: Fortress Press, 2004), 211

[124]BDB, 765

own existential being into trying to understand the text. As the cross-cultural methodology promotes, this 'fusion' of the author's world with that of the reader is more efficiently done when the reader perceives things through his or her own cultural background. For me as a Samoan Australian to dialogue through the lens of a Chinese man living in New Zealand, or a Fijian Indian would be superfluous.

However, as Gadamer states, it is critical that if we are to perceive through our own cultural context, that we must acknowledge who we are as we come to understand it, as he writes:

> What I described as the fusion of horizons was the form in which this unity actualizes itself, which does not allow the interpreter to speak of an original meaning of the work without acknowledging that, in understanding it, the interpreter's own meaning enters in as well.[125]

Gadamer's point here illumines the significance of valuing one's own culture and the significant part it plays in hermeneutics and understanding. So a reading of Ecclesiastes from one's own culture would be helpful for those trying to understand and familiarise through their own cultural concepts and terms. But also, where the nuance of the original text may fail to be brought out in our English translations, could be better explained and better understood through the translation of another culture as this paper has endeavoured to address.

4.3 Cross-Cultural Hermeneutics: Is it useful?

So the impetus of this research is to validate the idea that we as readers are part of the journey which the author is steering us. Our experience, our ideals, our culture provide a unique framework for understanding. This is the initial importance. But as this research has affirmed, cultural concepts and ideas contribute to a newer and greater understanding which enlightens the reader to different possibilities that

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[125]Gadamer, *TM*, 578

may exist. Prior to when this research began, I could not fathom the idea that *hebel* could have been linked to a word like *agaga*. *'ml* by definition has a far more apt equivalent in the Samoan language in the word *tautua* as opposed to the term *galuega* as used in the Samoan translation of the Bible. And who would have thought that an Australian icon such as the *Aussie Battler*, an absolute struggling bottom-dweller, could challenge the foundations of Israelite Wisdom?This is the door which cross-cultural hermeneutics opens; it allows for possibilities to be explored which may be oblivious at the first view. And it can only happen when the two horizons – that of the author and that of the reader – come together.

The bearing that one's own culture can have on interpretation must not be underestimated. To engage in dialogue with the text, is to engage in one's own experience. Dallmayr elaborates on the interpretation process:

> The interpreter cannot find the meaning by passively copying or transliterating the text; nor should she willfully foist a meaning on the text, thereby manipulating or coercing it. Hence, the labor is transformative: the reader must bring himself/herself to the text, but in an open manner, such as to allow for a new learning experience to happen. This is why we say (or why leading hermeneuticists say) that interpretation is necessarily dialogical.[126]

Dallmayr mentions the allowance for a new learning experience to occur, and this is precisely what cross-cultural hermeneutics has developed in this paper. The open manner which Dallmayr has highlighted has given rise to my own experience and my own cultural identity as a Samoan Australian to openly receive Ecclesiastes, and challenge the rationale of Qoheleth behind his conclusions regarding 'toiling'.

However, one particular weakness that Cross Cultural Hermeneutics has is that should the process of interpretation not be thorough, then the interpreter may sound like he/she is forcing the issue. The dialogical process should come to a mutual agreementwhereby the fusion of the two horizons is, as Dallmayr remarks,

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[126]Dallmayr, "Hermeneutics," 24

"transformative", rather than manipulative.This is the true essence of cross cultural reading, that both horizons are able to become transformed in interpretation.

4.4 Conclusion

On that note, the challenge for readers of Wisdom Literature and Ecclesiastes in particular is not to uncritically accept the text, but to allow for a dialogue to occur. Allow for the text to 'speak' and then for us as the reader to 'speak back' relay back our own understanding. The problem that can occur is that when we do 'speak back', we 'speak back' in terms unfamiliar to us. We need to converse in our own terms and our own concepts, and this is what Christian scholarship needs. This by no means translates into a neglect of the current Biblical scholarship, rather, it is allowing for us as readers to contribute to the discussion when the two horizons of the text and reader meet. Because in certain instances such as the theme of toiling in Ecclesiastes has shown, our own cultural perceptions may create a newer understanding which had largely been oblivious to those who had already spoken.

In conclusion, this inquiry probes into many questions which Qoheleth asks in relation to 'toiling' and as a result, such questions provide an intriguing insight into *tautua* and *battling*. Am I simply toiling, serving '*tautua*' and *battling* for the benefit of my *aiga*, family and inheritance, or am I being forced in order to maintain the status quo of a working society whilst upholding a cultural ideology?I have never questioned *tautua* or *battling* in this sense, yet Qoheleth's understanding of 'toiling' has such implications for my own understanding.

Also, the question of inheritance has proved significant in my understanding of *tautua* and *battling*, because there had been an uncritical acceptance of the necessity of toiling instilled in me.However, Qoheleth's fear of the fruits of his labour falling into the hands of an underserving 'heir' cannot be ignored. 2:18-23 thus asks

questions of our own understanding of whether we are truly serious with our toiling, given that our *aiga* will benefit. Should we have concern then for our heir apparent and *aiga*, or should we enjoy it to ourselves as 2:24 suggests?

As the term *hebel* has various meanings, the context is dependent upon for whatever reason that may be. Ostricker in parallel with the creation story in Genesis 2 brings out another meaning of *hebel* as 'spirit' which may imply breathing life into man or *adam*. In this sense, Qoheleth is portrayed as a positive character, who may not have incited a negative connotation as initially thought.

The response to these questions allow for the dialogue to be honest, because one cannot simply question the context of the text, without allowing the context of the text to question the context of the reader. Only then can Gadamer's 'fusion of horizons' come to full fruition.

GLOSSARY

Agaga	Spirit, soul
Aiga	Family
Faatauvaa	Insignificant, modest, of little importance
FaaSamoa	The Samoan Way
Galuega	Work, toil, job
Maota-tau-ave	"house-which-is-carried"
Matai	Chief
Taulealea	Untitled man, young man
Tautua	Service, Toil

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