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Hebel and Diminishing Marginal Utility: A Heuristic Theological Economic Reading of Ecclesiastes

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the Hebrew term hebel in the Book of Ecclesiastes through a heuristic dialogue with Hermann Heinrich Gossen's First Law of Diminishing Marginal Utility. The study does not claim that Qoheleth formulated modern economic theory, that hebel is conceptually identical to marginal utility, or that Ecclesiastes anticipates formal microeconomics. Rather, it asks whether Qoheleth's literary reflection on pleasure, wealth, work, and possessions in Ecclesiastes 1–5 displays a limited structural affinity with the economic idea that repeated or expanding consumption may yield progressively smaller additional satisfaction. Using a qualitative hermeneutical method, the study combines semantic analysis of hebel and yithron, literary exegesis of Ecclesiastes 1:2–11; 2:1–16; 3:12–13; 5:10; and 5:18–20, and a clearly delimited conceptual comparison with Gossen's framework. The study argues that Ecclesiastes portrays material acquisition, achievement, and pleasure as real but non-permanent sources of enjoyment. In this limited sense, Qoheleth's language of hebel vapor, breath, or transience resonates with the economic observation that satisfaction from accumulation is not automatically cumulative. The theological contribution is not a psychological theory of happiness, but a reading of Ecclesiastes that directs readers from possessive accumulation toward grateful reception of daily life as divine gift (Eccl. 2:24–26; 3:12–13; 5:18–20). The economic framework functions only as an interpretive lens and must not be read as an empirical reconstruction of Qoheleth's thought.

Keywords: Ecclesiastes; Qoheleth; hebel; yithron; Gossen's First Law; diminishing marginal utility; heuristic analogy; interdisciplinary hermeneutics.

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INTRODUCTION

Contemporary consumer culture often assumes that increasing the quantity of goods, wealth, or experiences consumed will produce a corresponding increase in human well-being. This assumption has been questioned by research on materialism, subjective well-being, and hedonic adaptation (Dittmar et al., 2014; Diener et al., 2006; Kasser & Ryan, 1993; Moldes & Ku, 2020; Nickerson et al., 2003; Pandelaere, 2016). Yet questions concerning the limits of acquisition and enjoyment are not exclusively modern. The wisdom literature of the Old Testament, particularly Ecclesiastes, also reflects on whether work, wealth, pleasure, and achievement can secure lasting human fulfillment (Fox, 1999; Longman, 1998; Seow, 1997).

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In Ecclesiastes, Qoheleth repeatedly uses the Hebrew term *hebel* to characterize human experience "under the sun." Traditionally rendered "vanity," the term literally evokes breath, vapor, mist, or smoke. Contemporary scholarship generally understands it as a metaphor for transience, intangibility, and disappointing outcomes rather than as a simple denial of value (Fox, 1977, 1991, 1999; Miller, 1998, 2002; Seow, 1996, 1997). Thus, when Qoheleth declares that "all is *hebel*" (Eccl. 1:2), he is not necessarily asserting that life, work, wisdom, or material goods are intrinsically worthless. Rather, he emphasizes their inability to provide permanent, graspable, or cumulative fulfillment.

This study proposes a heuristic theological–economic reading of *hebel* by placing Qoheleth's reflection in conversation with Gossen's First Law of Diminishing Marginal Utility. Gossen's law states that, under specified conditions, the additional satisfaction derived from successive units of the same good tends to decline as consumption continues (Gossen, 1854/1983; Varian, 2014). The purpose of this comparison is not to claim historical influence, conceptual identity, or theoretical equivalence. Qoheleth did not formulate a marginal-utility function, and Ecclesiastes is not an economic treatise. Instead, Gossen's law is used as a modern conceptual lens that may clarify one dimension of Qoheleth's theological observation: material increase does not automatically generate lasting satisfaction.

The primary textual focus is Ecclesiastes 1:2–11; 2:1–16; 3:12–13; 5:10; and 5:18–20. These passages explicitly address pleasure, labor, wealth, enjoyment, and the limits of gain. Ecclesiastes 2 narrates Qoheleth's first-person reflection on pleasure, building, possessions, and work. Ecclesiastes 5:10 addresses the insatiability associated with the love of money. The "enjoyment" passages in Ecclesiastes 2:24–26; 3:12–13; and 5:18–20 present food, drink, work, and enjoyment as gifts from God.

In biblical studies, *hebel* has been interpreted in several ways. Earlier traditions influenced by the Latin *vanitas* and English "vanity" often read the term as moral futility, emptiness, or existential nihilism (Crenshaw, 2010; Murphy, 1992). Modern studies, however, emphasize its literal semantic field of breath, vapor, or smoke and its metaphorical associations with transience, intangibility, and disappointing results (Fox, 1977, 1991, 1999; Miller, 1998, 2002; Seow, 1996, 1997; Sneed, 2017). Fox (1999) famously translates *hebel* in terms of "absurdity," while Sneed (2017) criticizes this thesis and gives greater weight to "worthlessness." This study does not resolve that debate. It focuses on the dimensions of transience and disappointing outcomes because they are most relevant to Qoheleth's reflection on work, profit, and accumulation.

In economics, Gossen's First Law concerns diminishing marginal utility: the additional satisfaction obtained from an additional unit of the same good may decline as consumption continues (Gossen, 1854/1983; Jevons, 1871). This concept must be distinguished from related but separate ideas. Saturation refers to the point at which an additional unit no longer increases total utility. Negative utility or disutility refers to a condition in which additional consumption reduces total utility. Hedonic adaptation is a psychological process whereby individuals adjust to changed circumstances, so that changes in consumption or life conditions may have only temporary effects on subjective well-being (Brickman & Campbell, 1971; Diener et al., 2006; Luhmann et al., 2012; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2012). These concepts are related, but they are not interchangeable.

Previous theological–economic studies have addressed consumerism, divine provision, and biblical critiques of market logic. Meeks (1989) examines the doctrine of God in relation to political economy; Cavanaugh (2008) critiques contemporary consumerism from a Christian theological perspective; and Brueggemann (2010) contrasts narratives of scarcity and abundance in Old Testament theology. These works provide important

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background for a theological critique of consumerism. However, they do not systematically compare Qoheleth's language of *hebel* with the formal concept of diminishing marginal utility.

The research gap addressed in this study is therefore specific: no systematic exegetical study has yet examined whether the narrative and theological pattern of Ecclesiastes 1–5 may be clarified through a carefully limited conceptual analogy with Gossen's First Law. The novelty of this study lies not in claiming that Qoheleth anticipated modern economics, but in developing a methodologically controlled dialogue between biblical wisdom literature and classical microeconomic theory.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative hermeneutical design with an interdisciplinary conceptual-comparative component (Repko & Szostak, 2020). The primary corpus is the Hebrew text of Ecclesiastes 1–5 in the Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia (Elliger & Rudolph, 1997). The selected passages are Ecclesiastes 1:2–11; 2:1–16; 3:12–13; 5:10; and 5:18–20. These units were selected because they explicitly address pleasure, labor, wealth, enjoyment, and the limits of gain. The study uses secondary sources from two fields. In biblical studies, it draws on lexical, exegetical, and hermeneutical studies of *hebel* and Ecclesiastes (Fox, 1977, 1991, 1999; Fuhr, 2013; Longman, 1998; Miller, 1998, 2002; Seow, 1996, 1997; Sneed, 2017). In economics, it draws on classical and contemporary discussions of marginal utility, consumer theory, and hedonic adaptation (Brickman & Campbell, 1971; Diener et al., 2006; Gossen, 1854/1983; Jevons, 1871; Luhmann et al., 2012; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2012; Varian, 2014).

The analysis proceeds in four stages

First, textual delimitation identifies the passages in which Qoheleth explicitly discusses acquisition, enjoyment, work, wealth, and the outcome of human effort. This selection is thematic rather than exhaustive. The study does not analyze all 38 occurrences of *hebel* in Ecclesiastes. Second, Hebrew exegesis analyzes the meaning of *hebel* and *yithron* through lexical semantics, immediate literary context, repetition, and the argumentative movement of Qoheleth's discourse. Particular attention is given to Ecclesiastes 1:2; 2:11; and 5:10.

Third, conceptual clarification defines the economic concepts used in the comparison. The study distinguishes diminishing marginal utility, saturation, disutility, hedonic adaptation, and the Easterlin paradox. These concepts are not treated as synonyms.Fourth, controlled analogy compares the biblical text with Gossen's law only where three criteria are met: (a) the biblical text explicitly concerns acquisition or enjoyment; (b) the analogy does not require modern assumptions absent from the text; and (c) the analogy clarifies, rather than replaces, the theological meaning of the passage.The economic model is employed as a heuristic analogy. It is not used to infer Qoheleth's psychological state, to reconstruct ancient economic behavior, or to claim that Ecclesiastes anticipates formal microeconomics. The criterion for the success of the comparison is not mathematical precision, but limited structural correspondence between the narrative pattern of the text and the conceptual pattern of Gossen's law.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Meaning of *Hebel* in Ecclesiastes

The Hebrew noun *hebel* appears 38 times in Ecclesiastes (Miller, 1998, 2002). Its literal semantic field includes breath, vapor, mist, and smoke. These images convey transience, intangibility, and elusiveness. Something

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described as *hebel* may be visible or momentarily experienced, but it cannot be permanently grasped or retained. This semantic range is important for interpreting Ecclesiastes 1:2. When Qoheleth states that "all is *hebel*," he is not simply declaring that created goods are evil or worthless. Rather, he characterizes human experience as fleeting and difficult to secure. Miller's typology is helpful here: *hebel* may connote intangibility, transience, and disappointing outcomes (Miller, 1998, 2002). In the context of work, wealth, and inheritance, the term often emphasizes that the fruits of human labor do not provide permanent security or guaranteed benefit.

This reading is supported by the literary context of Ecclesiastes. Qoheleth does not deny that pleasure, work, and possessions can be enjoyed. Ecclesiastes 2:10 states that his heart rejoiced in all his toil. Ecclesiastes 2:24–26; 3:12–13; and 5:18–20 affirm that eating, drinking, and finding enjoyment in one's work can be good. The problem is not enjoyment as such, but the attempt to secure ultimate fulfillment through accumulation. Therefore, *hebel* should not be defined as diminishing marginal utility. The former is a theological and poetic term for transience and elusive fulfillment; the latter is a technical economic concept concerning the additional satisfaction derived from an additional unit of consumption. Nevertheless, a limited analogy may be drawn: both highlight a gap between increasing acquisition and lasting satisfaction. This analogy is interpretive, not identical.

Gossen's First Law as a Heuristic Lens

Gossen's First Law, or the Law of Diminishing Marginal Utility, concerns the relationship between consumption and additional satisfaction. In its classical form, the law states that the additional utility derived from successive units of the same good tends to decline as consumption continues (Gossen, 1854/1983; Varian, 2014). This law must be carefully distinguished from several related concepts. Total utility refers to the overall satisfaction derived from all units consumed. Marginal utility refers to the additional satisfaction derived from the most recent unit consumed. Diminishing marginal utility describes a decline in the additional satisfaction yielded by successive units. Saturation occurs when an additional unit no longer increases total utility. Disutility occurs when additional consumption reduces total utility. Hedonic adaptation is a broader psychological process in which individuals adjust to changed circumstances, including changes in consumption, income, or life conditions (Brickman & Campbell, 1971; Diener et al., 2006; Luhmann et al., 2012; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2012).

The present study uses only the basic structure of diminishing marginal utility as a heuristic lens. It does not claim that Qoheleth's reflection corresponds to cardinal utility theory, ordinal preference theory, or any formal model of consumer choice. Qoheleth's introspective language concerns experienced valuation, but the text does not provide a basis for assigning it to either cardinal or ordinal utility theory.The relevance of Gossen's law to Ecclesiastes is therefore limited and analogical. Both perspectives question whether continued acquisition necessarily produces lasting satisfaction. Gossen's law expresses this through the concept of declining additional utility; Qoheleth expresses it through the theological-poetic language of *hebel*.

Qoheleth's Narrative Reflection on Acquisition (Eccl. 2:1–10)

Ecclesiastes 2 presents a first-person literary and theological reflection rather than an empirical experiment. Qoheleth narrates his pursuit of pleasure, wisdom, building projects, gardens, vineyards, slaves, livestock, silver, gold, and other forms of possession (Eccl. 2:1–8). The text portrays a royal figure with exceptional access to resources, although it does not provide a quantitative account of his wealth. The narrative distinguishes several forms of acquisition. First, Qoheleth explores pleasure, laughter, and wine (Eccl. 2:1–3). Second, he

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undertakes large building and agricultural projects, including houses, vineyards, gardens, and irrigation works (Eccl. 2:4–6). Third, he acquires servants, livestock, precious metals, and performers (Eccl. 2:7–8). These activities are narratively presented as expanding forms of possession and enjoyment.

In Ecclesiastes 2:10, Qoheleth reports a positive experience: "my heart rejoiced in all my toil." This verse affirms that his labor and acquisitions produced real enjoyment. However, the verse does not state that each additional building, asset, or pleasure produced measurable satisfaction. Nor does it establish a maximum point of satisfaction. The narrative reports enjoyment; it does not provide a utility function.

From the heuristic perspective of Gossen's law, this narrative may resemble a phase of expanding consumption or acquisition. Yet this resemblance must be stated cautiously. The economic analogy clarifies the narrative's concern with expanding possession, but it cannot determine the magnitude of satisfaction Qoheleth derived from each additional item.

The Limits of Gain: *Hebel* and *Yithron* (Eccl. 2:11)

The decisive evaluation occurs in Ecclesiastes 2:11. After narrating his acquisitions, Qoheleth considers all his work and concludes that it is *hebel* and "a chasing after wind," adding that "there is no profit (*yithron*) under the sun." The term *yithron* is generally associated with profit, surplus, or net advantage (Fox, 1999; Seow, 1997). In Ecclesiastes 2:11, Qoheleth's point is not merely that he received no pleasure from his work. Verse 10 has already affirmed that his heart rejoiced in his toil. Rather, verse 11 evaluates the ultimate outcome of his labor: its fruits do not provide permanent, secure, or ultimate advantage.

Therefore, the absence of *yithron* should not automatically be equated with zero or negative marginal utility. The text emphasizes the limitation of the fruits of labor "under the sun," not the saturation of consumption in a formal economic sense. Qoheleth's conclusion is theological and existential: human effort cannot secure an enduring advantage that transcends transience, mortality, and divine sovereignty.

Nevertheless, a limited conceptual analogy may be drawn. In economic terms, Qoheleth's evaluation resembles the recognition that accumulation does not automatically secure a lasting net benefit. In theological terms, his evaluation identifies the inability of created goods to provide ultimate fulfillment. The economic analogy may illuminate the first point, but it cannot replace the second.

Textual observation	Exegetical basis	Heuristic economic analogy	Interpretive limit
Qoheleth actively pursues pleasure, building, wealth, and possessions (Eccl. 2:1–10)	The first-person narrative lists expanding forms of acquisition and enjoyment	Resembles expanding consumption or acquisition	The text does not state that each additional item produced measurable utility
Qoheleth reports temporary joy in his toil (Eccl. 2:10b)	"My heart rejoiced in all my toil" affirms real, present enjoyment	Resembles positive experienced satisfaction	It does not establish a maximum point of satisfaction

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Qoheleth evaluates the outcome as *hebel* and lacking *yithron* (Eccl. 2:11)	The evaluation concerns the limited and non-durable profit of labor "under the sun"	Resembles the recognition that accumulation does not secure lasting net benefit	It does not prove zero or negative marginal utility
Qoheleth later commends enjoyment as God's gift (Eccl. 2:24–26; 3:12–13; 5:18–20)	Enjoyment is presented as a divine gift, not as the product of accumulation	Suggests a shift from possession-centered to reception-centered valuation	This is a theological claim, not an economic optimization claim

Sensory Desire and the Love of Money (Eccl. 1:8; 5:10)

Ecclesiastes 1:8 states that the eye is not satisfied with seeing and the ear is not filled with hearing. In its literary context, this verse contributes to Qoheleth's broader reflection on the repetitive and elusive character of human experience. It does not provide a psychological measurement of sensory adaptation. However, it expresses a qualitative observation: perception and desire may continue even when experience does not culminate in lasting fulfillment. Ecclesiastes 5:10 makes a related observation concerning wealth: "Whoever loves money never has enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with their income." The verse does not claim that income has no effect on well-being. Rather, it addresses the insatiability that arises when money becomes an object of desire. The problem is not money as such, but the love of money as a source of ultimate security.

In contemporary behavioral economics, this pattern may be placed in conversation with hedonic adaptation. Hedonic adaptation describes the tendency of subjective well-being to adjust after changes in circumstances, including changes in consumption or income (Brickman & Campbell, 1971; Diener et al., 2006; Luhmann et al., 2012; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2012). This concept is broader than diminishing marginal utility and should not be equated with it. Nevertheless, both highlight the possibility that increased acquisition may not produce a permanent increase in satisfaction. The analogy remains interpretive. Qoheleth's statement in Ecclesiastes 5:10 is a theological observation concerning desire, contentment, and the limits of wealth. It is not an empirical finding about income and subjective well-being.

Theological Reframing: Enjoyment as Divine Gift

Qoheleth's response to the limits of accumulation is not fatalism or nihilistic despair. Throughout Ecclesiastes, he commends the enjoyment of food, drink, work, and daily life. In Ecclesiastes 2:24–26, the ability to enjoy one's labor is presented as a gift from God. In Ecclesiastes 3:12–13, Qoheleth states that it is good for human beings to do good and to enjoy their work, because this too is a gift of God. In Ecclesiastes 5:18–20, he affirms that receiving one's portion and enjoying one's labor are gifts from God. These passages are central to the theological argument of this study. The "gift" motif does not function as a psychological technique for overcoming hedonic adaptation. Rather, it reframes enjoyment theologically: human beings receive the capacity to enjoy ordinary life as a divine gift, rather than secure fulfillment through accumulation.

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This theological reframing may be described as a shift from possession-centered to reception-centered valuation. In the possession-centered pattern, fulfillment is sought through expanding stock: more wealth, more property, more experiences. In the reception-centered pattern, fulfillment is received through grateful participation in the present gifts of God: food, drink, work, and companionship. This reading is consistent with Cavanaugh's (2008) critique of consumerism as a form of disordered desire, as well as with Brueggemann's (2010) contrast between scarcity-driven hoarding and divine provision. However, the present study does not claim that Qoheleth formulated a post-growth economic program. Its claim is more modest: Ecclesiastes offers a theological logic of sufficiency that may inform contemporary reflection on consumption.

Interdisciplinary Implications

First, for biblical hermeneutics, the study suggests that Ecclesiastes presents a sophisticated theological reflection on the limits of human acquisition. Qoheleth does not reject creation, work, or material goods. Instead, he relativizes their capacity to secure ultimate fulfillment. The economic analogy may clarify this aspect of Qoheleth's argument, but the theological meaning remains primary. Second, for contemporary discussions of consumption, the study offers a conceptual resource for critiques of materialism and consumerism. The argument does not claim that diminishing marginal utility proves the failure of aggregate welfare or that Qoheleth anticipated the Easterlin paradox. Rather, the Easterlin paradox is a contemporary economic debate that may be placed in conversation with Qoheleth's theological observations concerning wealth, desire, and satisfaction (Easterlin, 1974, 1995, 2001; Kahneman & Deaton, 2010; Killingsworth et al., 2023; Sacks et al., 2012). The relationship is dialogical, not evidentiary.

Contemporary research also shows that a strong materialistic orientation is associated with lower personal well-being (Dittmar et al., 2014; Kasser & Ryan, 1993, 1996; Moldes & Ku, 2020; Nickerson et al., 2003). These findings may be placed in conversation with Qoheleth's critique of possessive accumulation, but they do not prove that Qoheleth anticipated modern psychology. The theological claim remains primary: Ecclesiastes relativizes wealth because created goods cannot secure ultimate fulfillment.

CONCLUSION

This study has proposed a heuristic theological–economic reading of *hebel* in Ecclesiastes. It does not claim that *hebel* is identical to diminishing marginal utility, that Qoheleth conducted an empirical experiment, or that *yithron* in Ecclesiastes 2:11 denotes zero or negative marginal utility. Rather, the study argues that Qoheleth's literary reflection on pleasure, work, wealth, and possessions presents enjoyment as real but transient and non-cumulative. Within this limited scope, Gossen's First Law offers a useful comparative lens for articulating the difference between increasing acquisition and lasting satisfaction. Gossen's law concerns declining additional utility from successive units of consumption; Qoheleth's language of *hebel* concerns the transience, elusiveness, and limited advantage of human experience "under the sun." The two perspectives share a limited structural affinity, but they arise from different conceptual foundations.

The principal contribution of the study is theological. Ecclesiastes does not reject creation, work, or material goods, but relativizes their capacity to secure ultimate fulfillment. Qoheleth's call to receive food, drink, work, and enjoyment as divine gifts reorients human desire from possessive accumulation toward grateful participation in daily life. In biblical hermeneutics, this study offers a heuristic interdisciplinary reading that clarifies

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Qoheleth's reflection on the limits of acquisition without reducing his theological message to modern economic theory. It shows that a modern economic concept may illuminate, without replacing, the theological logic of Ecclesiastes.

In economic philosophy, the study contributes a conceptual dialogue between classical microeconomic theory and biblical wisdom literature. It does not extend Gossen's theory into the existential realm as a formal theoretical claim. Instead, it demonstrates how the concept of diminishing marginal utility may serve as a comparative lens for contemporary reflection on consumption, materialism, and well-being. This study has several limitations. First, it is a qualitative conceptual synthesis and does not test its claims statistically or mathematically. Second, it examines selected passages concerned with pleasure, labor, wealth, and enjoyment, rather than all 38 occurrences of *hebel*. This selection may limit the generalizability of the proposed analogy. Third, the economic framework is heuristic and analogical; it does not reconstruct ancient economic behavior or infer Qoheleth's psychological state.

Future research should proceed in three specific directions. First, a full semantic study of *hebel* across all occurrences in Ecclesiastes should examine whether the proposed analogy applies beyond the selected passages. Second, future studies should compare Ecclesiastes with Proverbs and Job to determine whether the structural affinity between wisdom literature and marginal utility theory is unique to Ecclesiastes or represents a broader pattern. Third, research should examine Sabbath and Jubilee motifs in relation to theological economies of sufficiency, particularly in conversation with sustainable consumption theory (Brueggemann, 2010; Jackson, 2017).

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