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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

The Empirically Corroborated Theology of the Meaning of Life in Ecclesiastes: A biblical and emirical analysis with reference to Malaysian Businesspeople

Tan, Sin

Award date:
2016

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THESIS

THE EMPIRICALLY CORROBORATED THEOLOGY OF THE MEANING OF LIFE IN ECCLESIASTES

**A BIBLICAL AND EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS
WITH REFERENCE TO MALAYSIAN BUSINESSPEOPLE**

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School of Philosophy and Religion**

**Submitted in Candidature for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Practical
Theology at Bangor University, Wales**

Sept 2016

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ABSTRACT

The intricate and complex book of Ecclesiastes has much to say on the subject of the meaning of life. Yet, concepts pertinent to the subject such as the worthwhile purpose of life and coherence in life, and for that matter, what the meaning of life means, remain insufficiently addressed in existing studies on the book. Considering that there is yet to be an adequately comprehensive work on the theology of Ecclesiastes in relation to the subject, this research seeks to construct an empirically corroborated theology of the meaning of life based on the book. It revisits the teaching of Ecclesiastes on the meaning of life and reconstructs its theology by engaging the thematic approach of interpreting and integrating the crucial themes in the book in light of the complex whole. These themes, namely that of הבל, enjoyment and undeserved suffering, are found to be subsumed under a central idea, expressed in Ecclesiastes 3:14c and 12:13b-14, thus forming a visible structure that rightly expresses the book's theology. The investigation has found that undergirding this framework is the book's distinctive teaching on the concepts of the worthwhile purpose of life and coherence in life, which thus reveal the relevance of the themes under investigation to the subject of the meaning of life. The hypotheses that express the book's theology are subsequently tested in a separate and independent empirical enquiry examining the life of those who claim to have found the meaning of life. The empirical evidence affirms the validity of the reconstructed theology of the meaning of life with respect to real life experiences.

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ABBREVIATIONS

<i>ABR</i>	Australian Biblical Review
<i>AUSS</i>	Andrew University Seminary Studies
<i>BI</i>	Biblical Interpretation
<i>Bib</i>	Biblica
<i>BK</i>	Bibel und Kirche
<i>BMC Med Res Methodol.</i>	BMC Medical Research Methodology
<i>Brit J. Psychol.</i>	British Journal of Psychology
<i>BTB</i>	Biblical Theology Bulletin
<i>BTB</i>	Biblical Theology Bulletin
<i>Can. J. Behav. Sci.</i>	Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science
<i>Clin Psychol Rev.</i>	Clinical Psychology Review
<i>CTJ</i>	Canadian Journal of Theology
<i>DBS</i>	Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal
<i>Dev Psychol.</i>	Developmental Psychology
<i>ED</i>	Euntes Docete
<i>EuroJTh</i>	European Journal of Theology
<i>FYCS</i>	Family, Youth and Community Sciences
<i>GraceTJ</i>	Grace Theological Journal
<i>IJQM</i>	International Journal of Qualitative Methods
<i>J Clin Psychol.</i>	Journal of Clinical Psychology
<i>J Couns Psychol.</i>	Journal of Counselling Psychology
<i>J Humanist Psychol.</i>	Journal of Humanistic Psychology
<i>J Pers Assess</i>	Journal of Personality Assessment
<i>J Pers Soc Psychol.</i>	Journal of Personality and Social Psychology
<i>J Phycol</i>	Journal of Psychology
<i>J Posit Psychol.</i>	The Journal of Positive Psychology
<i>J. Abnorm. Psychol.</i>	Journal of Abnormal Psychology
<i>J. Consult. Clin. Psychol.</i>	Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology
<i>J. Happiness Stud</i>	Journal of Happiness Studies
<i>J. Phil.</i>	The Journal of Philosophy
<i>JANES</i>	Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern
<i>JBL</i>	Journal of Biblical Literature

<i>JBQ</i>	Jewish Bible Quarterly
<i>JET</i>	Journal of Empirical Theology
<i>JNES</i>	Journal of New Eastern Studies
<i>JSOT</i>	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament
<i>MJTM</i>	McMaster Journal of Theology and Ministry
<i>Mod. Theol.</i>	Modern Theology
<i>Psychol</i>	Psychological Reports
<i>Psychol Assessment</i>	Psychological Assessment
<i>Psychol. Rev.</i>	Psychological Review
<i>Qual Res Psychol.</i>	Qualitative Research In Psychology
<i>Qual Res Psychol.</i>	Qualitative Research Psychology
<i>Rev Gen Psychol.</i>	Review of General Psychology
<i>RTR</i>	Reformed Theological Review
<i>SBL</i>	Society of Biblical Literature
<i>Soc Indic Res.</i>	Social Indicators Research
<i>StudBT</i>	Studia Biblica Et Theologica
<i>TBT</i>	The Bible Translator
<i>TBT</i>	The Bible Translator
<i>TynBul</i>	Tyndale Bulletin
<i>VT</i>	Vetus Testamentum
<i>VTsup.</i>	Vetus TestamentumSuppl
<i>WTJ</i>	Westminster Theological Journal

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The road to completing this thesis has been a journey both challenging and fraught with struggles. My inexperience and the lack of relevant academic sources in Malaysia were taxing challenge to me. This ambitious endeavour was also disrupted several times. My crippling kidney failure and months of confining dialysis treatments and related illnesses pushed me to the brink of despair – almost to the point of giving up the project entirely! Nevertheless, the journey, though hard-fought, has enabled me to witness and experience God's goodness first-hand, for he has placed many guides, many supporters, motivators, helpers, who have sped and blessed me along the way.

Firstly, I want to acknowledge the invaluable insight, advice and feedback from my research supervisors. Both of them have been very generous with their time and patience with my inadequacy. My lead supervisor, Dr. Eryl Davies has been instrumental guiding me on the path to competency. His careful, meticulous and honest critiques were crucial turning points for my research concentration and approach. The co-supervisor, Dr. Tien Fock Leong's influence stretched back more than two decades, where I then sat in a classroom as he expounded on the book of Ecclesiastes. It was he who planted the seeds that instilled an interest to embark on this project based on the book of Ecclesiastes. Dr. Tien Fock has been critical in his guidance, as he taught me to formulate the research questions, directed me to the relevant literatures, clarified my confusions and as a result, helped me to formulate a more cohesive interpretation of the book.

Secondly, I wish to bless my benefactor, Mr. Patrick Lim for his life-saving gift of a new kidney. His unconditional sacrifice and commitment to friendship has given me a new lease of life, and the needed health to face the challenges inherent in this journey. I wish to thank my sending agency and the leadership of the Malaysia Campus Crusade for Christ, for the permission and encouragement to embark on this research. I wish to

acknowledge and appreciate all the research participants too for their permission to be part of this project. Their candour and willingness to share their personal journeys in life has been indispensable to this research.

Thirdly, I want to express my heartfelt thanks to my beloved wife, Yee Bin, for her unconditional love and support throughout this journey. Her unyielding encouragement and patience during this turbulent journey has been a testimony of her commitment to help her husband succeed. I wish to appreciate my children, Matthias, Zechariah and Seraphines, with their frequent cries of ‘Ecclesiastes again?’, for graciously enduring my stress and emotional strain during those periods of uncertainty throughout the journey. Without their prayers, love, understanding and support, this journey would have been much more taxing, if not impossible.

CHAPTER 1

BASIS AND METHODOLOGY

1.1 ECCLESIASTES AND THE MEANING OF LIFE

The book of Ecclesiastes, despite its engaging spectrum of perspectives and interpretations, is generally accepted as a book depicting Qoheleth's struggle with the reality of הבל and the profitlessness of human toil 'under the sun' (1:2-3).¹ A common interpretation, with some degree of variation and emphasis, takes the book as Qoheleth's quest to understand 'about life, universe and everything,'² or what the meaning of life constitutes or a search to understand the 'different meanings for existence'³ and a 'philosophical inquiry about life's meaning and purpose.'⁴ By "variation" it refers to the different scopes and aspects of the meaning in life and by "emphasis" the weight of this inquiry on the overall message of the literature. Several biblical scholars who have investigated the nature, purpose and function of wisdom in Ecclesiastes similarly trace

¹ The book of Ecclesiastes covers a wide spectrum of subjects and often opposing poles of views and interpretations. Some of these views, among others, argue that Ecclesiastes is a genre-less piece of literature, as it is believed to have been written on loose papers that were mixed up and hence it is full of contradictions and lacking in a discernible message. See Gustav Bickell, *Der Prediger über den Wert des Daseins: Wiederherstellung des Bisher zerstückelten Textes* (Innsbruck: Wagner, 1884), 1-45. Others understand the book as a work of art in which the meaning remains subjective to readers. See Benjamin Lyle Berger, "Qoheleth and the Exegesis of the Absurd," *Biblical Interpretation* Vol. IX No. 2 (2001), 141-179. For more of the history of interpretation, see Eric S. Christianson, *Ecclesiastes Through the Centuries* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 17-84. Interestingly, despite the variety of views, it is observed that the book depicts one's tension with the reality of הבל and the profitlessness of human toil 'under the sun'. If there is an issue of contention, it is the question surrounding the time when the struggle took place. Is the book depicting Qoheleth's current struggle, or is he presenting a reality under the sun, providing a solution or, in Crenshaw's words, 'best option' on how one ought to live amidst such reality, although one may reason that the exhortation is an outcome of his earlier struggle? See James L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), 28. Even when considering the contention above, the main issue still remains, namely that the book is about his interaction with הבל and the profitlessness of human toil under the sun.

² Philip Graham Ryken, *Why Everything Matters*, ed. R. Kent Hughes (Illinois: Crossway, 2010), 35.

³ Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 78.

⁴ Ardel B. Caneday, "Qoheleth: Enigmatic Pessimist or Godly Sage?" *Grace Theological Journal* 7.1 (1986) 21-56, 44.

Qoheleth's "corrective wisdom" to his reaction against a world which he "discovered" to be void of any intelligible pattern,⁵ and where the meaning and key to life are inaccessible.⁶ The phrase "corrective wisdom" expresses what is considered a key reason for Ecclesiastes, which is to "correct" or in Murphy's phrase 'purify and extend'⁷ the wisdom inherited from the elders deemed unworkable and unsustainable by empirical observations.⁸

The postulated relationship between Ecclesiastes and the search for the meaning of life has become the guiding context for quite a number of "how to" or "self-help" efforts in this respect. These works include *Heart Cry* by Briscoe,⁹ Limburg's *Encountering Ecclesiastes*,¹⁰ Jensen's

⁵ Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 25. Other scholars include Gerhard Von Rad, *The Wisdom in Israel*, trans. James D. Martin (SCM Press Ltd: Bloomsbury, 1972), 229-231. Duane A. Garrett, "The Theology And Purposes Of Ecclesiastes," in *Reflecting With Solomon: Selected Studies on the Book of Ecclesiastes*, ed. Roy B. Zuck (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1994); Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1979), 588 and Alistair Hunter, *Wisdom Literature* (London: SCM Press, 2006), 147-175. Aare Lauha, "Die Krise Des Religiösen Glaubens Bei Kohelet" *Vetus Testamentum Suppl.* 3 (1955) 183-91.

⁶ Robert K. Johnston, "Confession of a Workaholic: A Reappraisal of Qoheleth," in *Reflecting With Solomon: Selected Studies on the Book of Ecclesiastes*, ed. Roy B. Zuck (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1994), 133. Also, from the same author and title, *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 38 (January 1976), 14-28.

⁷ Roland Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 23A (Dallas, Texas: World Book Publishers, 1992), Ixiv. See also Fox, in which he uses the phrase 'to tear down' and then a 'time to build up' the entire concept of meaningfulness in Ecclesiastes. See Michael V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down & A Time to Build Up* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 133-139.

⁸ Traditional wisdom is believed to advocate timeless truths founded on the religious conviction that the world is governed by a predictable moral and just retributive principle, although the method and time of the outworking of these principles remain unspecified. See Ronald E. Clements, "Wisdom and Old Testament Theology," in *Wisdom in Ancient Israel*, eds. John Day, Robert P. Gordon & H.M. Williamson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 269-286. Nevertheless, the stability offered by traditional wisdom has in one sense given meaning to life, in that right action is believed to lead to a worthwhile and just outcome. Such stability meets, in Fox's words, a 'framework of expectation' and hence gives meaning to life. See Michael V. Fox, "The Meaning of *Hebel* for Qoheleth," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 105/3 (1986) 409. Qoheleth, as argued by several biblical scholars, rejected and no longer shared the conviction of his predecessors' formulas for experiencing a meaningful life. Murphy, for instance, opines that Qoheleth 'rejects traditional wisdom for the security it offers', and in doing so he reconstructs one that can better reflect the realities of life. See Roland E. Murphy, "Qoheleth's 'Quarrel' with the Fathers," in *From Faith to Faith* (Pittsburgh Theological Monograph Series 31; D.G. Miller Festschrift; ed. D.Y. Hadidian; Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1979) 235-245 and *Ecclesiastes*, Ixiii. Also, William P. Brown, *Character In Crisis: A Fresh Approach to the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 123-129; Martin A. Shields, "Ecclesiastes and the End of Wisdom" *Tyndale Bulletin* Vol. 50.1 (1999) 117-139, and J.A Loader, *Ecclesiastes: A Practical Commentary*, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Williams B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 10-11.

⁹ Jill Briscoe, *Heart Cry: Searching for Answers in a World without Meaning* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2007).

¹⁰ James Limburg, *Encountering Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006).

*Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon*¹¹ and plentiful others that offer solutions to the meaninglessness of life.¹² These works employ a range of approaches such as didactic and self-discovery formats, in order to encourage readers to “turn” to and “fear” God. The subject of meaninglessness of life or the search for the meaning of life is a means to an end.¹³ More exegetically explicit and scholarly works, however, include Shank’s ‘Qoheleth’s World and Life View as Seen in His Recurring Phrases’,¹⁴ which investigates Qoheleth’s worldview on the meaning of life, McCabe’s ‘The Message of Ecclesiastes’,¹⁵ which is an exposition on the theme of labour and the implication to the meaning of life, Lee’s *Vitality of Enjoyment in Qoheleth’s Theological Rhetoric*, a comprehensive exegetical work on enjoyment and the meaning of life,¹⁶

¹¹ Irving L. Jensen, *Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon* (Chicago: Moody Bible Institute of Chicago, 1974).

¹² See also R.C. Sproul Jr. ed., *Vanity & Meaning: Discovering Purposes in Life* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1995); Dan B. Allender & Tremper Longman III, *Bold Purpose: Exchanging Counterfeit Happiness for the Real Meaning of Life* (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1998); Gordon J. Kiddie, *Looking for The Good Life: The Search for Fulfilment in the Light of Ecclesiastes* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1991); Stuart Olyott, *Welwyn Commentary Series: A Life Worth Living and a Lord Worth Loving* (Darlington: Evangelical Press, 1992); Paul R. Welter, *Counseling and the Search for Meaning* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1987).

¹³ These works advocate that the key to knowing and experiencing the meaning of life is having the right purpose in life, which can only be discovered when one knows and fears God. The fear of God, as these writers argue, will prevent one from falling into erroneous pursuits that will lead to futility and frustration. These works also encourage the reader to apply the admonitions of Qoheleth into one’s life and to do good whenever one can, as well as serve God while one is still able to do so.

¹⁴ H. Carl Shank, “Qoheleth’s World and Life View as seen in His Recurring Phrases,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 37 (1974) 57-73. Shank explores Qoheleth’s worldview by examining recurrent phrases such as ‘under the sun,’ ‘fear of God’ and ‘all is vanity’ found in his speech. He asserts that Qoheleth’s perception of the world involves ‘a knowledge which is a ‘reflex-action’ of his fear of God and which permeates to the essence of the *meaning* of what this world of vanity is all about’. See Shank, “Qoheleth’s World,” 68. Hence, Shank stresses the necessity to understand and define the meaning of life based on the fear of God, which means that a God-centred worldview is a prerequisite for knowing and experiencing the meaning of life. Yet, since Shank’s work is primarily an investigation of Qoheleth’s worldview based on these recurring phrases, it is not sufficient to show comprehensively how these recurring phrases are related to one another and the entire whole.

¹⁵ Robert V. McCabe, “The Message of Ecclesiastes,” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 1 (spring 1996) 85-112. The work explores the relationship between Ecclesiastes and the book of Genesis, in order to show the motive behind Qoheleth’s quest. According to McCabe, the fall of humanity has brought a curse upon the land, making human labour a strenuous toil. Hence, McCabe understands the quest for meaning of life in Ecclesiastes as primarily being about the quest for meaning in relation to the context of labour. Furthermore, McCabe sees Qoheleth’s resolution for life as recognising that life is enigmatic and full of mysteries. Hence, one must embrace the inability to master life but also engage a ‘theo-centric’ view of life and enjoy the gifts that God has made available (food, work, spouse, etc.).

¹⁶ Eunmy P. Lee, *Vitality of Enjoyment in Qoheleth’s Theological Rhetoric* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2005). Lee’s work is a comprehensive exegesis of enjoyment passages, with the purpose of understanding Qoheleth’s theology of enjoyment in relation to vanity. His study shows that enjoyment is related to the ability to enjoy the

and finally, Caneday's 'Qoheleth: Enigmatic Pessimist or Godly Sage?' a brief exegesis on the relationship between the themes of vanity and enjoyment and their implications for the meaning of life.¹⁷ Similar to the works that lean toward "self-help," these relatively more exegetically explicit works build upon the search for the meaning in life as an assumed message in Ecclesiastes. Hence, with the exception of McCabe's work, which tries to explain how he arrives at this assumption, these works focus their attention on the meaning and function of a specific theme in Ecclesiastes and its implications in relation to meaning in life.

This postulation is deduced primarily from 1:13, which is believed to express a comprehensive inquiry to 'seek and explore by wisdom concerning all that has been done under heaven' (1:13a). Qoheleth's personal quest is stated from 2:1 to 2:26, and the concluding motif is that all is *הבל* and human labour has no profit 'under the sun' (1:2-3; 12:8). Briefly, 1:13 is understood to express a comprehensive investigation into what is good for humans to do in the light of the negating effect of death.¹⁸ The narrative of his personal quest and concluding motif reveals and reinforces the sombre outcome of that inquiry: ultimately, all human labour has no net gain. The motif (1:2-3; 12:8) serves as a haunting reminder, a conclusive verdict, that 'first to last nothing profits those who walk under the sun.'¹⁹ The sombre reality of life evokes readers' subjective response (based on their existing expectations) to what then is the meaning of life when there is no ultimate net gain in human labour. Evidently, it is a response based on a certain framework of expectations and hopes. The troubling motif may similarly bring about commentators' assumptions that this is the same for every reader, and in this case, even for Qoheleth.²⁰

basics of life, such as food, drink, work and community life, amidst a harsh world. Such an ability, which is a gift given arbitrarily by God, enables one to find meaning in labour, relationships and life in the context of the vanity of life.

¹⁷ Caneday, "Qoheleth: Enigmatic Pessimist or Godly Sage?" 21-56. Caneday's work, although a brief exposition on Ecclesiastes, maintains that the book depicts Qoheleth 'journeying' with his readers to show that arriving at the meaning of life is an elusive wish. Through a brief exegesis on the relationship between the theme of vanity, enjoyment and the fear of God and its implications for the meaning of life, Caneday argues that Qoheleth's motive is to dissuade humans from being preoccupied with the search for the meaning of life; instead, one should enjoy life *now*. However, since the ability to do so is a gift bestowed by God, one must fear God and obey His commandments. This interpretation implies that the meaning of life is about the ability to enjoy life and is fundamentally associated with one's attitude towards God.

¹⁸ We shall see more of this in Chapter Two

¹⁹ Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 35.

²⁰ More of this will be discussed in the next chapter.

Several biblical scholars, however, dispute the meaning of life theme in these texts. Fredericks, for instance, maintains that in the light of that expressed in 1:2-3, the comprehensive inquiry stated in 1:13 is not about the search for the meaning of life but an inquiry into the benefits of labour in a context in which everything is הבל or transient.²¹ In Fredericks' words, 'Within all the frustration in the book, however, the question is not one of desperation about whether there is any *purpose* in life. Rather, after one's investment of time and effort in being wise, Ecclesiastes evaluates whether there is any advantage to the labour involved. The emphasis in Ecclesiastes is not about human meaning; it is about labour's benefit.'²² The eventual absence of any advantage to human labour led to Qoheleth's 'search... until he knew categorically what is best for humanity to pursue during our [their] brief lives,'²³ that is, what is good for humans to do when labour provides no advantage. In other words, Ecclesiastes, according to Fredericks, is about humans 'coping with and thriving'²⁴ as they explore the significance of life and achievement within this transient life. The motive is about living responsibly 'in our very temporary and brief lifespan, and the brief impact of even our wisest accomplishment.'²⁵

Fredericks' interpretation is not an isolated one, though. McCabe's work on 'The Message of Ecclesiastes,'²⁶ for instance, similarly understands the quest in Ecclesiastes as primarily a quest to gain some advantage from strenuous labour, within the context of the fall of humanity, and as a result of land that is cursed by God and labour as strenuous toil amidst the obliterating effect of death. However, contrary to Fredericks' assertion, the fact that McCabe sees the quest and struggle to find significance and advantage in 'the sweat of one's brow' within the context

²¹ Daniel C. Fredericks, "Ecclesiastes," in *Ecclesiastes & The Song of Songs*, Apollo's Old Testament Commentary, Vol. 16, eds. David W. Baker and Gordon J. Wenham (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2010). For Fredericks' detailed argument and reasoning behind הבל meaning "transient," see Daniel C. Fredericks, *Coping with Transience: Ecclesiastes on Brevity of Life* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993).

²² Fredericks, *Ecclesiastes*, 22, 70.

²³ Ibid., 80.

²⁴ Ibid., 80.

²⁵ Ibid., 80.

²⁶ McCabe, "The Message of Ecclesiastes," 85-112.

mentioned above exemplifies the quest for meaning and purpose.²⁷ Hence, to McCabe, the book of Ecclesiastes recounts Qoheleth's quest for the meaning and purpose of life.²⁸ Reviews on the two similar works above reveal, perhaps, that how one understands what constitutes the meaning of life, and what it means to search for that meaning, is crucial.

A brief survey on the works of philosophers on this subject shows significant parallels between Qoheleth's inquiry (as understood by Fredericks) and the works of Schopenhauer in 'The Vanity of Existence,'²⁹ Taylor in 'The Meaning of Life,'³⁰ Nagel in 'The Absurd'³¹ and Camus in 'The Absurdity of Human Existence.'³² For instance, note the resemblance between Schopenhauer's view on existence in the 'infiniteness of time and space'³³ and Qoheleth's description in Ecclesiastes 1:4-10:

That which *has been* no longer *is*; it as little exists as does that which has never been. But everything that is in the next moment *has been*. Thus the most insignificant present has over the most significant past the advantage of *actuality*, which means that the former bears to the latter the relation of something to nothing.³⁴

One generation passes away one and one generation comes but the earth stays forever... There is no remembrance of earlier and either of the things later; neither there is any remembrance with the things that shall come after that shall come. (Ecclesiastes 1:4-10)

²⁷ Ibid., 96.

²⁸ Ibid., 93.

²⁹ Arthur Schopenhauer, "On the Vanity of Existence" in *The Meaning of Life*, 2nd ed., ed. E.D. Klemke (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 67-70. Schopenhauer's work represents a school of thought that sees life as a whole as painful and, as such, not worth living. Other notable essays that share a similar idea are David Benatar, "Why It is better never to come into Existence?" in *Life, Death and Meaning: Key Philosophical Readings on the big Questions*, 2nd Ed., ed. David Benatar (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2010), 155-167. See also Elias Canetti, *The Human Province*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York: Seabury Press, 1978).

³⁰ Richard Taylor, "The Meaning of Life," in *Life, Death and Meaning: Key Philosophical Readings on the big Questions*, 2nd Ed., ed. David Benatar (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2010), 21-30.

³¹ Thomas Nagel, "The Absurd," in *Life, Death and Meaning: Key Philosophical Readings on the big Questions*, 2nd Ed., ed. David Benatar (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2010), 31-42.

³² Albert Camus, "The Absurdity of Human Existence," in *The Meaning of Life*, 2nd Ed., ed. E.D. Klemke (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 94-100.

³³ Ibid., 67-70.

³⁴ Schopenhauer, "On the Vanity of Existence," 67.

Also, the impetus for making sense of the meaning of repetitive activities and suffering within the finitude of life is described as follows:

Life presents itself first and foremost as a task: the task of maintaining itself, *de gagnersa vie*. If this task is accomplished, what has been gained is a burden, and there then appears a second task: That of doing something with it so as to ward off boredom, which hovers over every secure life like a bird of prey.³⁵

“Vanity of vanities,” says Qoheleth, “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity. What does man profit from all the labour which he toil under the sun?” (1:2-3)

In a similar vein, Camus goes on to suggest that repetitive, endless and purposeless toil and eventually death aptly express the notion that life is absurd. Such a fitting reflection of meaninglessness derives from the point of philosophical reasoning, conveying suicide as a natural option. Although not going as far as Camus, note the resemblance with Qoheleth’s words:

So I hated life because the toil that is done under the heaven is grievous to me. All is profitless, a striving after the wind. I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun because I must leave them to the one who comes after me (Ecclesiastes 2:17-19).

More interestingly, the impetus behind philosophy and Qoheleth’s investigation are strikingly similar. Consider the similarities below:

There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest – whether or not the world has three dimensions, whether the mind has nine or twelve categories – comes afterwards. These are games; one must first answer.³⁶

I set my heart to seek and to explore by wisdom all that is done under heavens. It is a grievous preoccupation that God has given to the sons of man to be afflicted with (Ecclesiastes 1:13).

³⁵ Ibid., 69

³⁶ Camus, “The Absurdity of Human Existence,” 94.

The fundamental task of philosophy is about making sense of toilsome and repetitive labour, and even life as a whole, in the light of its transitory nature.³⁷ Hence, the parallel between Qoheleth's inquiry and the work of philosophers is found in the themes concerned with subjects such as the search for the benefit of grievous and repetitive labour and the negating effect of death. More so, this parallel can be traced back to the impetus of the inquiry, which is driven by the need to make sense of labour and the significance of life in the light of death or, in Fredericks' deduction, the transient nature of life.³⁸

Therefore, despite Fredericks' assertion, Qoheleth's inquiry into the advantage of grievous labour, the value of wisdom, the permanency of success, the meaning of true enjoyment and the rationale for undeserved suffering in the face of the levelling effect of death do indeed indicate an expression to make sense of life. What is the benefit of labour when everything is הבל or transient? How can one live responsibly in one's temporal and brief lifespan? These are conceptual questions on the meaning of life.

Gordis and Fox actually built their works on such parallels. Gordis' work, for instance, although primarily a commentary on the book of Ecclesiastes, has a section that explores the similarities and differences between modern existentialists' with Qoheleth's perceptions on the meaning of life and in what ways these perceptions affect one's attitude to life.³⁹ After examining the similarities and conflicting thoughts of several important existentialists (within the movement of existentialism), Gordis finds a common stance on the issue surrounding the question on the meaning of life, in that the authors advocate the non-existence of the meaning of life in the cosmic sense. As Gordis observes, the existentialists have to confront life courageously in the face of inevitable annihilation. The search for the meaning in life is hence driven by its preoccupation with meaninglessness and death. Gordis compares the existentialists' preoccupation with insights taken from the books of Job and of Ecclesiastes, especially in view

³⁷ Although this may be a case of oversimplification, it is primarily the focus and essence of Taylor's work "The Meaning of Life" and Nagel's "The Absurd."

³⁸ For instance, Camus asserts that the question on the meaning of life is the most important question that philosophy must address, for in the light of death and the absence of any knowledge of the purpose for the individual and humanity, human existence and associated activities are absurd, and suicide is therefore a logical option. See Camus, "The Absurdity of Human Existence," 94-100.

³⁹ Robert Gordis, *Koheleth: The man and His World* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 112-121.

of Qoheleth's attitude to life. Furthermore, Gordis asserts that contrary to the stance of the existentialists, Qoheleth is convinced that the cosmic meaning defining one's meaning in life exists, though it is veiled from him and humanity as a whole. Such a conviction enables him to embrace every situation with 'joyous acceptance'⁴⁰ despite the inaccessibility of the meaning of life and the certainty of the negating effect of death. In other words, Qoheleth's attitude to life is one of joy, which is pitted against the existentialists' 'courage born of desperation.'⁴¹

The parallel is more explicit and precise in Fox's work, as seen in his adoption of Camus' perspective into his interpretation of הבל and the nature of Qoheleth's struggle.⁴² To explain further, Camus' works, specifically on the 'Myth of Sisyphus'⁴³ and the 'Absurdity of Human Existence,'⁴⁴ investigate the meaning of life against a backdrop of laborious, unending and repetitive work. Life in the context of such labour, according to Camus, is absurd. By "absurd," Camus means the absence of unity or a disjunction of harmony between an action and an outcome. In this context, working laboriously is "absurd" in the absence of a desired outcome from toil. Based on the same principle, in the light of the negating effect of death over one's labour and achievements, and in the absence of any knowledge of the purpose for the individual and humanity, human existence (and activities) is indeed absurd.⁴⁵ Fox argues that Qoheleth experienced and observed a similar violation of the principle. Meaningfulness, according to Fox, occurs when an action produces an appropriate consequence, and so a violation of this principle causes a sense of meaninglessness which, according to Fox, is the reason for the absurdity of life.⁴⁶ Hence, based on Camus' works, Fox interprets הבל as "absurd," in order to reflect an inner

⁴⁰ Ibid., 119.

⁴¹ Ibid., 119.

⁴² Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 133-139. Other works that examine the relationship between Camus and Qoheleth include Morgan's work on the spiritual dimension of Camus' Myth of Sisyphus. It is not, however, a biblical work on the book of Ecclesiastes. See Justin Keith Morgan, *Living in the Tensions: Camus, Qoheleth and the Confrontation with the Absurd* (M.A. Thesis, Liberty University, 2011); Also from the same author, "The Burden of Knowing: Camus, Qohelet, and the Limitation of Human Reason," *Eleutheria* Vol.2 Issue 1 (2012) 77-93.

⁴³ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage International, 1991), 119-123.

⁴⁴ Camus, "The Absurdity of Human Existence," 94-100.

⁴⁵ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 119-123.

⁴⁶ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 138-139

tension of ‘disjunction between two phenomena that are thought to be linked by a bond of harmony or causality,’⁴⁷ though the translation is fundamentally foreign to the Hebrew Bible.

Despite the relevance of Ecclesiastes on the subject of the meaning of life, there is no doubt that the relevance and relationship have not been explored adequately. Several pertinent questions, such as “what is the meaning of life?” or “what is meant by the meaningfulness of life?” remain confusingly obscure. Accordingly, there is yet another exegetical work that adequately shows the relationship between the different themes in Ecclesiastes and how their relationship can be understood as a whole, in order to provide a framework and a theological viewpoint on the meaning of life. Fredericks’ work, discussed earlier, perhaps highlights two related challenges or difficulties in this task. The first involves justifying exegetically the validity of interpreting Ecclesiastes in the context of the search for the meaning of life, and more so in the absence of the phrase “the meaning of life” or any explanation on what it means for such a search. The association of Ecclesiastes with the subject of the meaning of life has by far built upon readers’ response to the text and justified by the parallel argument between Ecclesiastes and the literature of philosophers on the subject. Secondly, the challenge is to ascertain what the *meaning of* the meaning of life actually constitutes. Since it has been established that Ecclesiastes is relevant to the subject of the meaning of life, and as the critique of Fredericks’ work has shown, confusion does indeed surround the concept.

A review of a more comprehensive work on Ecclesiastes and the meaning of life by Longman may demonstrate this point. He structured and arranged his commentary on Ecclesiastes in accordance with the theme of the meaning of life, which he then divided into two main sections: Qoheleth’s quest for the meaning of life (1:13-6:9)⁴⁸ and his wise advice (6:10-12:7). Longman sees the inquiry undertaken by Qoheleth as comprehensive in nature and directed at understanding the ‘different meanings for existence (1:13).’⁴⁹ The investigation includes identifying the meaning of pleasure for existence, which Longman further elaborates as the value

⁴⁷ Ibid., 31. For more of Fox’s discussion on the meaning of *הֵבֶל*, see also Fox, “The Meaning of *Hebel*,” 409-427.

⁴⁸ Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 22. I have taken the liberty of combining “Solomon’s Quest for the Meaning of Life” (1:13-2:26) and “The Quest Continues” (3:1-6:9) on the basis that both speak of Qoheleth’s quest for the meaning of life.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 78.

of pleasure as a source of meaning for life, the meaning of toil for existence as to whether it offers ultimate satisfaction and the meaning of wisdom for existence, as to whether possession of wisdom is worthwhile ultimately. The levelling effect of death, observed by Longman, is the ultimate reason for Qoheleth's conclusion that all is הבל, interpreted as "meaningless." By meaningless, Longman means that, ultimately, in the light of death, all is "valueless" in relation to existence.⁵⁰ As a result, Qoheleth is said to have failed in his quest as far as securing the meaning of his own life is concerned. The temporal anaesthesia for meaninglessness is enjoyment. In Longman's words, 'In the darkness of a life that has no ultimate meaning, enjoy the temporal pleasures that lighten the burden.'⁵¹ Nevertheless, Longman does not see Qoheleth's supposed pessimistic tone as the concluding voice in the book – he sees a second voice, found in the epilogue, which teaches that readers could avoid frustration in life by not following Qoheleth's path. The book of Ecclesiastes is hence considered a frame narrator's (1:1-11; 12:9-14) attempt to teach readers not to repeat the path taken by Qoheleth. One should instead adhere to the age-old tradition of 'fearing God and obeying His commandments.' Longman, however, did not show in what way 'fearing God and obeying His commandments' may contribute or be an answer to one's search for the meaning of life.

Similar to the works cited earlier, Longman built his work on the premise that Qoheleth sought the meaning of life. However, his comprehensive work is not able to show convincingly how he arrives at that premise, which raises doubt on the claim that Ecclesiastes is indeed about Qoheleth's search for the meaning of life. Despite asserting that 1:13 is an inquiry into 'different meanings for existence,' which he understood as the search for the meaning of life, Longman's subsequent elaboration shows that the inquiry is essentially about ascertaining the *value of the objects* of pursuit *for* existence, rather than what constitutes the meaning of life. In other words, it is an investigation into ascertaining whether an object of pursuit is of any "value". The evaluation on the "value" of the object of pursuit determines it is "worthwhile" or "useful" for existence, or it 'can be the source of meaning.'⁵² This is despite the fact that the rationale and justification for such a correlation is problematic.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 62.

⁵¹ Ibid., 35.

⁵² Ibid., 88.

The work might have assumed that the search for the value of the objects of pursuit is conceptually and qualitatively the same as the search for the meaning of life. However, the inquiry into the worth of the objects of pursuit, measured by their value to existence, can only show the degree of qualitative importance to life of the objects of pursuit. It is not sufficient to show that one is searching for the meaning of life, and neither can it be a conclusive or a determining factor as to whether one's life is or is not meaningful. The work asserts that the levelling effect renders objects of pursuit obsolete or not worthy for existence, in which case they are thus valueless and meaningless. This idea is seen further in the interpretation of הבל meaning "meaningless," based on the understanding that the object of pursuit has no value in relation to existence. This deduction is problematic on the ground that although an object of pursuit is found to be "valueless" in the light of death, it may not necessarily mean that it is "meaningless" in life, as an item can be ultimately valueless and yet meaningful depending on one's expectation placed on said item. On the same note, to discover in the long run that an item of pursuit is valueless does not render one's life meaningless. Hence, the exegetical analysis does not address the conceptual gap between the search for the value of an object of pursuit and the search for the meaning of life.

What Longman shows affirmatively is that the concept of the meaning of life rather than the search for the meaning thereof does exist in Ecclesiastes. The inquiry into understanding the 'different meanings for existence' in the light of death (and the inability to control the future as a whole) can reflect a search for the meaning of life, when confusion as to what it means to search for it is addressed.

We see a similar exegesis gap in Ellul's work on Ecclesiastes as a whole and the meaning of life.⁵³ Ellul's work is built on the premise that Ecclesiastes is Qoheleth's reflection on life amidst the tension and threats of הבל, and its implications for the nature and pursuit of power, money, work, progress and things deemed important to humans. It is also a reflection of the role of wisdom, especially on the possibility of wisdom as a remedy to the problem of the הבל of life. The reflections in Ecclesiastes, according to Ellul, are for the benefit of readers as they reflect on the reason for their existence and aspire to live meaningfully amidst הבל. Ellul's insightful

⁵³ Jacques Ellul, *Reason for Being: A Meditation on Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990).

reflection on the teaching of Ecclesiastes on the meaning of life, however, is built mainly upon sociology and philosophy; it is not an exegetical examination of the subject matter, though some exegetical issues are highlighted and addressed. This is seen clearly in his treatment of the meaning of הבל. From “breath” being the meaning of הבל (exegetical examination), Ellul expands it into multiple implied meanings (reflection). In his words, ‘This idea [הבל means “breath”] is so strong that we might conclude that *hebel* suggests [reflecting] the idea of nothingness: from the point of view of reality, unsubstantiality; from the point of view of the truth, a lie; from the point of view of efficiency, uselessness; and from the point of view of security, deceit.’⁵⁴ Furthermore, the link between Ecclesiastes and meaningful living is also based on reflection rather than exegetical analysis. This is seen in his conclusion on the themes of vanity and the meaning of life:

Qoheleth does not attach the label of “vanity” to some trite generality about life. If we think he makes no value judgment in what he says, we have missed the point. He means to make each of us reflect on our own life in its reality and concreteness. He does not say “life” is vanity, but rather your life, my life... If I am vanity, my life has very little importance and I can by no means consider myself as the center of the world. My work and my experience also amount to wind and a chasing after the wind.⁵⁵

Despite the twin challenge of justifying the exegetical link between Ecclesiastes and the meaning of life, as well as ascertaining what is meant by the meaning of life in Ecclesiastes, this research finds that Zimmer’s *Zwischen Tod und Lebensglück: Eine Untersuchung zur Anthropologie Kohelets*⁵⁶ provides an alternative way of addressing the concerned challenges. This is despite the fact that the work concentrates primarily on the anthropology of Ecclesiastes rather than the meaning of life. The brilliant aspect of this work lies in its way of validating the existence of anthropology in Ecclesiastes with the aid of an exegetical methodology. By “anthropology”, we refer to what Ecclesiastes teaches about humans as a whole, while “exegetical methodology” means that the study is built on exegetical rigour.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 52.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 126.

⁵⁶ Tilmann Zimmer, *Zwischen Tod und Lebensglück: Eine Untersuchung zur Anthropologie Kohelets* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1999).

To explain further, this stimulating work begins with an in-depth exegetical analysis of several anthropological terms such as רוח, לב, בשר and לאדם and their variations found in Ecclesiastes. Zimmer found from the analysis that the issues raised in Ecclesiastes concern the human race as a whole. Even Qoheleth's usage of the personal pronoun to describe his experiments in 2:1-26 may represent the general condition of every human. In his words, 'Die dabei verwendeten Einzelbeispiele zeigen—sofern es sich nicht überhaupt um fiktive Beispiele handelt—wenig Interesse an den betreffenden Personen. Sie stehen paradigmatisch für die Möglichkeiten menschlichen Lebens und werden als Arguments und Impulse zur Formulierung allgemeiner Aussagen herangezogen.'⁵⁷ More interestingly, an analysis of these anthropological terms reveals that humans have an intrinsically "built-in-desire" to shape and see enduring achievement in life.

With the concept of the human defined and specified, Zimmer moves on to investigate a number of anthropological themes in Ecclesiastes, such as death, joy and God. Zimmer includes the theme of God in the analysis, because anthropology, according to his understanding, is inseparable from theology.⁵⁸ The analysis reveals an anthropological issue: human tension between the reality of death and the inner desire to build long-lasting achievement in life. Hence the question as to what constitutes the profit of human labour is raised – a question about 'nach dem Ertrag des ganzen Lebens, nach dem Ergebnis, das am Ende des Lebens übrig bleibt.'⁵⁹ This phenomenon, according to Zimmer, signifies an anthropological crisis, known as the "human crisis," in relation to the meaning of life. Consequently, even though phrases such as the "search for the meaning of life" or "what it means to have the meaning of life" cannot be found in Ecclesiastes, the anthropological issues show that the concept or idea is alive in the book. According to Zimmer's analysis, the solution to the crisis is to recognise human mortality and to enjoy happiness whenever the moment is allowed by God.⁶⁰

Zimmer's work on the anthropology of Ecclesiastes affirms the works of other biblical scholars that state that the concept of the meaning of life exists. In addition, it offers a helpful approach to

⁵⁷ Ibid., 24.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 1.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 44.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 222. Our statement on the solution is overly summarised and admittedly an oversimplification. Zimmer offers an insightful analysis of the themes of God and joy and their implications for the meaning of life. See Zimmer 217-224 for more rewarding and insightful information.

addressing the concern for an exegetically verifiable method to build a theology of the meaning of life from the book of Ecclesiastes. Zimmer begins by setting out the parameters of the anthropological inquiry in Ecclesiastes, which is followed by an exegetical analysis of anthropological terms and issues in the light of the enquiry. Instead of trying to show that the document (Ecclesiastes) is about a subject of enquiry (anthropology), he shows that the subject of enquiry (anthropology) exists in the document (Ecclesiastes).⁶¹ With regards to my present attempt to investigate the theology of the meaning of life in Ecclesiastes, Zimmer's approach suggests that instead of seeking to prove exegetically that Ecclesiastes is about the search for the meaning of life, this research can show exegetically that the concept and the theology of the meaning of life exist.

Another helpful work, albeit closer to the purpose of this research, is Leong's *Our Reason for Being*.⁶² Although the work is primarily an exposition of Ecclesiastes on the meaning of life, it draws the relevance of the book to the subject by corroborating what philosophers mean by the meaning of life or the search for it and in what way Ecclesiastes is an answer to this quest.

Leong begins his exposition with a brief interaction with the works of other biblical scholars on the meaning of several crucial terms found in the motif (1:2-3, 12:8), such as הבל and יתרון. He concludes and asserts that the motif expresses the idea that 'in the light of death everything is transitory and is thus ultimately profitless and worthless even though items that come under this sweeping conclusion, such as wisdom and wealth, may have temporal profit and worth'.⁶³ His conclusion then links to his treatment of 1:13:

He [Qoheleth] reveals that he had committed himself ("set apart") to a comprehensive philosophical investigation into human experience in this world ("to inquire and explore with wisdom everything... done under the heavens"). What was he trying to accomplish? What did he want to know about human experience under the heavens?

⁶¹ This approach is also seen in Naoto Kamano, *Cosmology and Character: Qoheleth's Pedagogy from a Rhetorical-Critical Perspective* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2002), which investigates Qoheleth's pedagogy from the book of Ecclesiastes as a whole. This work is not discussed in this review, as the use of Zimmer is sufficient for our purpose.

⁶² Tien Fock Leong, "Our Reason for Being: An Exposition of Ecclesiastes on the Meaning of Life," 2008(?) TMs (photocopy).

⁶³ Ibid., 7.

Why did he make his investigation comprehensive? The goal of any comprehensive intellectual study of observable phenomena is not just to understand the parts but also to make coherent sense of the whole... Qoheleth is thus seeking a comprehensive understanding of human experience to make coherent sense of human life. He was thus searching for the meaning of life.⁶⁴

In other words, the motive of the quest leads to the concluding motif: the search for the worthwhile purpose of life and making coherent sense of the fact that life's events and experiences in the light of death lead to the sombre conclusion that all is vanity. The *meaning of* the meaning of life is narrowed down to the search for the worthwhile purpose and coherence of experiences. The validity of this concept is subsequently verified and validated by reference to the works of philosophers and psychologists. For instance, on the quest for a coherent life factor argued in 1:3, Leong notes:

As we have seen, the most important ingredient of the meaning of life is a worthwhile overall purpose. For without such a purpose of life does not make sense. But philosopher of religion Keith Ward adds, "When people complain that life is meaningless, they often mean they cannot see how the events that happen to them fit into any overall pattern. To see the meaning of a human life would be to see how its various elements fit into a unique, complex, and integrated pattern" (2000:22). Thus, to have a meaningful life we must not only have a worthwhile purpose to life for but we must also be able to see how the different aspects of our life, especially the painful ones, contribute to that overall purpose.⁶⁵

Leong's exposition asserts further that the purpose of Ecclesiastes is to persuade the audience to fear God and keep His commandments – the major themes in Ecclesiastes, such as vanity, suffering and enjoyment, are meant to point one towards that end. In light of what is meant by the meaning of life, Leong shows that the existence of the search for a worthwhile purpose and coherence in Ecclesiastes suggests that the book can be seen as the solution to one's search for the meaning of life. Leong's assertion is made clear in his postscript:

⁶⁴ Ibid., 11.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 11.

We know that throughout his speech Qoheleth is indeed talking about *the* meaning of life, and not *a* meaning or meanings of life. For he presents fearing God and keeping His commandments as *the* reason for being for “every man” (12:13). And he shows how “God so works” in and through human experiences “that man should fear Him” (3:14). Which means, his speech presents *the* purpose of human life and shows how the various aspects of human life, including undeserved suffering, contribute to this overall purpose.⁶⁶

The tight-knit relationship between Ecclesiastes and the subject of the meaning of life, as asserted by Leong, warrants more thorough investigation and study.

A helpful approach engaged in Leong’s work is the way in which the works of philosophers and psychologists are incorporated. Unlike works that are built on the parallel between these works and Ecclesiastes, Leong primarily builds his case from the exegesis of the passages in Ecclesiastes and, when it is appropriate, uses the works of the philosophers and psychologists to validate his points and enrich readers’ understanding. Hence, Leong’s work shows that in addition to the arguments of parallels as well as readers’ responses, the subject matter can be found and established exegetically when the concept of the meaning of life is clarified and understood. With regards to our present attempt to investigate the theology of the meaning of life in Ecclesiastes, the presence of exegetical validity offers a promising possibility for the reconstruction thereof from the book of Ecclesiastes, which will show comprehensively and adequately how different themes are connected and can be seen as a whole.

The above analysis of the works of biblical scholars shows that Ecclesiastes is not only affirmatively relevant to the meaning of life, on the basis of observable parallels between the books and the works of philosophers and psychologists, but there is also an exegetical basis on which to validate that it has a theological stance on the meaning of life. Although biblical scholars have separately established a link between the themes in Ecclesiastes with the meaning of life, what remains unexplored and unapplied is an exegetical work that could show comprehensively and adequately how these different themes are connected and how these relationships enlighten readers through the concept of the meaning of life. Hence, this research sees a launch pad from which to embark on an investigation to provide a comprehensive framework on the theology of the meaning of life which is practical to life experiences, more so

⁶⁶ Ibid., 84.

for a theology in which its rationality is consistent with empirical reality. The following sections will explain the research purpose and methodology.

1.2 THE RESEARCH PURPOSE AND METHODOLOGY

1.2.1 AN EMPIRICALLY CORROBORATED BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF THE MEANING OF LIFE

This research seeks to build an empirically corroborated biblical theology of the meaning of life, based on the book of Ecclesiastes. By “empirically corroborated biblical theology” (of the meaning of life) I mean a biblically-based theology built on a vigorous analysis of biblical and empirical data, the cogency of which is verified through theological rationality and empirical validity. Empirical consideration in theological inquiry is common practice in the field of practical theology. Hermens outlines two types of cooperation in this field.⁶⁷ The first type sees practical theology and social sciences as equal from a theoretical point of view.⁶⁸ The ontological framework and epistemology assumptions assumed in these distinct fields are bridged by a common research question and aim.⁶⁹ Data from both fields are considered to be “equally” necessary to verify the findings and to explain and build a common assertion. By “equally” it means non-prejudicial on data validity generated from either field. Whilst this model is theoretically and methodologically plausible, in practice researchers’ own ontology and epistemology may place different emphases on data selection and interpretation. Since no

⁶⁷ Chris A. M. Hermans, “Social Constructionism and Practical Theology: An Introduction,” in *Social Constructionism and Theology*, eds. C.A.M. Hermans, G. Immink, A. De Jong & J. Van de Lans (Leiden; Boston; Kolm: Brill, 2001), xi. See also Friedrich Schweitzer’s “Interdisciplinary Relationships and Unity” in *Practical Theology – International Perspectives*, Vol. 34 eds. Friedrich Schweitzer, Johannes A. van der Ven. (Frankfurt, Berlin: Peter Lang, 1999), 307-321. His work listed four types of cooperation.

⁶⁸ Ibid., xi.

⁶⁹ Several scholars have subdivided this model into interdisciplinary and intra-disciplinary sections. See Gerben Heitink, *Practical Theology: History, Theory, Action Domains: Manual for Practical Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm Eerdsman Publishing Co., 1999), 148 – 176. The difference is seen in how the cooperation is carried out. The interdisciplinary model is a joint enterprise done by two different researchers, departments or schools, each representing a specific field of concern, while in intra-disciplinary cooperation, one researcher representing two different fields of research does the research.

selection or interpretation of data is free from theory or theology,⁷⁰ the workability of this model will be challenged when two datasets clearly contradict one another on an issue. Hence, in the context of a practical theological enquiry, this model is engaged to enable social sciences to ‘shed critical light on theological statements... for further development, purification or even correction of these statements.’⁷¹

The second model adopted by this research is called the *ancillary model*, in which the social sciences are considered ancillary to practical theology.⁷² Under this arrangement, practical theology makes use of social science, that is, its socio-scientific assumptions, methods and procedures as part of theological inquiry. Since practical theology takes on a primary role, it defines the meaning of insights taken from data collected from social scientific procedures. Despite this arrangement, ‘the difference between the perspective of the social scientist and [that of] the practical theologian [will] lead to the possibility of greater awareness as to what may be hidden to an exclusively theological analysis.’⁷³ The broadened scope of observation enriches theological inquiry.

This research engages the cooperation model similar to the field of practical theology but differs in the motive and nature of cooperation. Practical theology ‘starts its theological reflections from [religious] practices, aims at empirically analysing practices and [is] directed towards the transformation of practices.’⁷⁴ It begins ‘when religious communities hit a crisis in its practices,’⁷⁵ or when the need to enrich an existing practice arises⁷⁶, thus creating the question

⁷⁰ Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* 3rd ed. (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 43-51. See also A.G. Van WYK, “‘From Applied Theology’ to ‘Practical Theology,’” *Andrew University Seminary Studies* Vol. 33, No. 1(Spring 1995) 85-10 for a survey looking in challenges on integrating theology with empirical enquiries.

⁷¹ Johannes A. Van Der Ven, “An Empirical or Normative Approach to Practical Theology Research? A False Dilemma,” *Journal of Empirical Theology* 15 (2002) 2, 5-33, 24.

⁷² Hermans, “Social Constructionism and Practical Theology,” xi.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, xi.

⁷⁴ Van Der Ven, *Practical Theology: An Empirical Approach* (Netherlands: Kok Pharos, 1993), vii.

⁷⁵ Don S. Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1995), 6. Also see Hans-Georg Ziebertz, “Normativity and Empirical Research in Practical Theology,” *Journal of Empirical Theology* 15 (2002) 1, 5-18.

on the meaningfulness of these practices as well as the theory or theology that sometimes undergirds such practices. In other words, empiricism is engaged in practical theology to deal with ‘the various aspects of Christian faith (or of unbelief) as they manifest themselves today in the behaviour of a certain group or individuals, most frequently in the light of the institutional dimension of Christianity.’⁷⁷ When necessary, the findings may be used to evaluate or reconstruct the theology that forms the basis of a religious practice, in order to meet the evolving norms of the affected religious communities.⁷⁸ These practices form the basis for considering and evaluating the validity of a theological praxis, and empiricism is the primary method in theological inquiry in practical theology.

An underlying perception in the discipline of practical theology is the inadequacy and even absence of a theology that can adequately address the complexity of practical issues in life. Even in the context of a religious community, theology alone *may* be insufficient, if not irrelevant, to grasping the process of secularisation of the community and the church. The nature of the issue is best expressed in Van Der Ven’s observation:

... because of the two processes of secularisation and church diversification, the contemporary religious praxis is not uniform, but pluriform. The interpretations of God, Jesus and the Spirit are numerous; the understandings of creation, evil and liberation are many; contingency, finiteness, suffering and death are interpreted by various theodicies, thanatological and eschatological models; the insight about the ethical relevance of the gospel within the field of labour, peace, justice and nature vary with numerous profane factors, the claims on the religious community are multitudinous; the variety of spiritual experiences is overwhelming. The conclusion must be obvious. There cannot be a blue print of ways in which theological insights can be applied, because there is no single present religious praxis.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ For instance, Andrew Village, *The Bible and Lay People: An Empirical Approach to Ordinary Hermeneutics* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2007).

⁷⁷ Bernard Raymond, “Principles and Methods of Practical Theology,” in *Practical Theology – International Perspectives*, Vol. 34 Eds. Friedrich Schweitzer, Johannes A. van der Ven (Frankfurt, Berlin: Peter Lang, 1999), 170.

⁷⁸ Karl Ernst Nipkow, “Empirical Research within Practical Theology: Some General Considerations in the Context of Modernity Summary,” *Journal of Empirical Theology* 6 (1993) 1, 50-63.

⁷⁹ Johannes A. Van Der Ven, “Practical Theology: From Applied to Empirical Theology,” *Journal of Empirical Theology* Vol. 1 (1988) 11.

Several theologians in the field of biblical theology share similar concerns. The discipline of biblical theology is said to be an ‘academic discipline [that] primarily concerns with what the text meant from the historical critical perspective,’⁸⁰ and is ‘pursued quite independently of the church and the ongoing Christian community.’⁸¹ In a phenomenon quite independent from the reason for practical theology,⁸² there are calls for biblical theologians to move beyond academic exercise and move away from theology detached from real-life experiences. Childs, for instance, stresses the *new* biblical theology should strive for relevance and provide guidance to believers and communities amidst changing and ‘burning issues of the day.’⁸³ Biblical theologians should be ‘involved’ and see biblical text as ‘an invitation to reflect on how life is best lived before God.’⁸⁴ Similarly, Murphy proposes biblical theologians adopt an ‘enlarged vision’ approach which, among others, invites theologians to study the text to evoke inspiration and challenge, comfort and aid, or simply reflect.⁸⁵ According to Murphy, ‘a more important issue [in biblical theology] is the apprehension of the biblical word by the community of faith – the way in which the Bible might function for the spiritual development of the believers... making it strike home

⁸⁰ For a further discussion on issues in biblical theology and the movement, see James Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999); Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology: A Proposal* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 52-74 and *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1970), 51-59; Robert Bornemann, “Toward a Biblical Theology” in *The Promise and Practice of Biblical Theology*, ed. John Reumann (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1971), 117-128; Charles H.H. Scobie, *The Ways of Our God: An Approach to Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdsman Publishing Company, 2003), 3-87.

⁸¹ Scobie, *The Ways of God*, 5. For a similar perspective, see also, Luke T. Johnson, “Imagining the World Scripture Imagines,” *Modern Theology* 14/2 (1998) 165-180, especially 172.

⁸² In fact, the impetus is not purely a concern for the practicality of biblical theology alone. It is also driven by the absence of a common agreement on what constitutes the biblical theology of the Bible. The call for the biblical theologian to move beyond academic exercise is, on the one hand, the need to address the problem of constructing a theology detached from real life experiences, while on the other hand it is an attempt to find inner unity in the Bible.

⁸³ Childs, “Biblical Theology in Crisis,” 92.

⁸⁴ Antony F. Campbell, “The Authority of Scripture: Canon as Invitation” in *The Institute for Antiquity and Christianity Occasional Papers*, No. 37 Ed. J. Ma. Asgerisson (Claremont: IAC, 1996), 21.

⁸⁵ Roland e. Murphy, “Questions Concerning Biblical Theology,” *Biblical Theological Bulletin* Vol. 30 No.3 (2003) 81-89.

to the modern reader.’⁸⁶ The issue herein lies with the interpreters and their interpretations rather than the inherent practicality of the Bible.

An attractive proposal comes from Bornemann, who suggests that the biblical theologian should begin within the questions that Israel, the church or the religious community asked, such as ‘How do we live in our world... in relation to the things and forces and people and circumstances all around us...[and] in relation to God?’⁸⁷ The answer, according to him ‘is not to be found in theology but to be found in how to live in our world in relation to God.’⁸⁸ When discussing theology, Bornemann has intellectual and academic ends in mind. Hence, he stresses that the answer to humanity’s basic religious questions is not given ‘*in intellectu* but *in actu*.’⁸⁹ This paradigm is reasonable, since writings in the Old and New Testaments reflect the life of the faith communities in relation to God and the world. These writings are theological,⁹⁰ albeit unsystematic but “practical” to life. Hence, Bornemann’s proposal provides a practical reference point for “doing” theology. That is, theology, a study about God, can begin from the questions people ask, providing answers to their concerns in order to live meaningfully in this world in relation to God. With this in mind, Bornemann is right to implore biblical theologians to engage biblical theology not as observers but as participants in the quest to find answers to religious questions about life and God.⁹¹

The cooperation engaged by this research is a corroboration of two distinct fields and research methods, in this case biblical theology and the empirical branch of social sciences in theological construction. The impetus is the construction of a theology based on the teaching of Ecclesiastes that is relevant to real-life experiences. Hence, contrary to current practice in the field of

⁸⁶ Roland E. Murphy, “When is Theology ‘Biblical’? – Some Reflection,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* Vol. 33 No. 1 (2003) 21-27.

⁸⁷ Bornemann, “Toward a Biblical Theology,” 118. The proposal is an attempt to address the “challenge of employing the common historical-critical tools of our age in the study of the Bible while at the same time doing full justice to the unique theological subject matter of Scripture as the self-revelation of God”.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁹⁰ Rolf P. Knierim, *The Task of Old Testament Theology: Substance, Methods and Cases: Essays* (Michigan, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1995), 23.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 121.

practical theology, it begins and ends with theology. Empirical inquiry is engaged to compare and contrast this theology with people's experiences, and in the context of our investigation it is engaged to compare and contrast the theology of the meaning of life from Ecclesiastes with people's experiences. This approach enriches the practicality and relevance of the biblical theology derived purely from biblical data analysis. More importantly, cooperation allows the theology to capture and reflect reality *more* wholesomely.

This research is grateful to McGrath's insight into the 'stratification of reality' from his work on scientific theology,⁹² which means that "reality" consists of multi-level or multidimensional realities which, when seen as a whole, reflect a fuller picture of reality. Based on the creation narrative in Genesis as his ontological framework for understanding reality, and on his experiences with scientific research, McGrath asserts that there is an observable, experiential-able and researchable multidimensional and levelled reality. Such a nature of reality implies the fallacy that one can assume a common epistemology or methodology that applies to all fields.⁹³ On the contrary, the existence of multi-levelled reality⁹⁴ encourages different fields of study to pursue its epistemic course and research strategy to address its distinctive layers of reality.

The "stratification of reality" concept implies the presence of a correlation between the different layers of reality, indicating the possibility of synthesising two distinct fields to provide objectivity and a fuller picture of reality. With this in mind, McGrath and several scholars have verified that two distinct fields and research methods in a common research can be bridged with a "connecting" or "contact" point that can be expressed through a common research question and

⁹² Alister E. McGrath, *A Scientific Theology: Reality*, Vol. 3 (London: T&T Clark/Continuum, 2006), 82-84.

⁹³ McGrath notes, 'Each level of reality may demand, not merely its own distinct mode of investigation, but its own correspondingly distinct mode of presentation... The stratification of reality also has important consequences for the type of 'understanding' it may elicit.' See McGrath, *Reality*, Vol. 3, 82. This concept is certainly helpful, as the field of theology, despite being a rigorous and objective discipline in its own right, has been perceived to be confessional in nature, tainted with interpretation subjectivity. From the lens of the philosophy of science, for instance, the "reality" propounded through theological deduction and induction alone is speculative realism or, in Blaikie's words, 'shallow' realism. See Norman Blaikie, *Approaches to Social Enquiry: Advancing Knowledge*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2007), 27. The demands for theological inquiry to be on a par with other sciences, especially social sciences, have led to the insistence on social sciences epistemology to justify theological inferences. See Van der Ven, *Practical Theology: An empirical approach* (Kampen, Netherland: Kok Pharos, 1993). The field of theology, on the other hand, treats claims from empirical evidence with reservation.

⁹⁴ Alister E. McGrath, *The Science of God: An Introduction to Scientific Theology* (London: T&T Clark/Continuum, 2004), 211.

aim.⁹⁵ The cooperation engaged by this research is made possible by the subject of the meaning of life being the connecting or contact point. The theology of the meaning of life, based on the book of Ecclesiastes, a subject which is verifiable empirically, makes a natural subject for such unique cooperation. We shall now explain the scope of the meaning of life adopted in this research, the biblical analysis and empirical methodologies.

1.2.2. THE MEANING OF THE MEANING OF LIFE

This research recognises the complexity of the subject of the meaning of life, which lies in the very nature of the subject itself in which a holistic understanding (if it is attainable) of the subject may require a corroborated investigation and synthesis of conflicting views from and within the fields of philosophy,⁹⁶ psychology⁹⁷ and theology.⁹⁸ This is in addition to the argument that any claim of attainability of the meaning of life, even when it can be scientifically validated, is fundamentally a human subjective experience. Hence, the claim that one has found the meaning of life is, in Nagel's words, a form of 'pretence,'⁹⁹ perhaps a more politically correct word for "self-deception." Accordingly, as some thinkers have vigorously argued, meaningfulness is in

⁹⁵ McGrath proposes a 'Connectivist approach' which seeks to understand reality by understanding the correlation between the different layers of reality. In other words, it identifies a contact point in the form of a common research question and aim. See also Udo Fr. Schmäzle, "Empirical Research in Practical Theology as a Strategy Intervention," *Journal of Empirical Theology*, Vol 16 No. 1(2003) 5-19 and Ottmar Fuchs, "Relationship between Practical Theology and Empirical Research," *Journal of Empirical Theology*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (2001) 5-19.

⁹⁶ Complexity is evident within this field itself. Besides ongoing contention between philosophers with existential and theistic worldviews, philosophers' stances on this subject are divided on whether meaning of life, and for that matter meaning in life, exists at all, thus resulting in a variety of views that range from absolute nihilism to bold optimism as solutions for life. For a brief on key contributors on the subject, see E.D. Klemke and Steven M. Cahn, eds., *The Meaning of Life: A Reader*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008) and David Benatar, ed. *Life, Death and Meaning: Key Philosophical Readings on the Big Questions*, 2nd Ed. (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2010).

⁹⁷ Specifically, Personality Psychology. This subfield researches and conducts empirical studies on "personal meaning" and "well-being." See the introduction to Paul T.P. Wong and Prem S. Fry, eds., *The Human Quest for Meaning: A Handbook of Psychological Research and Clinical Applications*, Irving B. Weiner ed., Personality and Clinical Psychological Series (Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 1998).

⁹⁸ The word "theology" used in this sentence is employed as a normative term to describe the study of the metaphysical and of religion. Whilst it is generally agreed that there is an ultimate meaning to existence, there is disagreement as to the identity, the nature of the ultimate meaning and the means by which one may achieve meaning. See Joseph Runzo & Nancy M. Martin, eds., *The Meaning of Life in the World Religions* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2000).

⁹⁹ Nagel, "The Absurd," 31-42.

itself relative¹⁰⁰ and conceptually obscuring and confusing.¹⁰¹ A person who claims to have found the meaning of life may, in reality, be living a less meaningful life than the other one who also claims to be living life meaningfully. Such subjectivity is aggravated not only by the relativity but also the instability and fluctuation of human experiences. Despite a proposal for a scale of meaningfulness,¹⁰² the scale is itself vulnerable to the subjectivity and relativity of human experiences. Hence, real meaningfulness can be seen as an unattainable ideal and the search for the meaning of life an unnecessary endeavour. The phrase “meaning of life” should just be rejected “en bloc”¹⁰³ and one should just live life!¹⁰⁴

Nevertheless, in the midst of subjectivity is the presence of objectivity, which is based on objective and observable reality. Camus’ work expresses the objectivity of the subject of the meaning of life.¹⁰⁵ The question on this topic, insists Camus, is the most important question that philosophy must address. The objectivity and reality of death, and the absence of any knowledge of the purpose of the individual and humanity, implies that human existence (and activities) is absurd and that suicide is a logical option. This is concurred in Schopenhauer’s thought, in which he insists that the central problem of philosophy is to provide an antidote to the fear of death.¹⁰⁶ Indeed, the objectivity of the issue, expressed in the form of the reality of death, is a major impetus for the works of philosophers on the subject of the meaning of life – a concern, as argued by a number of biblical scholars, shared by Qoheleth.

¹⁰⁰ Paul Edwards, “The Meaning and Value of Life,” in *The Meaning of Life: A Reader*, 3rd ed., eds. E.D. Klemke and Steven M. Cahn, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 114-132.

¹⁰¹ R R.W. Hepburn, “Questions about the Meaning of Life” in *The Meaning of Life*, 2nd ed., ed. E.D. Klemke (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 262.

¹⁰² Julian Huxley, “The Creed of a Scientific Humanist,” in *The Meaning of Life*, 2nd ed., ed. E.D. Klemke (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 78-83.

¹⁰³ Hepburn, “Question about the Meaning of Life,” 275.

¹⁰⁴ David Schmitz, “The Meaning of Life,” in *Life, Death and Meaning: Key Philosophical Readings on the Big Questions*, 2nd Ed., ed. David Benatar (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2010), 93. Also Yutang Lin, *The Importance of Living* (John Day Company Inc. 1937; repr., Singapore: Cultured Lotus, 2001), 123-126.

¹⁰⁵ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 119-123.

¹⁰⁶ Julian Young, *Willing and Unwilling: A Study in the Philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer*, Nijhoff International Philosophy Series, 33, eds. Jan T.J. Szrednicki, Lynne M. Broughton and Stanislaw J. Surma (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1987), 107-108. See also from the same author, *Schopenhauer* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 170.

Whilst the concern seems to be preoccupied with the reality of “death,” it underscores the search for the purpose of life in the light of the negating effect of death. Indeed, a closer scrutiny on debates within the field of philosophy reveals that a major concern is with the question whether there is a reason to exist at all. Hence, the focus shifts to the question on the existence of an ultimate purpose or a divine “reason” for human existence. Fundamentally, should one derive purpose from the divine or should one create a purpose that will give reason to one’s existence? To some philosophers, the existence of a divine purpose or reason answers the question as to why humanity as a whole and as individuals exists.¹⁰⁷ It carries the implication that everyone is intrinsically and functionally valuable and of worth. The search for the meaning of life becomes the search to know God’s or the divine’s reason for existence, and then to live accordingly.¹⁰⁸ This “reason” is distinct from goals and purposes in life. It is assumed that the ultimate and objective purpose of life is to live in accordance with the reason for existence. Such a stance is generally accepted in the field of theology, although disagreement as to what constitutes the “reason” or “purpose” of life persists.¹⁰⁹ The common understanding is that ‘if a specific set of religious beliefs is true, those who do not accept it, however meaningful their lives may seem to be, will indeed have missed the [objective] meaning of life.’¹¹⁰ Thinkers who argue for a contrary framework have to look within themselves; hence, the search is the search for the

¹⁰⁷ William Lane Craig, “The Absurdity of Life without God,” in *The Meaning of Life*, 2nd ed., ed. E.D. Klemke (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) 40-56. See also Thomas V. Morris, “Making Sense of it all: Pascal and the Meaning of Life” (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992; repr 2001), 31-62; Leo Tolstoy, “My Confession” in *The Meaning of Life: A Reader*, 3rd ed., eds. E.D. Klemke and Steven M. Cahn, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 7-15.

¹⁰⁸ Philip L. Quinn, “The Meaning of Life According to Christianity” in *The Meaning of Life: A Reader*, 3rd ed., eds. E.D. Klemke and Steven M. Cahn, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 35-42.

¹⁰⁹ Though they may not agree with the theistic interpretation of God, they do agree that the God factor, or rather religion, plays a primary role in the pursuit of meaning. However, they differ in the nature of the reason or purpose for existence. For instance, contrary to Christianity, Confucius, a key Chinese philosopher, stresses that the purpose of human existence is to be a responsible person – beginning with the self and eventually with the country. The meaning of life is thus found when one aligns one’s life to these heaven-given roles and responsibilities. Lao-tzu, another key philosopher, advocated that one needs to understand and attune with “Mother Nature,” in order to find meaning, i.e. the ability to experience the meaning of life depends on how well one attunes to nature. Lao-tzu’s philosophy eventually evolved into a form of religion known as Daoism, which focuses on pursuing immortality as the ultimate meaning of life.

¹¹⁰ Keith Ward, “Religion and the Question of Meaning,” in *The Meaning of Life in the World Religions*, Vol. 1, The Library of Global Ethics and Religion, eds. Joseph Runzo and Nancy M. Martin (Oxford: Oneworld, 2000), 30.

meaning *in* life, rather than the meaning *of* life. Attention is focused on developing and living a worthwhile purpose built on values that are intrinsically good.¹¹¹

The philosophical relationship between the purposeful factor and meaningfulness is validated in scientific research and empirical studies on subjective human experiences.¹¹² Psychologists affirm that humanity's 'will- to- meaning'¹¹³ is sustained by one's ability to live responsibly and purposefully.¹¹⁴ Interestingly, studies also show that meaningfulness is already experienced when one progresses towards meeting and experiencing an identified purpose in life. In other words, the *process* of meeting the goal that is considered most worthwhile is what gives meaning to life regardless of whether or not that worthwhile purpose is achieved or met.¹¹⁵ Scholars investigating this phenomenon cite one's ability to explain the meaning of a current experience or present event in the light of the whole. In other words, it is about the ability to see coherence. Therefore, Ward is right to note that 'when people complain that life is meaningless, they often

¹¹¹ This is best expressed in Tao's words: 'But in order for a life to have meaning, there must be both the subjective involvement of the person and objective values based on reason... When we talk about the meaning within life or the meaning in life, we are concerned with how human beings would live their lives in fulfilment [sic] of certain fundamental values in order to have a good life'. See Julia Tao, "The Meaning of Life" in *Meaning of Life*, eds. Julia Tao & Hektor K.T. Yan (Singapore: McGraw Hill, Asia, 2006), 15-16. Also, Paul Edwards, "The Meaning and Value of Life," 114-132.

¹¹² See the "Introduction" to *The Human Quest for Meaning: A Handbook of Psychological Research and Clinical Applications*, eds. Paul T.P. Wong and Prem S. Fry, Personality and Clinical Psychological Series, ed. Irving B. Weiner (Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 1998), xvii-xxvi.

¹¹³ Victor E. Frankl, *The Doctor And The Soul: From Psychotherapy To Logotherapy*. 2 ed. trans. Richard and Clara Winston (New York: Vintage Book, 1986), xvi.

¹¹⁴ Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006 (1959)), 67. Also, Roy F. Baumeister, *Meanings of Life* (New York: Guilford Press, 1991), 29-57 and empirical findings by Kristin L. Sommer and Roy F. Baumeister, "The Construction of Meaning from Life Events: Empirical Studies of Personal Narratives," in *The Human Quest for Meaning: A Handbook of Psychological Research and Clinical Applications*, eds. Paul T.P. Wong and Prem S. Fry, Personality and Clinical Psychological Series, ed. Irving B. Weiner (Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 1998), 143 -161.

¹¹⁵ R.A. Emmons, C. Cheung & Tehrani, "Assessing Spirituality through Personal Goals: Implications for Research on Religion and Subjective Wellbeing," in *Social Indicators Research 45* (Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1998), 391-422. The importance of having an ultimate concern or ultimate meaning has also been validated by researchers tracking the relationship between the quality of one's wellbeing and the meaning of life. These empirical studies show that, among others, people who believe an objective purpose exists and orientate their lives around the attainment of this spiritual end tend to find that their lives are worthwhile, unified and meaningful. Research by Wong even shows that the God factor and spirituality offer the most satisfying and coherent answers to life's meaning. Paul T. P. Wong, "Spirituality, Meaning and Successful Ageing," in *The Human Quest for Meaning: A Handbook of Psychological Research and Clinical Applications*, eds. Paul T.P. Wong and Prem S. Fry, Personality and Clinical Psychological Series, ed. Irving B. Weiner (Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 1998), 359-394.

mean that they cannot see how the events that happen to them fit into any overall pattern. To see the meaning of a human life could be to see how its various elements fit into a unique, complex, and integrated pattern.’¹¹⁶ This is usually the case when life is riddled with painful experiences, undeserved suffering and eventual death.

The pivotal need for coherence, in order to experience meaningfulness, finds support in scholarly researches. For instance, Polkinghorne, who examines the relationship between an individual with time and the dimension of time in the making of meaning, argues that the narrative is a scheme through which human beings give meaning to their experience of temporality and personal action.¹¹⁷ In the context of the meaning of life, it implies that the meaningfulness of daily activities (also known as daily events) takes into consideration the relations between these events. A person can see the meaning of daily events or activities when the person sees how these events are connected and contribute to each other over a period of time. Interestingly, Antonovsky explains that there are three important components that influence how one processes and arrives at a sense of coherence, and hence meaningfulness, namely ‘comprehensibility’ (predictability of an event), ‘manageability’ (availability of resources) and ‘meaningfulness’ (emotional sense). When one is free to select one’s own outcomes (meeting the needs of comprehensibility and manageability), a strong sense of meaningfulness develops.¹¹⁸ However, when one finds that one has no say in any matter (an event in life), a sense of chaos instead of coherence ensues. When this happens, one tends to see life as being void of meaning.¹¹⁹

The discussion in the fields of philosophy and theology, as well as findings in the field of psychology, points to the existence of objectivity amidst the subjectivity and complexity of the subject matter. The reality of death and the impetus to make sense of life under the context of

¹¹⁶ Ward, “Religion and the Question of Meaning,” 22.

¹¹⁷ Donald E. Polkinghorne, *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 11.

¹¹⁸ Aaron Antonovsky, *Health, Stress, and Coping* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1979), 123-159. His view is also summarised in David Korotkov, “The Sense of Coherence: Making Sense out of Chaos,” in *The Human Quest for Meaning: A Handbook of Psychological Research and Clinical Applications*, eds. Paul T.P. Wong and Prem S. Fry, Personality and Clinical Psychological Series, ed. Irving B. Weiner (Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 1998), 54-55.

¹¹⁹ Korotkov, “The Sense of Coherence,” 54-55.

this reality lead to identifiable and agreeable meanings on the meaning of life. That is, when someone asks ‘What is the meaning of life?’ it means either one or both of the following. Firstly, the person wants to know what purpose is served by living this life,¹²⁰ in the sense that whether ‘life has a purpose, whether life is worthwhile and whether people have any reason to live, *independently* [emphasis mine] of their specific circumstances.’¹²¹ It is a religious question¹²² about the meaning of one’s existence within the universe.¹²³ Whether the meaning of life has anything to do with God is a subject of intriguing debate among philosophers. Fundamentally, it is the search for the purpose of one’s existence that is expressed in the pursuit of the most worthwhile purpose¹²⁴ that is intrinsically good¹²⁵ as a goal of life.¹²⁶ Secondly, the person wants to know how daily activities, as repetitive and mundane as they are, and events such as suffering in one’s life give meaning over a period of time. It is a search for the meaning of a particular event, in the light of the whole, especially in the light of the certainty of death. Thus, experiencing the meaning of life confirms the existence of coherence,¹²⁷ expressed in the ability to make sense of the reality of death, suffering, happiness or fulfilment.

¹²⁰ David Schmitz, “The Meaning of Life,” 93.

¹²¹ Edward Craig, ed., *Routledge Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, Vol. 5 (London: Routledge, 1998), s.v. “Life, Meaning of,” by Susan Wolf, 630-631.

¹²² According to Einstein, ‘to know an answer to the question “what is the meaning of life?” means to be religious’. Albert Einstein, *Mein Weltbild* (Amsterdam: Querido, 1934) trans. Sonja Bargmann, *Ideas and Opinions by Albert Einstein* (New York: Crown, 1985), 11. Also, according to Sigmund Freud, ‘the idea of life having a purpose stands or falls with the religious system’. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* J. Strachey ed., Vol. XXI, Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud (London: Hogarth, 1953-74), 76.

¹²³ John Cottingham, *On The Meaning of Life* (London: Routledge, 2003), 2-11. Alister McGrath, *Glimpsing the Face of God: The Search for Meaning in the Universe* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 14-24.

¹²⁴ Edwards, “The Meaning and Value of Life,” 114-132; Kurt Baier, “The Meaning of Life,” in *The Meaning of Life: A Reader*, 3rd ed., eds. E.D. Klemke and Steven M. Cahn, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 82-114.

¹²⁵ Edwards, “The Meaning and Value of Life,” 114-132.

¹²⁶ Robert A. Emmons, *The Psychology of Ultimate Concerns: Motivation and Spirituality in Personality* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2003), 137-156. Sommer and Roy F. Baumeister, “The Construction of Meaning from Life Events: Empirical Studies of Personal Narratives,” 143 -161.

¹²⁷ Ward, “Religion and the Question of Meaning,” 22.

The meaning of the meaning of life explained above is an acceptable parameter for this inquiry. The presence of objectivity expressed in the search for a worthwhile purpose and coherence in life anchors the research from claims of subjectivity and obscurity. More importantly, this search is an empirically verifiable people experience. In light of my attempt to construct a biblical theology of the meaning of life that will reflect people's real experiences, this research finds it reasonable to adopt the scope of the meaning of the meaning of life explained earlier. Consequently, the relationship between Ecclesiastes and the meaning of life will be examined on the basis of its teaching and the search for a worthwhile purpose and coherence.

1.2.3 BIBLICAL THEOLOGY CONSTRUCTION METHODOLOGY

The field of biblical theology has its share of complexity; for instance, there is disagreement and hence no "simple definition" on the meaning of the word "biblical."¹²⁸ Ebeling defines biblical theology as theology contained in the Bible as the theology of the Bible itself.¹²⁹ For Murphy, biblical theology is 'a [theologian's] construal of biblical data according to biblical categories into a complex whole, based on some organizing principle (s) chosen by the interpreter, such as covenant, tradition history or something similar.'¹³⁰ Murphy defines biblical theology based on the *process* of theological construction and makes a distinction between the theology contained in the Bible from interpreters' interpretations. In view of the existing spectrum of definitions for biblical theology, Childs points out perceptively that 'the real question is not whether to do biblical theology or not, but rather what kind of biblical theology does one have.'¹³¹

This thesis understands theology as the study of God in the context of the human relationship with God and His creation. It is built on the premise that there is a practical character of theology

¹²⁸ The meaning of "biblical" is also subject to debate. Does it include data solicited from extra-biblical materials or Apocrypha, or should it be confined to acceptable canons? Does the word "biblical" refer to a specific theological framework? See also Murphy, "When is Theology 'Biblical'?" 21-27. See also James Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective*, 117. See also Knierim, *The Task of Old Testament Theology*, 63-69.

¹²⁹ Gerhard Ebeling, "The Meaning of 'Biblical Theology'," in *Word and Faith*, trans. James W Leitch (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963), 79-97.

¹³⁰ Murphy, "Question Concerning Biblical Theology," 81.

¹³¹ Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis*, 95.

that concerns how humans should relate to God and the world.¹³² Based on this perspective, this research defines theology as a study of God and the life of people in relation to their faith. As proposed by Bornemann, it begins with the question as to how to live this world in relation to God, and then subsequently in relation to himself and communities. In this case, Ecclesiastes' teaching on the meaning of life is pertinently a question on how one ought to live in this world in relation to God.

It is *biblical* because the theological trait and teaching is construed primarily from biblical data categorized 'into a complex whole, based on some organizing principle(s) chosen by the interpreter.'¹³³ In the context of the book of Ecclesiastes, biblical scholars have already identified clear themes that are relevant to the subject of the meaning of life. As this research is primarily a work on the theology of the meaning of life, based on the teaching of Ecclesiastes, the analysis will focus on interpreting and integrating these themes in light of the complex whole. The construction of a theological model by means of the thematic approach builds structure around themes and topics that arise from biblical data¹³⁴ and which occur most frequently or appear to be significant in the text.¹³⁵ Although this method is employed to build a biblical theology of the Bible as a whole, it is nevertheless suitable for the purpose of this research as well.¹³⁶ Thus, the approach will be engaged, albeit with the scope limited to the book of Ecclesiastes.

Scobie cautions that the challenge of the thematic approach is to ensure that the investigation of a specific theme is not done in isolation from other biblical themes. The interrelatedness and interdependency of biblical themes cannot be answered without some view of the structure of the

¹³² This concept by Paul Althaus, *Die Prinzipien der deutschen reformierten Dogmatik im Zeitalter der aristotelischen Scholastik* (Darmstadt, 1967), is cited by Van Der Ven in "Practical Theology: from Applied to Empirical," 8.

¹³³ Murphy, "Question Concerning Biblical Theology" 81. See also, Murphy, "When is Theology 'Biblical'?" 21-27.

¹³⁴ Scobie, *The Ways of God*, 85. See also James K. Mead, *Biblical Theology: Issues, Methods, and Themes* (Louisville, London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 169-239.

¹³⁵ John. L. McKenzie, *A Theology of the Old Testament* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Image Book, 1974), 24-25

¹³⁶ For instance, Fuhr Jr. "An Analysis of the Inter-Dependency of the Prominent Motifs within the Book of Qohelet" (October 2008), Accessed in June 7, 2015 http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1020&context=fac_dis

biblical revelation (in this case, Ecclesiastes) as a whole.¹³⁷ Another related challenge is to ascertain whether an overarching theme that may help explain the meaning and functions of other themes does actually exist. With regard to this challenge, I find Mead's suggestion helpful, whereby biblical theology construction, by means of a thematic approach, may consider arranging the many diverse themes around a central idea. In the context of developing a biblical theology of the Bible as whole, he proposes that themes to be built and arranged around the 'God to whom testimony is given'¹³⁸ notion. In other words, it involves building a structure in which various themes are arranged around a central theme that may eventually explain the meaning and significance of said themes under investigation. However, since this inquiry seeks to reconstruct a theological hypothesis on the meaning of life, the structure in which various themes are arranged around a central theme should be able to establish that Ecclesiastes teaches about a worthwhile purpose and coherence. To adopt Mead's methodology, the inquiry shall begin by identifying the motive of the book of Ecclesiastes. This step is useful in identifying a "central idea" that will eventually enlighten the relevance of the various themes, namely הבל, enjoyment and undeserved suffering, in the rhetoric. Following this is an exegetical investigation into the meaning of each theme and in what way the dynamic relationship between them can be integrated and has contributes to all of Qoheleth's arguments.

Placing the inquiry into context, the analysis will begin by investigating the possibility of the final imperative, that is, to 'fear God and keep His commandment,' being the controlling purpose of the book. Although arriving at a central purpose of the book has been a matter of contention in scholarship on Ecclesiastes, the analysis will show the plausibility to keep 12:13b-14 as the central focus of the book. Working with the assumption that Ecclesiastes is a speech expressing Qoheleth's reflective journey and his quest for the meaning of life,¹³⁹ this research works on the possibility that 12:13b-14 shares conceptual and experiential equivalence with the worthwhile purpose of life. Consequently, the "central idea" of the book is established, thereby setting the scene for the interpretation of the various themes and placing them around the central idea.

Attention will turn to an exegetical analysis of the three important themes in Ecclesiastes, namely הבל, enjoyment and undeserved suffering. This analysis will stand on, and hence, will not

¹³⁷ Charles H.H. Scobie, "New Directions in Biblical Theology," *Themelios* 17.2 (January/February 1992) 7.

¹³⁸ Mead, *Biblical Theology*, 170.

repeat the existing wealth of, and exhaustive research undertaken on these themes. However, I will focus on the teaching of several crucial passages pertinent to the selected themes, in order to establish and show their meanings and functions in relation to the purpose of Ecclesiastes and the subject of the meaning of life. An important focal point is to establish their interdependency as well as their relationship with the imperative to ‘fear God and keep His commandments.’ Building on the case that the problems of *הבל*, undeserved suffering and the availability of enjoyment are essentially factors that affect the coherence of life, this research will explore this interdependency to establish Ecclesiastes’ concept and teaching on coherence.

Finally, by placing these themes around the central tenet, the research will argue for a framework built upon Ecclesiastes’ teaching on the worthwhile purpose and coherence in life and their contribution to meaningfulness. Since the framework is essentially conceptual rather than empirical, the findings will be compared with the experiences of people who claim to have found and experienced the meaning of life. The following section will explain the empirical methodology.

1.2.4 EMPIRICAL RESEARCH METHODOLOGY¹⁴⁰

Several scholars in the field of qualitative empirical research insist that an empirical project must display theoretical and methodological rigour. This means logical consistency in the reasoning, arguments and the choice of method applied to the research problem,¹⁴¹ and it includes how data are acquired and how their authenticity is preserved and interpreted.¹⁴² The approach must also be repeatable. Accordingly, any study or design must enable a project to give careful attention not only to the preservation of the research participants’ (sample) responses but also to the context within which the phenomenon is studied, to ensure usefulness and validity for

¹⁴⁰ A more detailed explanation and how this is conducted will be given in Chapter Three. The following section gives a brief explanation of the methodology.

¹⁴¹ Alfred Schutz, *The Phenomenology of the Social World*, trans., G. Walsh & F. Lehnert (Evanston, IL: North Western University Press, 1967, Originally German work, 1932). See also, R. Burke Johnson, “Examining The Validity Structure of Qualitative Research,” *Education* (Winter 1997) 282-302 and Catherine Marshall & Gretchen B. Rossman, *Designing Qualitative Research*, 4rd ed. (Sage Publications. 2006), 23-42.

¹⁴² Joy Higgs, “Charting Stand-Points in Qualitative Research,” in H. Byrne-Armstrong, J. Higgs, & D. Horsfall, Eds., *Critical Moments in Qualitative Research* (Oxford, UK: Butterworth Heinemann, 2001), 44-67. See also Pranee Liamputtong Rice & Douglas Ezzy, *Qualitative Research Methods: A Health Focus* (Melbourne, Australia: Oxford University Press, 1999).

interpretation.¹⁴³ In the light of the purpose of the inquiry, the empirical section will seek to understand, from research participants' life experiences in relation to the teaching of Ecclesiastes, the meaning of life. Specifically, the investigation will focus and directed at four interrelated aspects of life experiences:

1. How did the research participants arrive at meaningfulness of life (according to their own understanding of "meaningfulness")?
2. How does the purposes of life offer meaning to unfortunate events in life?
3. How does the purposes of life offer meaning in relation to work, family and personal life?
4. Is there an experiential difference in meaningfulness between meaning in life and the meaning of life?

The nature of the data required leads to the use of the case study design as a means of investigation. This design is appropriate for any inquiry seeking to investigate phenomena in a real-life and complex social context,¹⁴⁴ particularly when one is attempting to understand in-depth and holistically how one or two issues shape a subject matter.¹⁴⁵ The design is advantageous, as it uses interviews as a data collection method. The method is attractive, as it allows for the design of an interview questionnaire that reflects the themes expressed in the book of Ecclesiastes. Furthermore, this allows participants to express their subjective views or responses with more depth and breadth, thus ensuring data consistency and reliability.

In order for the data to take into account the themes expressed in Ecclesiastes adequately, the research participants will fulfil all the following criteria:

¹⁴³ Jennifer Fereday, & Eimear Muir-Cochrane, "Demonstrating Rigor Using Thematic Analysis: A Hybrid Approach of Inductive and Deductive Coding and Theme development," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 5(1) (2006) 1-11.

¹⁴⁴ Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research: Designs and Methods Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publication, 2009), 3. Also, Irene S. Rubin & Herbert J. Rubin, *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2012), 25-40.

¹⁴⁵ G. Sjoberg, N. William, T. Vaughan and A. Sjoberg, "The Case Study in Social Research," in J. Feargin, A. Orum and G. Sjoberg, eds., *The Case for Case Study* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 27-79. Also, Winston Tellis, "Application of a Case Study Methodology," *The Qualitative Report* 3(3) (1997, September), Accessed in August 27, 2014 <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR3-3/tellis2.html>

1. The participant has experienced meaning in life. This refers to participants who have high scores in the Meaning in Life questionnaires (MLQs). A high score in an MLQ indicates that the participant is experiencing meaning in life.¹⁴⁶
2. The participant is married.¹⁴⁷
3. The participant has experienced unfortunate experiences in life. This may include the loss of loved ones, setbacks in businesses, illness, etc.
4. The participant is financially independent but has had financial difficulties in the past.

Data collection will be conducted in two stages with the following tools:

1. The Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ), owned by the University of Minnesota. (Permission to use this tool has been granted.) This is a 10-item measure of the Presence of Meaning in Life and the Search for Meaning in Life.
2. A partially structured interview questionnaire, which will be designed based on the themes expressed in the book of Ecclesiastes.

Data analysis and interpretation will begin with data codification. A code in a qualitative inquiry is most often a word or a short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing and/or evocative attribute to a portion of language-based or visual data.¹⁴⁸ One of the coder's primary goals is to find repetitive patterns of action and consistencies in human affairs as documented in the data.¹⁴⁹ The data can be coded in two cycles. The first cycle of coding processes can range in magnitude from a single word to a full sentence and on to an entire page of text.¹⁵⁰ The purpose is to identify discrete parts of the data that correspond with the themes expressed in the interview. The second cycle coding processes uses code on the same

¹⁴⁶ It is difficult to identify correctly who has actually found and experienced meaning of life. In view of this difficulty, the selection will be based on scores in the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MILQ) test. A high score in a test may indicate that the research participants are experiencing the meaning of life.

¹⁴⁷ This criterion is used in order to be consistent with the societal background of Ecclesiastes, where marriage and having a family is expected and considered appropriate. Furthermore, this criterion permits an investigation into experiences of life meaning, from singlehood to married life, thus providing a fuller range of life experiences and, hence, richer data for analysis and interpretation.

¹⁴⁸ Johnny Saldana, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* (London: Sage, 2009), 3.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 5.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 45-146.

units or passages of text to identify categories or themes for identifying the relationship between the discrete parts inherent in the data.¹⁵¹

This project, following the framework suggested by Saldana, will engage two processes of codification. The first cycle will engage a combination of InVivo and initial codification. A combination of InVivo and initial coding means that codes are generated from the responses of the participants themselves,¹⁵² with the purpose of identifying discrete parts based on the themes of Ecclesiastes. This will be followed by the use of a pattern coding approach in the second cycle of codification. Pattern codes are ‘explanatory or inferential codes, ones that identify an emergent theme, configuration or explanation. They pull together a lot of material from first cycle coding into a more meaningful and parsimonious unit of analysis’.¹⁵³ This approach is a way of grouping the earlier codes into a manageable with smaller number of themes and concepts for analysis.

The analysis will focus on how these themes and concepts are systematically interrelated, and in what ways they surface as a theory.¹⁵⁴ It will be done both by working within individual data (working within) and by comparing them with each other (working across).¹⁵⁵ Findings and theories postulated from the analysis will be based on the four interrelated aspects of life under investigation, and these will then be compared to existing works on similar themes with the teaching of Ecclesiastes on the meaning of life.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 149-182.

¹⁵² Saldana, *The Coding Manual*, 58-186. Also, Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2006), 42-70; Juliet Corbin & Anselm Strauss, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2008), 61-74 and Matthew B. Miles, A. Michael Huberman & John Saldana, *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook* 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2014), 73-74.

¹⁵³ Miles, Huberman & Saldana, *Qualitative Data Analysis*, 86.

¹⁵⁴ Corbin & Strauss, *Basic of Qualitative Research*, 55.

¹⁵⁵ Matthew B. Miles & A. Michael Huberman, *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Expanded Sourcebook* 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1994), 207-273. See also Rubin & Rubin, *Qualitative Interviewing*, 189-210.

1.3 SUMMARY

I have shown that despite the engaging spectrum of perspectives on and interpretations of the book of Ecclesiastes, there is an exegetical basis on which to argue that the concept of the meaning of life is present in the literature. This claim is also affirmed in numerous biblical works on the same topic. What remains unexplored, firstly, is what does Ecclesiastes teach about the meaning of life? In particular, what is Qoheleth's idea of the worthwhile purpose of life, coherence and meaningfulness in life? Secondly, what is Ecclesiastes' theology of the meaning of life that, thirdly, reflects the experiences of those who have found it? In the light of these unanswered questions, this research seeks to identify and build an empirically corroborated theology of the meaning of life based on the book of Ecclesiastes. This endeavour requires corroboration between the two distinct fields presented in this dissertation as follows.

The next chapter (Chapter Two) will show the reconstruction of the biblical theology of the meaning of life based on Ecclesiastes. The first section of the chapter will explore the role and function of 12:13b-14 in relation to the purpose of Ecclesiastes in its entirety. Attention will be given to considering the conceptual similarities between 12:13b-14 and the concept of the worthwhile purpose of life. Subsequent sections will examine important themes in the book, namely 'the הבל of life', the exhortation to 'enjoy life' and the problem of 'undeserved suffering' as a whole, in order to see how they are related to each other. The inquiry will attempt to integrate these themes and build a structure showing the interdependency of these themes as well as their relation to the worthwhile purpose. The chapter will establish Ecclesiastes' unique concept of the worthwhile purpose and coherence, and its significance in experiencing meaningfulness. It will conclude with a building block or framework expressing the biblical theology of the meaning of life.

Chapter Three and Chapter Four are primarily the empirical sections investigating the theology of the meaning of life in relation to people's real-life experiences. Chapter Three will commence with an analysis of the selected empirical works that are relevant to the subject of enquiry. It will show that even in the field of empiricism itself lies an unexplored area pertinent to the meaning of life. This will be followed by a detailed explanation on how the empirical methodology has been applied, how the research participants were selected and profiled, how the data collection was done and, finally, how the data were codified and categorised for analysis

and interpretation. Chapter Four will report on and interpret these findings, and it will report the experiences of each research participant as well as common patterns and themes common to all of them.

The final chapter (Chapter Five) will integrate the biblical theology of the meaning of life and the empirical findings. By comparing Ecclesiastes' theology of the meaning of life with what is expressed in the empirical data, the chapter will show how much people's actual experiences correspond to the biblical theology of the meaning of life based on Ecclesiastes. This interaction would also include the comparison and identification of similarities and differences, and an explanation of these differences in light of biblical theology on the meaning of life. This final section will also present an exegetically and empirically substantiated biblical theology of the meaning of life.

CHAPTER 2

RECONSTRUCTING THE THEOLOGY OF THE MEANING OF LIFE IN ECCLESIASTES

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The book of Ecclesiastes has much to say on the subject of the meaning of life. Although this is affirmed in the scholarship of Ecclesiastes, pertinent concepts such as the worthwhile purpose of life, teaching on coherence in life or for that matter what is meant by the meaning of life remain unsubstantiated and insufficiently addressed. In fact, there is yet to be an adequately comprehensive work on the book's theology in relation to the subject. Admittedly, the task of identifying and reconstructing the book's theological outlook on the meaning of life is demanding, and even the range of topics covering the subject is itself intimidating, for the very concept is riddled with claims of subjectivity. However, since the quest for the meaning of life is fundamentally about the search for the purpose of life, coherence in life and lucidity therein, it shows that it has focus and aspects of objectivity crucial to this investigation. The focus and aspects of objectivity have outlined a researchable parameter, making it possible to examine and reconstruct the theology of the meaning of life in relation to one's search for the purpose of life and associated cohesion.

The primary task is therefore to show that the book teaches not *a* purpose in life but *the* most "worthwhile purpose of life," which refers to the purpose that transcends the idea of a "better choice" between two or more principles. In short, the "purpose" represents the reason for living and the significance of this existence,¹⁵⁶ and it is "worthwhile" because it is intrinsically good and meaningful¹⁵⁷ and is worthy of investing the maximum amount of effort.¹⁵⁸ The phrase,

¹⁵⁶ Tao, "The Meaning of Life," 6. Also Edwards, "The Meaning and Value of Life," 114-132.

¹⁵⁷ Edwards, "The Meaning and Value of Life," 114-132. Edwards uses the term "intrinsically valuable," which carries the idea of being "intrinsically good and meaningful" into life.

however, is not found in Ecclesiastes, and so it is crucial to show that this concept does in fact exist in the book. In order to achieve this aim, sections 2.2 and 2.3 of this chapter will revisit, explore and analyse the purpose of Ecclesiastes in relation to the command to fear God and keep His commandments (12:13b-14). I will also show that the injunction expressed in 12:13b-14 is conceptually identical to the concept of the worthwhile purpose of life.

The second task is to show that Ecclesiastes teaches and describes the need for coherence in life. Similarly, it is necessary to show that this concept exists and is taught in Ecclesiastes, since the phrase “coherence in life” is not actually present in the book. Therefore, 2.4 section of this chapter will investigate the major themes in Ecclesiastes,¹⁵⁹ including the problem of undeserved suffering. This will include examining the dynamic relationship between these themes and considering how these are integrated with the injunction in 12:13b-14. The analysis will also show that living consistently with the injunction in 12:13b-14 will enable people to see and experience coherence in life.¹⁶⁰

The third task is to reconstruct and show in Ecclesiastes the pertinent concepts of the worthwhile purpose of life and coherence in life. This will be followed by a reconstructed framework or building block that expresses Ecclesiastes’ theology of the meaning of life.

¹⁵⁸ Robert A. Emmons, *The Psychology of Ultimate Concerns: Motivation and Spirituality in Personality* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2003), 94-97.

¹⁵⁹ The themes of הבל and enjoyment are in fact two of the four major themes in the book; the others are fearing God and toil. In addition to the above, commentators give a list of slightly varied but consistent themes that include wisdom, pleasure and justice as obvious constructs in Ecclesiastes. However, their significance has not been shown to be able to tilt the interpretation of Ecclesiastes. Most biblical scholars see the themes of enjoyment and of fearing God as minor to the theme הבל. De Jong, however, raises the possibility that the theme of toil is in fact the most important of them all, considering that the problem of toil presented throughout the speech is clearly an issue of concern for Qoheleth. See Stephen de Jong, “A Book on Toil: The Structuring Principles and the Main Theme of the Book of Qoheleth,” *JSOT* 54 (1992) 107-116. De Jong is certainly right about the centrality of the theme of toil in Ecclesiastes. However, unlike the themes of הבל, enjoyment and fearing God, the problem of toil in Ecclesiastes is the object of the investigation, although these themes are respectively the verdicts on and responses to the investigation and are weighty enough to shape the entire interpretation of Ecclesiastes. In fact, the phrase “major themes,” used to refer to these themes, could perhaps be an understatement, considering that the decision on the role and weight of any of these themes will tilt the message of the book toward either an overly pessimistic or an optimistic tone. See, among others, Anderson’s *Qoheleth and its Pessimistic Theology*, Zimmermann’s *The Inner World of Qoheleth*, Longman’s *Ecclesiastes*, representing interpretations that place stronger emphasis on the theme of הבל, Whybray’s “The Preacher of Joy” and Lohfink’s “Revelation by Joy,” representing an interpretation that places more weight on the theme of enjoyment. See R.N. Whybray, “Qoheleth, Preacher of Joy,” *JSOT* 23 (1982) 87-89 and Norbert Lohfink, “Qoheleth 5:17-19 – Revelation by Joy,” *CBQ* 52/4 (1990) 625-635.

¹⁶⁰ More of these will be explained in section 2.4.

2.2 THE PURPOSE OF ECCLESIASTES

Determining the controlling purpose of Ecclesiastes has long been an issue of complicated contention amongst biblical scholars.¹⁶¹ The problem has its roots in disagreements on how the book should be interpreted in the light of the two apparent types of “contradictions.” The first issue relates to “internal contradictions,” a problem considered by Seow as the ‘most serious [question] concerning the integrity of Ecclesiastes’¹⁶² and which refers to “inconsistencies” in thoughts and arguments within the body of the speech (1:2-12:8).¹⁶³ An example of an apparent contradictory thought is the question as to whether it is good for one to be alive, for on the one hand it seems better for one to be stillborn (6:3-5) whilst on the other hand it is considered a privilege to be able to see the sun (11:7). Another case includes seemingly contradictory advice on the significance of feasting to life (7:2-4 and 9:7-9). Several biblical scholars have also highlighted that certain passages in the book are out of place in the light of its overall pessimistic sentiment, for instance the relevance of the surety of God’s judgement, found in 3:17 and 8:12b-13, in the perceived absence of theodicy in the book. These “contradictions” seem obvious to the extent that Qoheleth was believed to have been suffering from some kind of childhood stress.¹⁶⁴

The second is the “contradiction” between the main body (1:2-12:8) and the epilogue of the book (12:9-14). Regarding the latter, the message in the epilogue is considered by some as subversive or at least different from the teaching in the main body. The claim found its basis in the apparent conservative sentiment on wisdom and the call to fear God in 12:13-14, both of

¹⁶¹ This issue is one of several disputed in the book. Another is the usage of *Elohim* rather than *YHWH* in the text. Michel concludes that the God of Qoheleth is not the same God in relation to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob or even Jesus Christ. See Diethelm Michel, “Gott bei Kohelet,” *Bibel und Kirche* 45 (1990) 32-36. Lys adds to this matter by noting that the “definite article” usually attributed to the God of Israel is not found consistently in the book. See Daniel Lys, *L’Ecclésiaste ou Que Vaut la vie? Traduction; Introduction Générale; Commentaire de 1/1 à 4/3* (Paris: Letouzey et Ane, 1997), 77-78. Gilbert goes to the extent to contend that belief in God is of no use to Qoheleth. Maurice Gilbert, *Jean L’Hour and Joseph Scharbert, Morale et Ancien Testament* (Louvain: Centre Cerfaux-Lefort, 1976), 152. Adding to the above is the perceived ‘distant and unpredictable’ God. See also Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 35; James Limburg, *Encountering Ecclesiastes: A Book for Our Time* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2006), 79.

¹⁶² Seow, *Ecclesiastes: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday: 1997), 39.

¹⁶³ For instance, Murphy sees it as ‘contradiction in thinking’; Fox sees a ‘violation of sensibilities rather than logic [relating to Qoheleth’s observation]’ and Whybray notes the ‘contradictory character of his thoughts’. Hence, in a broad sense, it is perceived inconsistency in the speech of Qoheleth. See Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, xxxii, Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 3, and R.N. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1989), 24.

¹⁶⁴ Frank Zimmermann, *The Inner World of Qoheleth* (New York: KTAC, 1973).

which are considered by several biblical scholars as countering the overall pessimistic outlook about wisdom and God in the main body (1:2-12:8). Seow notes,

While the fear of God is a notion present in the teaching of Qohelet (3:14; 5:6 [Eng v 7]; 8:12-14), the call to obey God's commandments is not. Qohelet does speak of one who keeps the commandment in 8:5, but there the command of a human despot seems to be at issue. The charge to keep God's commandments in the epilogue, therefore, is an additional dimension to the teachings of Qohelet.¹⁶⁵

Similarly, Murphy insisted that it would be highly unlikely for Qoheleth to place 12:13-14 in the speech, since Qoheleth never mentioned "commandments" and would likely not treat the idea of fearing God in a facile manner.¹⁶⁶ Hence, the injunction in 12:13b-14 is widely believed to be additional material¹⁶⁷ or a glossary,¹⁶⁸ inserted to 'correct' or 'neutralise' Qoheleth's radical views, in which case the *fremden*¹⁶⁹ message is different from the intended message of Qoheleth.¹⁷⁰ Several biblical scholars have even gone as far as asserting that a similar conservative voice was also introduced into the main body, in particular 3:17; 5:18; 7:18b.¹⁷¹

The apparent inconsistencies and contradictions in the book have in fact garnered a number of conflicting opinions, ranging from the view that Ecclesiastes is a hopelessly scrambled piece of writing¹⁷² to one that cites it as a fine work that exhausts the stylistic possibilities of proverbial

¹⁶⁵ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 394.

¹⁶⁶ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, lxv, and Murphy, "The Sage in Ecclesiastes and Qoheleth the Sage," in *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, eds. John G. Gammie and Leo G. Perdue (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 265.

¹⁶⁷ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 394-395.

¹⁶⁸ Walther Zimmerli, "Das Buch des Predigers Salomo, Sprüche/Prediger" (Das Alte Testament Deutsch 16/1; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1962); Also see reconciliation work by T.A. Perry, *Dialogues with Koheleth. The Book of Ecclesiastes: Translation and Commentary* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State University, 1993), 46.

¹⁶⁹ Walter Zimmerli, "Das Buch Kohelet – Traktat Oder Sentenzensammlung?" *VT* 24 (1974) 221-230.

¹⁷⁰ On the same note, several biblical scholars use different terminology to differentiate between the messages in the book. That is, the word of Qoheleth refers to the main body of Ecclesiastes (1:2-12:8), while Ecclesiastes refers to the book in its entirety. See Shields, "Ecclesiastes and the end of wisdom," *TynBull* 50.1 (1999) 117-139 and Andrew G. Shead, "Ecclesiastes from the outside in," *Reformed Theological Review* 55/1 (1996) 24-37.

¹⁷¹ See C.G. Siegfried, *Prediger Und Hoheslied*, HKAT 2:3, 2. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1898), 2-12; A. Lauha, *Kohelet*, BKAT 19, Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchen, 1978), 4-7.

¹⁷² Gustav Bickell, *Der Prediger über den Wert des Daseins: Wiederherstellung des Bisher zerstückelten Textes*, 1-45.

Hebrew wisdom and poetry.¹⁷³ The impact of the apparent literary maze is far-reaching. To quote Berger's thoughts on this point,

The book of Qoheleth sets up a horizon of thought, a landscape of poetry that is opaque, unsettling, intangible and ephemeral. It conveys an exigency of meaning, yet the words spin around a thematic centre that seems, ultimately, not to exist. The text is not meaningless but is unrelentingly and strangely both creative and destructive. Its movements are ephemeral, with only breezes of significance and apparitions of answers.¹⁷⁴

The complexity of the issues found in interpreting Ecclesiastes casts doubt on claims that there exists an indisputably cohesive message – an affirmative structure – and hence a controlling purpose of the book.¹⁷⁵

Whilst the apparent inconsistencies in thoughts such as 6:3-5 and 11:7 as well as between 7:2-4 and 9:7-9 can be adequately explained by considering the context and purpose on which the view and exhortation were presented, the apparent conflicting sentiments within the book remain part of an interesting puzzle. Proposed solutions by biblical scholars range from the assertion that Qoheleth had an incoherent thought¹⁷⁶ or that there were multiple hands or glossators¹⁷⁷ through to the notion that Qoheleth entered into dialogue with himself or self-reflected,¹⁷⁸ thereby assuming he wrote the entire book or at least the main body (1:2-12:8). Whilst the apparent conflicting sentiments are well-noted, the presence of vocabularies and thematic consistency, with its sustained arguments, provides a strong indication for the presence of a coherent and single-point message.¹⁷⁹ Additionally, it casts doubt on the viability of the multiple glossators

¹⁷³ Oswald Loretz, *Qoheleth und der alte Orient* (Freiburg, 1964), 180-185. Also Craig Bartholomew, "Qoheleth in the Canon? Current Trends in the Interpretation of Ecclesiastes," *Themelios* 24.3 (May 1999) 4-20.

¹⁷⁴ Berger, "Qoheleth and the Exigencies of the Absurd," 141.

¹⁷⁵ Bartholomew, "Qoheleth in the Canon?" 4-20. Bartholomew points out that there is yet to be agreement on the message of the book. Delitzsch predicts that all future attempts will fail, while Eaton suggests that all findings are at best tentative. See Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, trans. M. Easton (Grand Rapids: Wm. Eerdmans, 1875, repr. 1950), 195. The literary complexity of the book not only leads to a lack of affirmative consensus about the structure of Ecclesiastes, but it has also leads to claims of 'multiple hands' and 'contradictions' in the book.

¹⁷⁶ Zimmermann, *The Inner World of Qoheleth*, ix-xii.

¹⁷⁷ Siegfried, *Prediger*, 2-12; Lauha, *Kohelet*, 4-7.

¹⁷⁸ For instance, Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*; De Jong, "A Book on Toil," and Loader, *Ecclesiastes*.

¹⁷⁹ Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 35.

theory, or worse that Qoheleth was suffering from some kind of psychological instability. On the contrary, it appears that Qoheleth had “pondered and searched out and set in order... searched to find the right words, and what he wrote was upright and true” (12:9-10). As also noted by Crenshaw, “[t]he epilogist believed that Qoheleth stamped his teaching with recognizable design rather than bequeathing a legacy of random thought.”¹⁸⁰ A possible route, which I will argue further in section 2.4.3 of this chapter, is to treat the apparently different sentiments as complementary rather than contradictory, intended to present a cohesive and pointed message.

It is in fact a growing consensus that “contradictions” and the apparently “contradicting” sentiments in the speech are intentional and need to be recognised as they are, in order to unlock and understand the message of Ecclesiastes.¹⁸¹ In other words, cohesiveness is established only through embracing the apparent “internal contradictions”. Fox expresses this sentiment as follows:

The contradictions in the book of Qohelet are real and intended... [they] do not make the book incoherent. On the contrary, Qohelet’s persistent observation of contradictions is a powerful cohesive force, and an awareness of it brings into focus the book’s central concern: The problem of the meaning of life.¹⁸²

Fox’s rationale is noteworthy, in that he argues that the “contradictions” within 1:2-12:8 are undergirded by intangible tensions driven by two traditions *within* Qoheleth. What is expressed, and which therefore represents the “contradictions” in the book, is the result of vigorous interactions between the voices of the frame narrator, the wiser but older Qoheleth, and the younger Qoheleth. These “internal contradictions” mirror the act of tearing down the traditionally accepted maxims for the meaning in life and the act of building up an empirically verifiable alternative. Similar treatment of the book can be seen in Loader’s “polar structure,” which sees the “contradictions” as reflecting Qoheleth’s struggle with faith – a notion which was left intentionally unresolved in the book. The purpose was to create a “religious vacuum,” i.e. the sense of a number of unresolved questions that arise from discrepancies between traditionally

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 35.

¹⁸¹ Bartholomew, “Qoheleth in the Canon?” 4-20.

¹⁸² Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 3

accepted maxims and the reality of life.¹⁸³ The “structure complex” theory, by De Jong, a similar format to Loader’s “polar structure,” is another approach that can be used to address the same complexity.¹⁸⁴

Similarly, the second type of “contradiction”, that between the main body (1:2-12:8) and the epilogue (12:9-14), is significant to the interpretation of the book. The epilogue, particularly 12:13b-14, is considered ‘an important hermeneutical key for reading the whole’¹⁸⁵ and the key to understanding Qoheleth’s message.¹⁸⁶ Fox’s use of the epilogue is such an example, because although he believes that the exhortation is the work of a later scribe, he insists that it is nevertheless essential and crucial to interpreting the book – ‘the book now says: Even if everything is absurd, nevertheless we must fear God and keep His commandments.’¹⁸⁷ Fox explains this implication as follows:

Man’s duty to fear and obey and God’s ultimate judgement on man are, for Qoheleth too, bedrock truths that experiences can collide with but not dislodge. We may wander around bruised and bewildered. We may see the meaning of life crumble if we stare at it too carefully. But we can still do what we are supposed to do. And we *know* what this is, even if we are ignorant of its consequences. That is no small thing.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸³ Loader, *Ecclesiastes*: 7-8.

¹⁸⁴ De Jong, “A Book on Toil,” 107-116. Another example is A.D.G. Wright, “The Riddle of the Sphinx: The Structure of the Book of Qoheleth,” *CBQ* 30 (1968) 245 - 266. Wright notes, ‘Its seeming lack of order and of progression of thought, as well as its alternation of orthodox and heterodox statements sometimes to the point of apparent contradiction’. He continues, ‘It is only when the principle underlying this maze can be established with evidence sufficiently objective to give some promise of a consensus, that we will have the requisite data to move ahead with confidence...’ See Wright, “The Riddle of the Sphinx Wright,” 313-314. See also, “Riddle of the Sphinx Revisited: Numerical Patterns in the Book of Qoheleth,” *CBQ* 42 (1980) 38-51. This “revisited” version provides a better understanding of the structure of the book by introducing numerical patterns for its subsections.

¹⁸⁵ Lee, *Vitality of Enjoyment*, 183-184. See also Jamie Grant, “Wisdom and Covenant: Revisiting Zimmerli,” *EuroJTh* 12:2 (2003) 103-111. An issue raised in this work is the function of 1:1 as a link between wisdom and the history of Israel, particularly to through King Solomon. In other words, 1:1 serves a literary purpose, which in turn opens up the possibility that, similar to 1:1, 12:13-14 has a specified literary function. This is especially the case when the same author frames the body of Ecclesiastes in line with the superscript (1:1) and the epilogue (12:9-14). See Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 366.

¹⁸⁶ Gerald T. Sheppard, “The Epilogue to Qoheleth as a Theological Commentary,” *CBQ* 39 (1977) 182-189.

¹⁸⁷ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 144.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 144-145. Emphasis is Fox’s.

In other words, the purpose of the book in its entirety is to call readers to fear God and keep His commandments.

The centrality of 12:13b-14 is similarly noted in works investigating the function of Ecclesiastes in the light of ancient Near Eastern wisdom. Ecclesiastes is considered a criticism against, as well as a corrective measure for, certain traditionally accepted maxims of life.¹⁸⁹ On the function and the significance of the epilogue in the light of the wisdom movement, Shields comments:

It appears that the epilogist... employed Qohelet's words in order to reveal the failure of the sages and *warn their prospective students to adhere to the commands of God* [emphasis mine]. The book of Ecclesiastes thus functions as a tract designed to discredit the wisdom movement, using the sage Qohelet's own words in order to do so.¹⁹⁰

Clearly, 12:13b-14 is significant in interpreting the book in its entirety, and more so when it expresses the purpose of the book.¹⁹¹ Evidently, more weight is given to 12:13b-14, even when it may mean having to subvert most of the teaching and experiences of Qoheleth.¹⁹²

¹⁸⁹ Ecclesiastes, argued by some, is the work of a specific era of wisdom, during which time literary works expressing scepticism and criticism in relation to the traditionally accepted maxims of life abounded. Katherine Dell, *An Introduction to Israel's Wisdom Literatures* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd., 2000), 51; Kathleen Anne Farmer, "The Wisdom Books: Jobs, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes," in *Hebrew Bible Today: An Introduction to Critical Issues*, eds., Steven L. McKenzie and M. Patrick Graham (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 134. Cf., for example, W. Baumgartner, "The Wisdom Literature," in H.H. Rowley ed., *The Old Testament and Modern Study* (Oxford: OUP, 1951), 221-27. Within this context, Qoheleth represents a generation of Jews who would not deny the existence of God due to their Jewish heritage and upbringing. Nonetheless, they questioned the wisdom and the traditions of their elders regarding God. See Von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*. trans. James D. Martin (SCM Press Ltd: Bloomsbury, 1972), 232-235. Hence, to some biblical scholars, Qoheleth suffered an inner religious "tension," driven by inconsistency inherent in pious hope and teaching in comparison with empirical observations. Others posit that Qoheleth had lost his faith and no longer shared the confidence and the faith of the elders. See Von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, 232-235. Several biblical scholars, on the other hand, have argued that the primary function of Ecclesiastes is a criticism against neither the faith of Qoheleth nor the inconsistency of God – it is primarily a criticism against several traditionally accepted maxims of life. Crenshaw notes that 'Qoheleth quotes traditional belief and then exposes it in the harsh light of experience. In this case, he comes perilously close to blaming God... [but] the problem is no longer God simply because God and His actions will remain an "insoluble, a mystery ... in the unfathomable mystery of God"'. See Crenshaw, "Defending God" in *Biblical Responses to the Problem of Evil* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 168. Seow sees Ecclesiastes as a work of literature attempting to teach and help a new generation of Jews living in a world of new economic, political and social realities to apply traditionally accepted maxims of wisdom. Seow, *Ecclesiastes* 69.

¹⁹⁰ Shields "Ecclesiastes and the End of Wisdom," 117-139.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 121-122.

¹⁹² Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 35.

Whilst the importance and function of 12:13b-14 is verified, there is perhaps, a cause to review the claim that it undermines the message of the main body (1:2-12:8). The primary underlying reason undergirding the antithesis theory is the perceived pessimistic tone in 1:2-12:8, particularly in the perceived absence of theodicy and the view of the overall verdict that all is הבל. In this sense, it can be postulated that the concluding voice of optimism in the epilogue is there to balance or neutralise the overall tone of the book. However, as I shall argue further in 2.4.1 of this chapter, this perceived pessimism is most likely the interpreter's own reaction to the verdict rather than the intended function and purpose of הבל. Nonetheless, not everyone sees a distinct contrast between the body of Ecclesiastes and the epilogue. Gese, for instance, maintains that the main body of Ecclesiastes 'shows a mutation of structure in comparison with the earlier wisdom'. Unlike the earlier structure of wisdom, where reality is built primarily and based on one's perception and conduct, this "new" structure is built upon the perception of the individual in the light of world affairs. Furthermore, this new structure requires one to avoid being "estranged" from reality and instead 'hold[ing] fast to a single world in which God accomplishes and orders all things'. In this respect, the book of Ecclesiastes is essentially the work of wisdom that supplements and also applies accepted maxims within the context of a "real world." According to Gese's reading, the way to bridge this gap is by means of employing a healthy fear of God, found in 1:2-12:8, summed up correctly in 12:13-14.¹⁹³

The frame narrator can have a more active and positive role than widely assumed, and it is always probable that even if there are two different authors, the second author intended for the entire composition to fit into intended arguments and purpose of 1:2-12:8. Hence, instead of an antithesis, the epilogue strengthens the message Qoheleth wished to convey. Perhaps, Murphy is right to point out that if an antithesis is intended, the endeavour is 'an outstanding failure',¹⁹⁴ while Bartholomew goes further by saying it is 'naïve' to think that an antithesis is intended by the epilogist.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹³ Hartmut Gese, "The Crisis of Wisdom in Koheleth," in *Theodicy in the Old Testament: Issues in Religion and Theology* 4, ed., James L. Crenshaw (Philadelphia: Fortress Press), 142-45.

¹⁹⁴ Murphy, "The Sage in Ecclesiastes and Qoheleth the Sage," 264.

¹⁹⁵ Bartholomew, *Reading Ecclesiastes*, 95-96.

There is already a basis for this stance – as Shead’s study on the lexical relationship between the epilogue and the main body of Ecclesiastes explains:

The vocabulary of the epilogue is totally distinctive of and often peculiar to Ecclesiastes. With the epilogue’s vocabulary one can write a third of the text of Ecclesiastes; favourite and idiomatic words in Ecclesiastes make up almost half the words in the epilogue. In other words, far from being the alien addition of one or two redactors, the epilogue is entirely characteristic of the rest of the book from a lexical point of view. Of course, the possibility is not excluded that redactors could have written in the style of the original with great skill, but this is irrelevant to a study of the book as literature: the fact remains that body and epilogue speak with one voice. The preponderance of “favourite” words throughout the whole book lends both a peculiar sense of unity to the work, and a feeling of intertextual allusiveness.¹⁹⁶

Consistency in the language, vocabulary and voice between the body and the epilogue are in fact too glaringly obvious to be ignored,¹⁹⁷ and the lexical relationship, as well as the shared perspectives between the main body and the epilogue of Ecclesiastes, is more affirmatively intentional and consistent than assumed. Not surprisingly, biblical scholars such as Garrett, Curtis and Leong and, to a certain extent, Fox (except for 12:13b-14) believe that Ecclesiastes is the work of a single author.¹⁹⁸ Even Seow, despite recognising the problem of “contradictions”

¹⁹⁶ Andrew G. Shead, “Reading Ecclesiastes ‘Epilogically,’” *TynBull* 48.1 (1997) 76-77. Shead’s work on the epilogue is sharply criticised by Shields in his work “Ecclesiastes and the End of Wisdom.” Interestingly, however, Shields agrees that there is indeed vocabulary or lexical cohesion between the body of Ecclesiastes and the epilogue. Shields attributes this to the epilogist’s usage of Qoheleth’s words in order to show the failure of the wisdom movement. See Also Mile Curtis, *The End of the Matter: Understanding the Epilogue of Ecclesiastes* (Belingham: Lexham Press, 2012), a work on the same authorship of the body and the epilogue of Ecclesiastes.

¹⁹⁷ In addition to the presence of a lexical relationship, there is an indication of cohesion in the message as a whole. Although the word “commandments” appears for the first time in the epilogue, the idea is present in 5:1-7, in which it closely resembles a restatement of the law of Deuteronomy 23:22-24 in 5:4-5, and the background of 5:6 is Numbers 15:22-31. See Lohfink, “Revelation by Joy,” 633. See also Craig G. Bartholomew, *Reading Ecclesiastes: Old Testament Exegesis and Hermeneutic Theory* (Roma: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1998), 258-259.

¹⁹⁸ Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, The New American Commentary, Vol., 14 (Nashville, Tennessee: B&H Publishing, 1993), 262-263; Curtis, *The End of the Matter*, 92-95. Leong, *Our Reason for Being*, 3; Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 365; also Seow. *Ecclesiastes*, 391-396. Lexical and perspectival cohesion form one of the exegetical bases for Fox’s “three hierarchies of perspectives” in Ecclesiastes. That is, ‘the frame narrator, who tells about Qoheleth-the reporter, the narrating “I,” who speaks from the vantage point of old age and looks back on Qoheleth – the observer, the experiencing “I,” – who undertook the investigation reported in the book. However, he excludes 12:13-14 on the basis that it is the work of another epilogist or scribe – hence his reservation concerning the voice in 12:13-14. The passage is argued to be a form of colophon, which is usually the work of another scribe. However, a colophon only attests to the type, date, source and literary significance of a particular piece of literature. See Erle V. Leichty, “The Colophon” In *Studies Presented to A. Leo Oppenheim*, Ed. Robert D. Biggs & John A. Brinkham (Chicago: The Oriental Institute, 1964), 147-154. The emphasis is not the identity of the scribe unless it is stated, and a colophon does not rule out the possibility of the same author. See also Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 262. Following Fox’s theory, Garrett proposes three levels of discourse in Ecclesiastes coming from the same person. The first level – that of a frame narrator (1:1-2; 12:8-10) – is referred to as the third person. This

in the book, maintains that its perspective is the same.¹⁹⁹ Others inclining toward the antithetical assumption (have to) explain this lexical cohesion by suggesting that the epilogist(s) has borrowed and used the voice of Qoheleth for the epilogue or, in Shead's words, written 'in the style' of Qoheleth.²⁰⁰ This of course is a possible explanation; however, the presence of the shared perspectives and lexical relationship does raise questions about the motive of the frame narrator, and indeed, if an antithesis is intended, lexical harmony and cohesive presentation is fundamentally unnecessary.

Thematic and vocabulary consistency is similarly observed in the apparently conservative sentiments in 12:13-14 and 1:2-12:8, in particular 3:14c; 5:6 [5:7]; 8:12-14. Furthermore, Qoheleth's fear of God encompasses an appropriate attitude expressed through visible behaviours and conduct covering every dimension of life, with the underpinning idea that God will hold one's decisions in life to account. It is thus not surprising that 12:13b-14 includes the call to 'keep his commandments.'²⁰¹ Hence, the call to fear God and keep His commandments 'bring to the close by drawing the attention of the reader back to the motif only previously referenced in obscurity.'²⁰² The injunction is thus the final call demanding reverence fear encompassing all spheres of life,²⁰³ consistent with the prescriptive function of the call to fear God in the wisdom literature. Contrary to the assertion of Seow that the injunction provides an

level 'sets the Teacher in the realm of history and sets a degree of objectivity and distance between the reader and the Teacher' and lifts the book above the level of personal reflection. In addition it presents the teacher as an authority whose word ought to be heard. The second level presents the Teacher speaking in terms of wisdom in the light of the reality of the world. And the third level includes first-person recollections and meditations which invite the reader to learn from the Teacher's experience and to join him in confronting life lessons.

¹⁹⁹ Seow, *Ecclesiastes* 38.

²⁰⁰ Shead, "Reading Ecclesiastes 'Epilogically,'" 76. Also Michael A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary* (Leicester, England: Inter Varsity Press, 1983), 21-24 who views 'One style pervades the book; but two people, Qoheleth, the originator of the material, and an unnamed author-editor, lay behind it'. Sheppard goes on to suggest the epilogist's thematic motive as another explanation. See Gerald T. Sheppard, "The Epilogue to Qoheleth as Theological Commentary," *CBQ* 39 (1977) 188-89. However, see also Gordis, *Kohelet*, 349, who claims the similar style, reflects the same period of writing.

²⁰¹ I shall cover more of this in 2.5.1 of this chapter.

²⁰² Richard Alan Fuhr Jr. "An Analysis of the Inter-Dependency of the Prominent Motifs within the Book of Qohelet" (diss., Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, October 2008), 215. Accessed in June 7, 2015 http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1020&context=fac_dis.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 215 -216.

additional dimension to the teaching of Qoheleth,²⁰⁴ it actually sums up the dimensions of the teaching of Qoheleth. Therefore, it is more probable that the injunction serves to complement rather than to contradict the message of Qoheleth. This paradigm is significant in interpreting Ecclesiastes. For if this is the case, the direct command in 12:13b-14 signals the intention for these final two verses to be read as part of the speech that begins in 1:2,²⁰⁵ while the injunction expressed in 12:13b-14 forms the concluding command in the list of injunctions from Qoheleth. In other words, the speech directs the reader to embrace the direct exhortation at the end of the epilogue (12:13b-14) and as the summary of the book. Therefore, it narrows the purpose of Ecclesiastes, and the intention of Qoheleth to persuading his readers to fear God and keep His commandments.²⁰⁶

It is not within the scope of this chapter to diverge at greater length away to the issue of “internal contradictions” and the “antithetical” arguments in Ecclesiastes, but the arguments selected, analysed and presented herein are sufficient to show that despite the intricacy and the complexity of the book, there is an exegetical basis on which to take the controlling purpose of the book as to persuade one to “fear God and keep His commandments” (12:13b). Moreover, adopting the argument of the non-antithetical paradigm, there is a reasonably strong argument for defining Qoheleth’s mode of persuasion as intentional and re-examining the teaching of the book as a whole through a new paradigm of cohesiveness. These notions represent considerable implications for interpreting the book, as well as to this research. Firstly, the book expresses Qoheleth’s attempt to persuade (his readers). The writing is thus a speech intended to guide and goad readers toward the intended direction. With respect to the question on the meaning of life, it gives a stronger basis and emphasis to Qoheleth’s journey, experience, warnings and exhortations in relation to the quest for the meaning of life and coherence therein. Secondly, if the ultimate intention of Qoheleth for his audience is found in 12:13b-14, it acts as the keystone to Qoheleth’s – and hence the book’s – teaching on the worthwhile purpose of life.

²⁰⁴ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 394

²⁰⁵ Leong, *Our Reason for Being*, 83.

²⁰⁶ Carolyn J. Sharp, “Ironic Representation, Authorial Voice, and Meaning in Qoheleth,” *Biblical Interpretation* 12 (2004) 64. Sharp actually sees the entire book as a literary device calling Israel to fear and obey God.

2.3 THE INJUNCTION IN 12:13b-14 AND THE WORTHWHILE PURPOSE OF LIFE

2.3.1 CONCEPTUAL IDENTICALITY AND CONSISTENCY

I have argued and shown that the purpose of Ecclesiastes is to persuade readers to keep the final injunction in 12:13b-14. The final imperative states:²⁰⁷

12:13a - Hear the conclusion of the matter:

12:13b - Fear God and keep His commandments - For this is everyone.

12:14a - For God shall bring every work into judgment,

12:14b - with every secret thing, whether good or evil.

It is explicit that the phrase ‘Hear the conclusion of the matter’ (12:13a) points readers to the imperative ‘Fear God and keep His commandments’ (12:13b)²⁰⁸ and hence serves as a link between all thought in the book (1:2-12:8) in line with the injunction (12:13b-14).²⁰⁹ The demonstrative pronoun *this* in 12:13b has a significant function in interpreting the text. Elsewhere in the speech, for instance, it is commonly used to signify climactic statements,²¹⁰ while in 12:13b-14 it carries an asseverate voice linking the reader and humanity as a whole²¹¹ to

²⁰⁷ English Bible quotations in thesis is my translation unless specified otherwise.

²⁰⁸ This is not without contention, though. Fox argued that the presence of a ‘large samekh’ may suggest the book ends at 12:13a. A similar occurrence is cited from Daniel 7:28a to show an end of a report on things that were said earlier. Contrary to Fox’s view, however, the presence of large letters usually signals the beginning of a book or a section. See Zvi Ron, “Four Large Letters in the Bible,” *JBQ* 37 (2) (2009) 91-95.

²⁰⁹ Disagreement exists as to the scope of the text in the speech covered by 12:13b-14. Shields, for instance, sees the word דבר (matter) in 12:13a as referring to the failure of the sages as a whole. In line with this interpretation, 12:13a links the “failure” of the sages with the “corrective measure” expressed in 12:13b-14. Instead of following the folly of the sages, one should fear God and obey His commandments. See Shields, “Ecclesiastes and the End of Wisdom,” 129-139. Shields, however, does not show convincing rationale for limiting the word “all (have been heard)” as only limited to the failure of the sages. Further, it is difficult to ignore the continuation of the call to fear God in the body of the text and the epilogue.

²¹⁰ Peter Enns, “הַדָּמָה and the Evaluation of Qoheleth’s Wisdom in Qoh 12:13 or the ‘A is so, and What’s more, B’ Theology of Ecclesiastes,” in *The Idea of Biblical Interpretation: Essays in Honour of James L. Kugel*, eds., Hindy Najman and Judith H. Newman, Supp. to the *Journal for the Study of Judaism*, eds., John J. Collins and Florentino Garcia Martinez, Vol. 83 (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2004), 125-138. Enns notes that the demonstrative pronoun זה (this) is used in a number of climactic statements. In 14 instances it is used to introduce Qoheleth’s conclusion (2:15,19,21,23,26; 4:4,8,16; 5:9; 6:2,9; 7:6; 8:10,14) and a concluding statement of some sort in 12 other instances.

²¹¹ Zimmer, *Zwischen Tod und Lebensglück*, 24.

the basis of the imperative, i.e. ‘Fear God and keep His commandments’,²¹² ‘for *this* [emphasis mine] is everyone’.²¹³

Interpreting the phrase *זה כליה־אדם* (literally, “This is everyone”) in 12:13b is problematic. A similar construction is found in Psalm 109:4, *אני תפלה* and Psalm 120:7, *אני־שלום* which can be translated literally as ‘I am prayer’ and ‘I am peace’, respectively, considering that, as Joüon notes, when an apposition construction, such as the nominal (substantival) predicate, is used in Hebrew, it expresses an abstract quality or a concrete particularity of the subject.²¹⁴ Similarly, Davidson notes, when such apposition is used it means the predicate explains the thing and its quality, i.e. its substance or the class of the subject.²¹⁵ As Davidson elaborates, “instead of saying the altar is brazen or the table is of wood, it can be put in certain simplicity and concreteness such as the altar is brass or the table is wood”.²¹⁶ Hence, based on works such as those of Joüon and Davidson above, Goldingay’s commentary on Psalm 109 notes, “The last clause [Psalm 109:4b], literally ‘I am a plea/prayer’, is allusive, though it compares with ‘I am peace’ in 120:7 and English expressions such as ‘he is trouble’ or ‘he is good news’.”²¹⁷ Therefore, the constructions in 109:4 and 120:7 emphasise an intensification of a “substance that constitutes, or fills up, the entity in the predicate.”²¹⁸ Such reading is consistent with the context of Psalm 109 and Psalm 120. In the case of Psalm 109:4, the expression came about as a response to *יִשְׁטוּנִי תַחַת־אֹהֲבָי* (For my love they are my adversaries), leading to the psalmist devoting himself fully to prayer. Hengstenberg noted,

²¹² The presence and relevance of the word “commandments” is a point of contention. Murphy, for instance, insists that Qoheleth would hardly use the word “commandments” in speech. See Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, xxxiv. Also Murphy, “The Sage in Ecclesiastes and Qoheleth the Sage,” 265. Unless Murphy is troubled by the word itself rather than the meaning of word, it is hard not to deduce the relevance of “commandments” in the injunction. There are reasonable data to show that the instructions to fear God in the speech are related to commandments spelled out in Deuteronomy 23:22-24, Numbers 15:22-31, Leviticus 4:2, 22, 27-20. It has also been shown that the injunction to fear God in Ecclesiastes and Deuteronomy are virtually synonymous. See Lee, *Vitality of Enjoyment*, 89, 113-114. Others, such as Leong, see the connection between the commandments and the Decalogue Leong, *Our Reason for Being*, 45-47, 79.

²¹³ Enns, “*הֵאָדָם־כֻּלּוֹ*” and the Evaluation of Qoheleth’s Wisdom in Qoh 12:13,” 135-136.

²¹⁴ Paul Joüon, S.J. *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, Vol. II Part 3: Syntax: Paradigms and Indices, Subsidia Biblicva – 14/11, trans. and rev. T. Muraoka (Roma: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1991) 565-566. In this case, Psalm 109:4 was cited as an example.

²¹⁵ A.B. Davidson, *Hebrew Syntax*, Introductory Hebrew Grammar, 3rd ed. (Edinburg: T & T Clark, 1989), 39.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 41

²¹⁷ John Goldingay, *Psalms, Volume 3: Psalms 90-150*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic 2008), 279.

²¹⁸ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 362.

As the Psalmist in the whole paragraph describes how he is treated, not how he feels, the expression, ‘I am prayer’ cannot mean, ‘I am quiet in it,’ ‘I do nothing else than prayer,’ but only, ‘they treat me so wickedly, or matters have come to that extremity with me, that I am wholly prayer’.²¹⁹

In the same vein, the expression in Psalm 120:7, when it is considered in the light of the predicament of being among those who hated peace, can be best understood to express the intensity that the psalmist is wholly for peace, implying the psalmist or his whole being is this way inclined.

Accordingly, the constructions in Psalm 109:4 and Psalm 120:7 may read ‘I am prayer [itself]’ and ‘I am [all for] peace’, respectively.²²⁰ In light of these similar constructions, the elliptical sentence in 12:13b, כִּי־זֶה כָּל־הָאָדָם can mean ‘*this*—the fear of God and obedience to his commandments—is the substance... of every person’.²²¹ In other words, ‘fear[ing] God and keep[ing] His commandments’ *is* what it is to be human and expresses the reason for existence and the purpose of life. Furthermore, the warning that God will bring ‘every work into judgment’ (12:14) links the judgment to ‘every work’ (of everyone) and shows a consequential relationship between ‘fear[ing] God and keep[ing] His commandments’ and ‘every work’. That is, the judgment hinges on whether one’s ‘every work’ is in harmony with the injunction. Consequently, because God will judge everything, the reader needs to fear Him, and this is all the more so because this is what humans are all about. In essence, it is the question of whether one’s work is in agreement with the reason for existing and the purpose of life. It is thus not surprising that the *Contemporary English Version* and the *Good News Translation* paraphrase 12:13b as ‘this is what life is all about’ and ‘this is all that we were created for’, respectively. In any case, even widely accepted translations of 12:13b, such as that of the *New International Version* (‘this is the duty of all mankind’) and that of the *New American Standard Version* (‘this applies to every person’), already imply the teaching that fearing God and keeping His commandments is God’s purpose for humanity. For when a command to live in a certain way

²¹⁹ E.W. Hengstenberg, *Commentary on the Psalms*, Vol III, trans. John Thomson Leith & Patrick Fairbairn, Salton (Edinburgh: T. & L. T. Clark, 1848), 306.

²²⁰ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 362. And so, Seow reads the construction as ‘I am a person of prayer’ (109:4) and ‘I am a person of peace’ (120:7). See Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 390.

²²¹ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 362.

applies to, or is the duty of, all humanity and every human being will ultimately be judged accordingly, it points to and has to be the purpose of life.

The teaching of 12:13b-14 is fascinatingly identical to the concept of the worthwhile purpose of life. Undeniably, what can be considered as “worthwhile” and therefore *a worthwhile* purpose *in* life is ultimately subjective to every individual. However, since a worthwhile purpose *in* life is, by definition, a purpose that *gives* value to life and *makes* life worth living,²²² it highlights that this subjectivity is still anchored in objectivity. In this case, the “worthwhile” concept is associated with the positive value and the worth it gives to life – it is a purpose which is intrinsically good and contributes to a meaningful life. Accordingly, life has value and is worth living because it is motivated by an intrinsically good purpose that undergirds meaningful activity. When one considers that a specific purpose gives the utmost value and worth to living, such a purpose can be considered as worthwhile. Therefore, although this does not eliminate the element of subjectivity, the concept is still based firmly on conceptual objectivity. One can still know and see how a specific purpose in life is worthwhile or the most worthwhile.

The worthwhile purpose *of* life, however, is conceptually different from *a* worthwhile purpose *in* life, due to the types of questions it answers in relation to the reason for one’s existence: it is fundamentally a concern for the overall purpose, which gives significance to existence and the reason for living.²²³ Considering the persuasive function of 12:13b-14 in the light of the book in its entirety, it implies that to fear God and keep His commandments is the worthwhile purpose for life, intrinsically good and contributes to a the (God intended) meaningful life. More intriguingly, the injunction answers the purpose of existence and the reason for living. Furthermore, since one’s work will eventually be evaluated based on its harmony with this purpose of life, it reinforces that 12:13b-14 is conceptually the worthwhile purpose of life indeed.

²²² Edwards, “The Meaning and Value of Life,” 114-132.

²²³ Tao, “The Meaning of Life,” 6. Also, Edwards, “The Meaning and Value of Life,” 114-132.

2.3.2 CONSISTENCY WITH QOHELETH'S WORTHWHILE PURPOSE OF LIFE

I have shown that 12:13b-14 is conceptually and functionally identical to the concept of the worthwhile purpose of life. This subsection will investigate the significance of 12:13b-14 in relation to Qoheleth's quest for the meaning of life and coherence in life.

2.3.2.1 The Quest for and the Worthwhile Purpose of Life

A major portion of the speech involves Qoheleth's first-person recollections of experiences that invite readers to step into his life and learn from his encounters.²²⁴ In fact, the book is rich with information on Qoheleth's enquiry for the meaning of life. Hence, although reading into these experiences runs the risk of reading too much into the texts, not to mention the risk of reading into an 'implied author' rather than the actual author,²²⁵ they nonetheless offer promising evidence for the investigation. Consider, for instance, 1:13:²²⁶

²²⁴ Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 263. The passages are 1:12-14; 2:1-13, 14b-26; 3:9-14, 16-4:4; 4:7-8; 5:12-13 [5:13-14], 16-6:6; 7:15-18, 23-29; 8:9-10, 14-9:1; 10:5-7. See also Baruch A. Levine, "The Appeal to Personal Experience in the Wisdom of Qoheleth" in *From Babel to Babylon: Essays on Biblical History and Literature in Honor of Brian Peckham*, Eds., Joyce Rilett Wood, John E. Larvey, Mark Leuchter (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 332 – 345. The work deals with more than the two phrases mentioned above. Levine built on the assumption that in addition to instructions by their predecessors, sages appealed explicitly in relation to their experiences in their writings. In the context of Ecclesiastes, it is personal experience that equally informs the writing of Qoheleth.

²²⁵ One issue is with the identity of the king (1:12) in the royal biography. Is Qoheleth the king mentioned in the passage? The issue is not the actual identity of Qoheleth but the literary association and the connection that is being made. See Jamie Grant, "Wisdom and Covenant: Revisiting Zimmerli," *EuroJTh* (2003) 12:2, 103-111. It is probable that Qoheleth intended to be associated with the king, as it would 'lend credence and authority to his [Qoheleth's] message and teaching'. Furthermore, when the king and the court have long been seen to have 'acquired comprehensive knowledge, understood everything and experience everything', associating with the king strengthens his verdict and conclusions about life. See also Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 280-281.

²²⁶ This verse is open to a number of interpretations. Fox, for instance, argues that the endeavour is to investigate 'what happens' in life, which is to say 'What people do', while Crenshaw views it as 'the exploration of everything within human experience'. Garrett emphasises that the purpose is to acquire wisdom, while Whybray provides direction for the investigation by pointing out, in a slightly different nuance, that it should "test the adequacy of wisdom." Fredericks, on the other hand, maintains that in the light of the motif expressed in 1:2-3, the comprehensive inquiry stated in 1:13 is an inquiry into the benefits of toil under a context in which everything is *הבל*. McCabe and Longman dive into the motive of the investigation and maintain that it is the search for meaning in life. See Fox, *A Time To Tear Down*, 105; Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 72; Garrett, *Ecclesiastes*, 289; Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 49; Fredericks, "Ecclesiastes," 22, 70. See also McCabe, "The Message of Ecclesiastes," 93-96; Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 78.

- 1:13a I set my heart to seek and to explore by wisdom all that is done under heavens.
 1:13b It is a grievous preoccupation that God has given to the sons of man to be afflicted with:

It is clear that 1:13a expresses a purposeful investigation, considered by biblical scholars as a ‘serious deliberation’²²⁷ involving ‘the whole person.’²²⁸ Similar expressions of purpose can also be found in 1:17, 2:1, 2:3, 2:12, 4:1, 4:7, 7:25, 8:9 and 8:16.²²⁹ Although these passages share a similar intention, 1:13 remains the overarching purpose, forming the reason for all the purposes expressed in the passages listed above. This is exegetically verifiable, in that the relationships between 1:13, 1:17, 2:1, 2:3 and 2:12 are linked syntactically and have to be interpreted as a whole.²³⁰ For instance, the purpose that is expressed in 1:17a is an explanation for 1:13-16,²³¹ in that the investigation ‘by wisdom’ (1:13a) requires one to know wisdom (1:17a).²³² In the case of 1:17a, it drives a tenacious and relentless search for wisdom²³³ so that a thorough examination of

²²⁷ McCabe, “*The Message of Ecclesiastes*,” 93.

²²⁸ Craig G. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalm, ed. Tremper Longman III (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2009), 123. The idiom נתן את לבי indicates a decision or determination from the heart, known as a decision-making organ in Ancient Near-Eastern anthropology. The word “heart,” which is often used figuratively to express human feeling or to personify one’s soul, suggests that the investigation involves the whole being, an assertion affirmed further in 2:1-13. Crenshaw notes that the combination of the word לדרוש (to seek) and ולתור (and search) shows the search is a comprehensive endeavour. According to him, the word לדרוש refers to the length and breadth of the search, whilst the second infinitive, תור, adds inner depth, i.e. penetration beyond the surface of reality. Interestingly, Gordis’ study on the same words arrives at an opposing conclusion. Seow suggests that perhaps the search includes both the ‘normative (drš)’ and the ‘novel (twr)’ to signal that the search follows well-defined paths and untested avenues. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 72; Gordis, *Koheleth*, 209; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 145.

²²⁹ There is a certain degree of variation in the expressions used in the stated passages. These variations, however, are minor and do not affect the analysis. See Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 11-13.

²³⁰ For instance, Wright sees double introductions in 1:13-18 for 2:1-17, and Whybray sees a progressive parallel between 1:13-15 and 1:16-18. Somewhat similarly, Frederick argues that 1:13-15; 1:16-18 and 2:1-3 make the tri-parallel units that serve as an introduction to the larger unit in 2:4-26. See Wright, “The Riddle of the Sphinx,” 318; Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 50, and Fredericks, *Ecclesiastes*, 79.

²³¹ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 17. Also Fox, *Contradiction*, 174.

²³² The construction with the connective ב makes it clear that the investigation is “by” (a means) or “with” (along with) wisdom in the Hebrew construction. See also Gordis, *Koheleth*, 209.

²³³ Fredericks, *Ecclesiastes*, 83.

knowledge can be possible.²³⁴ It seems clear from the unfolding passages that the application of wisdom involves the utilisation of empiricism as a tool of investigation. This is consistent with the long-noted peculiarity of Ecclesiastes for its emphasis and interaction between empiricism and ethical-religious principles.²³⁵

Similar intentions and expressions are found in 7:25 and 8:16. Consider the text below:

7:25 I turn my mind to understand, and to investigate and to search by wisdom the schemes of things, and to understand the foolishness of wickedness and the madness of folly.

8:16 When I applied my mind to know wisdom and to observe the preoccupation that is done on earth, though one's eyes see by day and do not sleep by night.

Unlike 1:17, which states the purpose of knowing wisdom in general, these passages express the search to understand and to apply wisdom to specific and observable phenomena. In the case of 7:25, it takes additional words such as to “search” (ולתור), to “seek” (ובקש) and “reasons (for things)” (וחשבון) to amplify the intensity²³⁶ of the quest, in order to understand ‘the explanation that stands behind the world’.²³⁷ A similarly perplexing phenomenon is expressed again in 8:16.²³⁸ Clearly, 7:25 and 8:16 share a similar motive with 1:17a concerning the purpose and intended function of wisdom. Other passages expressing purposes, such as 2:1-3, 2:12, 4:1, 4:7 and 8:9, are specific items that fall under Qoheleth’s investigation.

²³⁴ Ibid., 83.

²³⁵ Bartholomew, *Reading Ecclesiastes*, 233-235. See also Fox, *Contradiction*, 90 for the argument that Qoheleth employs experiential arguments as a new source of knowledge.

²³⁶ Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 124

²³⁷ Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 203. Contextually, the search is a response to a perplexing reality in which the righteous die in their righteousness and the wicked prosper in their wickedness (7:15 -20). The intensity of the search is implied, since such knowledge is ‘distant’ (7:23b) and too ‘deep’ for him (7:24). Hence, the purpose expressed in 7:25 is an attempt to know wisdom (7:23-24) as well as to know ‘the evil of folly and the foolishness of madness’ (7:25b) See also Leong, *Our Reason for Being*, 63.

²³⁸ The preceding passages describe a perplexing reality. In this case, the righteous receive the outcome that ought to be for the wicked, and the wicked are rewarded with what is rightly for the just (8:14). Passage 8:14 highlights that the perplexing reality remains a mystery and eludes the grasp of wisdom.

Qoheleth's experiment and reflective investigation are comprehensive and broad, a notion which finds further support in the phrase 'under heavens.'²³⁹ A related phrase which is more frequently used by Qoheleth is 'under the sun' (תחת השמש), which refers to the activities of human life in the realm of the living as opposed to the hereafter (4:3; 9:6).²⁴⁰ The emphasis on the realm of the living carries an explicitly temporal connotation,²⁴¹ while the phrase 'under heavens', on the contrary, has the attention and scope that covers activities everywhere on earth; hence, it carries a locative or spatial sense.²⁴² In this respect, whilst the phrase 'under the sun' means the investigation is about the realm of the living, 'under heavens' emphasises that the investigation covers the realm of the living everywhere (on earth). It is thus not surprising that his investigation should include a critical analysis of his personal experiments as well as an analytical observation of all human experiences (and pursuits) in the realm of the living.

Although it is not stated in 1:13a, it is obvious from the speech that the impetus of the inquiry points to death, since it is 'la véritable *nemesis* du Qohelet'.²⁴³ The shadow of death is seen first (1:4-6) and then appears vividly in the last poem (12:2-7). Death actually appears in every chapter of the book (with the exception of Chapter Ten), as the troubling and neutralising shadow lurking behind one's achievement, dignity and virtues – it grips life before one actually dies,²⁴⁴

²³⁹ For a further discussion on the scope of the investigation, see Norbert Lohfink, "Koh 1,2, 'Alles ist Windhauch' – universale oder anthropologische Aussage?" in *Der Weg zum Menschen*. FS A. Deissler, ed. R. Mosis and L. Ruppert (Freiburg, 1989) 201-216; Ludger Schwienhorst-Schönberger, "Nicht im Menschen ründet das Glück" *Kohelet im Spannungsfeld jüdischer Weisheit und hellenistischer Philosophie*, Herders Biblische Studien 2. (Freiburg, 1994). See also Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 40-41, 48-49; Fox, "The Meaning of *Hebel*," 426.

²⁴⁰ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 104-105. Compared to the phrase "under the heavens," which appears three times in the book (1:13; 2:3; 3:1), the phrase "under the sun" appears 27 times. The idea that the phrase "under the sun" connotes the realm of the living is sustained in 9:6, where the dead no longer share activities under the sun. A similar idea is seen in 4:3, where one who never existed will not see the evil under the sun.

²⁴¹ James B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 79; also Leong, *Our Reason for Being*, 5.

²⁴² Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 120-121. The locative connotation carried by this phrase is further sustained in 8:16. We find a similar expression in 1:13a (cf. 1:17). 8:16, which forms the conclusion to an observation stating that the investigation by means of wisdom focuses on business that has been done 'upon the earth'.

²⁴³ Lavoie, *La pensée du Qohelet*, 53. Quoted in Shannon Burkes, *Death in Qoheleth And Egyptian Biographies of the Late Period* (Atlanta, Georgia: Society of Biblical Literature, No. 170), 60.

²⁴⁴ N. Lohfink, *The Christian Meaning of the Old Testament*, trans. R.A. Wilson (London: Burns & Oates, 1965), 152. 'Death has become the frontier situation which forces man to reflect upon it.' For more of Qoheleth's views of death, see Alison Lo, "Death in Qohelet," *JANES* 31 (2001) 85-98.

and its levelling effect is the reason for Qoheleth eventually hating his life (2:17-18) and declaring that all is הבל.

The scope and the impetus of the inquiry signal that the quest is a comprehensive, philosophical and theological investigation into the question of existence and the meaning of life. Furthermore, considering the function of the purpose expressed in 1:13a in relation to the other passages (that express purposes), there is good reason to believe that the underlying concern is for the search for the purpose of existence, i.e. these unprejudiced and reflective experiments on purposes highlight that the issue is not about whether one has a purpose in life; rather, the concern is the search for the worthwhile purpose of life. One example of this experiment is 2:1-3:

- 2:1 I said in mine heart, “Go to now, I will test you with mirth, therefore experience good (בטוב): But, behold, this also vanity.
- 2:2 I said of laughter, mad: and of mirth, What does it accomplish?
- 2:3 I explore with my heart to give myself to wine, yet guiding my heart with wisdom; and to lay hold on folly, till I might see what is good (טוב) for the sons of men to do under the heavens during the few days of their life.

It is clear that the passage above expresses the motives of the experiment. Here, 2:1 states the king’s intention to experience what is ‘good’.²⁴⁵ Since the phrase ‘experience good’ is qualified by ‘what does it accomplish’ (2:2), it suggests a concern for the qualitative aspect from the object of investigation, namely the benefit of pleasure. Consequently, to ‘see good’ is to experience pleasure. The next verse, 2:3, states the second motive, i.e. to search for what is good for humans to do. The meaning and the motive behind knowing what is good for humans to do in their fleeting years point to the search for the purpose of life. Such motives have their parallels in a

²⁴⁵ See Dominic Rudman, *Determinism in the Book of Ecclesiastes*, JSOT, Supp. 316 (Bloomsbury: T&T Clark, 2001), 82. See also Dough Ingram, *Ambiguity in Ecclesiastes* (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 171 -175. The discussion and analysis by Ingram has been helpful, as it gives an overview and an adequate survey of the usage of the word “good.” A relevant issue is the meaning of “good” (טוב) in the passage as well as in the book. The concern is valid, since the word “good” may carry different meanings in different contexts. This possibility leads to the argument that ‘Ecclesiastes is playing on a semantic range of this word [good] so that at times it is not clear at all.’ See Ingram, *Ambiguity*, 175. As a result, the word may have a certain degree of “ambiguity,” leaving readers to ask, “What *does* [Ingram’s emphasis] mean to talk about ‘goodness’ in these different contexts?” (Ibid., 175.) In fact, Ingram notes that there is a possibility that ‘Qoheleth is not simply asking what is, “good” for people but also – implicitly – what it means to call something “good” anyway’. Whilst these are enriching questions, perhaps, the danger is an over-zealousness at arriving at a philosophical meaning of the word, or an overreliance on the lexical significance of the word when the context is clear.

Mesopotamian document known as the “Dialogue of Pessimism,” which describes a master telling his slave about the things he intends to do. Consider the stanza on love:

Slave, listen to me! – Here I am, master, here I am!
I want to make love to a woman! – Make love, master, make love!
The man who makes love to a woman forgets sorrow and fear!
O well, slave, I do not want to make love to a woman!
Do not make love, master, do not make love!
Woman is a real pitfall, a hole, a ditch,
Woman is a sharp iron dagger that cuts a man’s throat!²⁴⁶

A unique feature in these conversations (between the master and the slave) is the subjectivity of “what is good” in life, which in this instance seems ‘anything goes’ and ‘there are as many reasons to act as not to act’.²⁴⁷ As a result, when the poem ends with the question ‘What then is good?’,²⁴⁸ it carries an implied answer that ‘nothing’ is worthwhile doing at all. The quest for “what is good” is therefore driven by the search for ‘the value of human activity and of the meaning of life itself’.²⁴⁹ Bottéro notes aptly that it is ‘*What is good to do*, i.e. in the end whether one can find in human activity something really useful with an indisputable value and a definitive meaning.’²⁵⁰ To be exact, the relationship between ‘activity...[with] an indisputable value and [providing] a definitive meaning’ and ‘[w]hat then is good’ shows that the concern is not about the existence of any purpose (in life) – it is about the purpose which one can consider as worthwhile doing in one’s fleeting years. Similarly, the search for what is good for humans to do in their life (2:3) is fundamentally the quest for the worthwhile purpose of life. In this case, the experiment with “pleasure,” in relation to its worth as an object of pursuit in later life, is an investigation into whether pleasure is worth pursuing for life. To put this differently, the impetus of the inquiry is not whether a purpose to life exists but rather on concerns for the worthwhile purpose of life, moreover when the context has already shown that this experiment alone

²⁴⁶ Jean Bottéro, *Mesopotamia: Writing, Reasoning, and the Gods*, trans. Zainab Bahrani & Marc Van De Mieroop (Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 251-267. The translation is Bottéro’s.

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 256.

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 256.

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 260.

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 263.

involves testing different purposes in life (e.g. building houses, planting a vineyard, acquiring slaves).

2.3.2.2 Qoheleth's Concerns for Coherence in Life

There is evidence that Qoheleth's comprehensive quest for the meaning of life includes the preoccupation with the search for coherence in life. To begin with, consider 1:13b in relation to 1:13a below:

- 1:13a And I gave my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all that is done under heaven;
1:13b It is (הוא) a grievous preoccupation (ענין) God has given to the sons of man to be preoccupied (לענות) with.

What this “preoccupation” involves is not explained in 1:13b. However, since 1:13a and 1:13b are connected by הוא the syntactical relationship points out that the preoccupation is connected to the quest expressed in 1:13a.²⁵¹ Hence, Seow and Fox argue that the word “preoccupation” involves ‘the efforts of people to grasp – by wisdom – all that is happening in the world’²⁵² and expresses the ‘effort to understand what happens on earth’,²⁵³ respectively. These efforts, although focusing on different scopes and aspects of meaning in life, are nevertheless expressions for the search for meaning. As explained in sub-section 2.3.2.1 of this chapter, Qoheleth's endeavour expressed in 1:13a was in fact a comprehensive, philosophical and theological investigation into the question of existence and, therefore, the meaning of life. Accordingly, “preoccupation” summarises humans' fixation with the quest for the meaning of life, although this mission may not be as comprehensive or as intentional as that of Qoheleth.²⁵⁴

An expression similar to that in 1:13b is found in 3:10:²⁵⁵

²⁵¹ Crenshaw opines that the preoccupation which God has given to human (1:13b) refers to the heavy burden of daily activities. See Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 72. However, as argued above, the syntactical relationship points that there is a link between the preoccupation given by God and Qoheleth's search in 1:13a.

²⁵² Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 146.

²⁵³ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 171. Fox actually argues that 1:13b is parenthetical to 1:13a.

²⁵⁴ Leong, *Our Reason for Being*, 13.

²⁵⁵ It is possible from the point of parallel expression to argue for 1:13b and that 3:10 expresses the activity of “searching.” See also Kamano, *Cosmology and Character*, 104. To be exact, 3:10 introduces additional activities of God.

3:10 I have seen the preoccupation (הענין) which God has given to the sons of men to be preoccupied (לענות) in it.

An analysis of 3:10 shows an additional aspect of the preoccupation, or concern, expressed in 1:13b. In this case, it is related to the reality expressed in 3:1-8, the rhetorical question on the profit of human toil in 3:9 and the human inability to know the work of God as described in 3:11. See the text below:

3:1 There is a time for everything
and a season for every activity under heavens.
3:2 A time to be born, and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to uproot,
3:3 a time to kill, and a time to heal;
a time to tear down and a time to build up,
3:4 a time to weep, and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn and a time to dance,
3:5 a time to scatter stones and a time to gather stones;
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing,
3:6 a time to search, and a time to give up;
a time to keep and a time to throw away,
3:7 a time to tear down and a time to mend;
a time to be silent and a time to speak,
3:8 a time to love, and a time to hate;
a time for war, and a time for peace.
3:9 What profit has the worker in all that he toils?

3:1-8 is noted as a poetic expression of ‘time for everything’ (3:1),²⁵⁶ explicated by fourteen pairs of opposite events that represent the whole range of events and activities of humans under heaven (3:3-8).²⁵⁷ Although there are several views on the meaning of the passage,²⁵⁸ there is no

²⁵⁶ For an interesting read on the poetic structure of 3:1, see Tod Linafelt and F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, “Poetic Line Structure in Qoheleth 3:1,” *VT* 60 (2010) 249-259.

²⁵⁷ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 209; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 171; also Leong, *Our Reason for Being*, 24.

²⁵⁸ A possible reading is to see it as Qoheleth’s intention to inculcate the importance of knowing the right time for action and speech. The view is problematic, for it means that one should know the right time “to be born” and “to die.” There is suggestion for the former to be read as “to give birth.” See Blenkinsopp, *Ecclesiastes 3:1-5: Another Interpretation*, 56-57. Another interpretation is to treat the poem as being functionally parallel to 1:4-11, which expresses the idea of “no surplus” and הבל. The poem begins with ‘A generation goes and a generation comes, But the earth remains forever’ (1:4) to express the idea that humanity will always remain the same. It is followed by imageries of creation’s natural and endless activities that neither adds nor changes anything. Qoheleth summarises

doubt that God is the primary agent bringing about human events in life. In this case, God has worked out that every fortunate event between one's birth and death has an unfortunate counterpart that may or may not happen to a person,²⁵⁹ thus stressing the reality that one may lose the fruits of toil before one dies. Hence, an immediate declaration in the form of a rhetorical question is the reality of הַבֵּל of human toil (3:9) and so restates the sombre conclusion expressed in 1:2-3.

Biblical scholars agree that 3:1-9 forms the first unit of 3:1-15, followed by 3:10-15.²⁶⁰ The second unit records the reason for the human preoccupation (3:10-11) in view of 3:1-9, wherein 3:12-13 and 3:14-15 reveal the appropriate responses to 3:1-11. In relation to 3:10-11, it reads:

- 3:10 I have seen the preoccupation (הַעֲנִין) which God has given to the sons of men to be preoccupied (לַעֲנוֹת) in it.
- 3:11a He makes everything appropriate in its time.
- 3:11b He has also put eternity (הָעֶלֶם) in their heart, yet so that man will not find out the work God does (עֲשֵׂה) from the beginning and to the end.

The logical flow from 3:1-9 suggests the “preoccupation” in 3:10 is related to the reality of הַבֵּל expressed in 3:9. In addition, the expressions in 3:1 (לְכָל זֶמֶן וְעַת לְכָל־חֶפֶץ) and 3:11a (עֲשֵׂה יִפֶּה בְּעֵתוֹ) suggest 3:11 continues with the theme expressed in the poem. Since 3:11 expands on 3:10 and clarifies the statement that God has given a preoccupation (הַעֲנִין) with people,²⁶¹ 3:11 explains that the nature of the preoccupation which God gives to humans in 3:10 is related to what God has placed in human hearts (3:11b), which eventually confirms the restatement of the theme in 3:9.

the poem with the question, ‘Is there anything of which one might say, “see this, it is new?” Already it has existed for ages, which was before us’ (1:10). Fox maintains that ‘The poem shows that the persistent, toilsome, movements of natural phenomena, of which mankind, taken as a whole, is one, do not really affect anything. All this is meant to show that, by analogy, human toil cannot be expected to do so’. See Fox, “Qoheleth 1:4,” *JSOT* 40 (1988) 109. Following the parallel between 1:4-11 and 3:1-8, it is clear that 3:1-8 emphasises the reality of ultimate profitlessness. See W. E. Staples, “‘Profit’ In Ecclesiastes,” *Journal of New Eastern Studies* 4 (1945) 87-96. Also Whybray, “Ecclesiastes 1.5-7 and the Wonders of Nature,” *JSOT* 41 (1988) 105-112. This is plausible, as each item in the poem cancels out the other (e.g. a time to laugh and a time to weep). See Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 96.

²⁵⁹ Leong, *Reason for Being*, 24.

²⁶⁰ See Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 92-193; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 172-173.

²⁶¹ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 172-173.

Two words in 3:11 is crucial to the attempt to understand the nature of such preoccupation in 3:10. The first is העלם, where at least ten meanings for the word are proposed.²⁶² A major issue raised by biblical scholars is the use and meaning of this word when it is applied in the context of one's heart. Although the word occurs over 400 times in the Hebrew Bible and consistently expresses time-related nuances such as ages, continual and forever, the problem becomes apparent when one seeks to understand the meaning and the relevance of העלם in the context of one's heart. Barr, for instance, proposed that the word means perpetuity (memory, awareness of past and future) in the human heart,²⁶³ while Gault took a leap with the argument that it means "darkness,"²⁶⁴ inferring an obscuring of the knowledge of God's work in one's heart.²⁶⁵ On the grounds of consistency with 1:4, 2:16, 3:14, 9:6, 12:5,²⁶⁶ it is more likely that the word does have an undertone of 'forever-ness,'²⁶⁷ and "time". Furthermore, the contrast between העלם and עת found in 3:1-8 strengthens the presence of a "time" connotation as part of the meaning of the word.²⁶⁸ In addition, considering the tension between having העלם in one's heart and yet being incapable of knowing the work of God from 'beginning and to the end,' it is very probable that העלם propagates the idea that the human heart has the ability to transcend constraints brought about by the dimension of time.

It is obvious, then, that in this context an immediate application of העלם in one's heart is the desire to find out about the work God does (עשה), from the beginning to the end. Several biblical scholars opine that "the work" which God עשה refers to is His divine activity (from the beginning to the end)²⁶⁹ or His eternal activity.²⁷⁰ It is more likely, however, when considering the

²⁶² There are at least 10 renderings for the word העלם. Brian P. Gault, "A Re-examination of 'Eternity' in Ecclesiastes 3.1-11," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 165 (January-March 2008) 39-57.

²⁶³ James Barr, *Biblical Words for Time*, Studies in Biblical Theology, No. 33 (London: SCM Press, 1969), 124.

²⁶⁴ Gault, "A Re-examination of 'Eternity' in Ecclesiastes" 3.1-11," 39-57.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 57.

²⁶⁶ Christian David Ginsburg, *The Song of Songs and Coheleth* (New York: KTVA Publishing House, 1970), 310.

²⁶⁷ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 173.

²⁶⁸ Gault, "A Re-examination of 'Eternity' in Ecclesiastes 3:11", 39-57.

²⁶⁹ Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 98.

²⁷⁰ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 174.

relationship between “everything” in 3:1 and 3:11a in the light of 3:2-8, that it refers to His involvement with a range of activities and events that are beautiful, fitting and serviceable,²⁷¹ both from the point of humanity as a whole as well as across a person’s lifetime. Furthermore, since the investigation of Qoheleth is also confined to one’s lifetime (also 3:2a), it is plausible to deduce the phrase “from the beginning to the end” as stretching from one’s birth to one’s death. If this is the case, an immediate application of העלם in one’s heart involves finding out about the work of God עשה from the beginning (birth) to the end (death).

The verb עשה, which is often translated as “do” is commonly treated as the perfect tense in this verse. In this case, the appointed time at 3:2-8 is a “completed” work of God; hence, Whybray, Crenshaw and Murphy translate the word as “has acted,” emphasising a completed act.²⁷² Similarly, Fox interprets it as ‘God has brought to pass,’²⁷³ however, the context does not at all limit the appointed time referring to past events. Whilst the range of human events and activities has been determined, the timing of these is still in the making. Driver notes that ‘it [the perfect tense alone] is used to express general truths known to have actually occurred, and so proved from experience: here again the idiomatic rendering in English is by means of the present’.²⁷⁴ With this in mind, עשה ‘has a stative force depicting an attribute of God’²⁷⁵ and expresses a general present.²⁷⁶ Hence, Schoors argues:

But in 3:11 the second עשה is determined by מראש ועד־סוף “from beginning to end.” This favours a reading of the verb as a general present and hence is a strong hint that the same reading is preferable in the three verses [3:11,14; 7:14].²⁷⁷

²⁷¹ See also, Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 210.

²⁷² See Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 72-75; Crenshaws, *Ecclesiastes*, 91-100 ; Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 34-35 .

²⁷³ Fox, *A Time To Tear Down*, 211-212

²⁷⁴ S.R. Driver, *A Treatise on the Use of the Tenses in Hebrew and Some Other Syntactical Question* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 17.

²⁷⁵ B. Isaksson, “Studies in the Language of Qoheleth, With Special Emphasis on the Verbal System” (*Studia Semitica Upsaliensia* 10, Upsala, 1987), 79-82, 89. Cited in Antoon Schoors, “The Preacher Sought to find Pleasing Words” (Louvain: Peeters Press, 1992), 175.

²⁷⁶ Schoors, *Pleasing Words*, 175.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 175.

This is significant, because juxtaposed with העלם is the inability to know what God *does* (from the beginning to the end) or to ‘comprehend anything pertaining to divine activity’.²⁷⁸ In the light of this, the preoccupation which God gives to human in 3:10 is an ongoing yet futile attempt to grasp what God does in the context of the catalogue of human activities and time in 3:1-8, specifically within the lifetime of a person and the eventual profitlessness of the person’s toil which may happen before one’s death. It is clear that the aspect that is being denied is knowledge of the timing as well as the nature of events.²⁷⁹ This means that although humans are given the ‘ability to transcend the present to look back into the past as well as to think about the future,’²⁸⁰ God denies them the ability to see nature and its timing, or to have control over impending events. The implication underscored in 3:1-11 is aptly expressed in Murphy’s words:

In contrast to the particular time (e.g. in 3:1-8), he has put into the human heart the timeless, a sense of duration.... It is a case of divine sabotage: things are appropriate to the times fixed for them, but humans are out of kilter, on another time line.²⁸¹

While one can argue with Murphy’s phrase ‘divine sabotage,’ the expression rightly uncovers acute tension and frustration. In Janzen’s perceptive words:

Not only that life under the sun is connected with the theme of death as the end of every individual life...life under the rule of the sun, is weary work in the face of uncertainty as to what happens next, as events unfold under the strictures of times and seasons totally outside the control of the individual.²⁸²

Considering the analysis on 3:1-8, 3:9 and its relationship with 3:11, I have shown that the preoccupation in 3:10 is an on-going attempt to make sense of the meaning of the present activity in the face of uncertainty as to what happens next. Such an attempt underscores an ongoing effort to seek coherence in life, since it is driven by the need for logical and meaningful connectedness²⁸³ of events or activities, with the purpose of seeing a logical relationship that

²⁷⁸ Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 98.

²⁸⁰ Leong, *Our Reason for Being*, 26.

²⁸¹ Murphy, “The Faith of Qoheleth,” *Word & World* 7/3 (1987) 253-260.

²⁸² Gerald Janzen, “Qohelet on Life ‘Under the Sun,’” *CBQ* Vol. 70, No. 3 (July 2008) 466-483.

²⁸³ Baumeister, *Meanings of Life*, 29-57.

could help integrate events into a plot which is understandable in the context of the whole.²⁸⁴ In other words, preoccupation aptly expresses an ongoing endeavour to make sense of life by seeking to understand current events or activities in view of the uncertainties of life and the certainty of death. This is unmistakably an attempt to make sense of life through securing coherence therein, and it is evidently a reflection of Qoheleth's concern and search for consistency.

2.3.2.3 The Quest of Qoheleth and 12:13b-14.

The analysis in 2.3.2.1 and 2.3.2.2 have shown that the quest for the worthwhile purpose of life (1:13) and coherence in life (3:10-11) is conceptually the search for the meaning of life. Juxtaposed with the comprehensive enquiry is the call to 'fear God and obey his commandments' (12:13b), indicating the possibility of the injunction as the solution to the quest. Both the quest for the meaning of life (1:13; 3:10) and the injunction in (12:13b) are two pieces of reality tied to the question on the purpose of existence, exposing this juxtaposition with a gap that needs to be filled.²⁸⁵ The gap from the juxtaposition is created by, in Stenberg's words, 'two pieces of reality that bear on the same context but fail to harmonize either as variants of a situation or as phases in an action.'²⁸⁶ A useful approach to fill the gap from the juxtaposition is to fill the gap with the text's norm and directive.²⁸⁷ My analysis will show that the gap between the two pieces of reality can be filled by the call to fear God.

A direct outcome from the reality implied in 3:1-11 is the two instances of 'I know' found in 3:12 and 3:14. Based on Levine's work, the phrase expresses the result of observation, reflection and realisation leading to definitive knowledge.²⁸⁸ In other words, it is an expression that the search for an answer is complete. The first is the sensible response – to enjoy life (3:12-13),

²⁸⁴ Polkinghorne, *Narrative Knowing*, 21.

²⁸⁵ Bartholomew, *Reading Ecclesiastes*, 254.

²⁸⁶ Stenberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 186. Cited in Bartholomew, *Reading Ecclesiastes*, 254. In this context, a key passage that links both the two pieces of reality is 3:14c.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 186.

²⁸⁸ Levine, "The Appeal to Personal Experience," 341.

alluded to in the preceding passage 2:24-26 and subsequently in 3:22, 5:18-20, 8:15, 9:7-10 and 11:7-10,²⁸⁹ while the second states the reason for the reality. Consider the following passages:

- 3:14a I know that all that God does will endure forever.
- 3:14b Nothing can be added and nothing can be taken from it.
- 3:14c And God so works that men will fear Him.

Contextually, 3:14ab summarises 3:1-11 and sets the stage for the reason stated in 3:14c, i.e. God works (3:1-11) in such a way that humans will fear Him although it is not forced upon them.²⁹⁰ Interestingly, this is another key passage that expresses purpose,²⁹¹ i.e. the purpose of God.²⁹² In this case, God ‘directs or permits appropriate events to happen at appropriate times so that we [humans] would acknowledge Him and seek to live a conscientious life.’²⁹³ The following text can be taken to reinforce this idea further:

- 3:15a And whatever is already been and whatever has already been there before.
- 3:15b God requires that which is the past

Specifically, 3:15a, which parallels 3:14ab, affirms that the pattern and the range of human events and activities in 3:1-8 will remain the same, with nothing to add or subtract, and that God ensures this is always true so that human should fear Him.²⁹⁴ In fact, the expression and meaning in 3:15a are similar to 1:9, in that they express that there would be nothing new under the sun. It appears that 3:15b reinforces 3:15a to emphasise that this reality will remain. Several biblical

²⁸⁹ We will discuss more of this in the next section.

²⁹⁰ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 212.

²⁹¹ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 165. See also Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 35.

²⁹² Expressing a similar effect, Fox uses the word to “occasion” the fear, while Murphy prefers to use the phrase ‘to produce [emphasis mine] fear among the mortals’. See Fox, *A Time To Tear Down*, 212-213, Roland E. Murphy, “Qoheleth And Theology?” *BTB* Vol. 21, No. 1 (Spring 1991) 32. The Hebrew construction שִׁירָאוֹ (the verbal form with a preposition) places greater emphasis on the action of fearing, that is the proper response that God sets out to evoke. See Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 35. This is most likely the reason for greater attention to the nature of response solicited. As much as attention is placed on the nature and meaning implied from the phrase “should fear,” it must be noted affirmatively that the link between the purpose of God and that human should fear Him.

²⁹³ Leong, *Our Reason for Being*, 27.

²⁹⁴ See Lohfink, “Revelation by Joy,” 632-633. Also Lee, *Vitality of Enjoyment*, 87. 3:14a, is a reiteration of the appointed times of God, that is the activities of God ‘that [can]not be grasped by the human mind’.

scholars suggest that 3:15 reinforces the sentiment of pessimism, since the ‘sameness of all events with the denial of anything new under the sun’²⁹⁵ underscores an aspect of determination which further ensures the reality of הבל for all human toil. The sense of pessimism is reinforced when the verse is considered along with the subsequent unit, i.e. 3:16-22, which apparently states that humans have no advantage over animals. Nevertheless, 3:16-22, which begins with ועוד ראייתי, should be taken as a separate unit addressing a new – albeit related – issue. More importantly, the synthetic relationship between 3:15 and 3:14 shows that ‘3:15a uses the phraseology of 1:9a to restate 3:14.’²⁹⁶ Furthermore, synthetically, 3:14c parallels 3:15b whereby both express the purpose of God.²⁹⁷ In the case of 3:15b, Crenshaw posits that 3:15b describes God seeking what has passed, in order to bring it back into the present,²⁹⁸ thereby giving the idea that God will continue to ensure the continuity of what He does.²⁹⁹ Pinker goes further to argue that 3:15b underscores God’s desire for respect,³⁰⁰ an expression similar to “so that human may fear God.” Hence, the parallel between 3:14c and 3:15b suggests that 3:15b emphasises the motive in 3:14b that God *continues to work* in the activities of humans and will ensure this will remain the case so that men should fear Him. Hence, although a certain amount of determinism is at work, the emphasis points to the purpose, namely it will cause humans to fear God.

An important pattern observed in the rhetoric in fact pointing to 3:1-15 as a theological conviction, and to 3:14c as the turning point of the speech when it refers to human activities in relation to the sovereignty of God. This is not an overstatement. Starting from 3:14c, Qoheleth’s

²⁹⁵ Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 100.

²⁹⁶ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 213.

²⁹⁷ See Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 35-36. Consequently, 3:15b emphasises the motive in 3:14b that God *continues to work* so that men should fear Him.

²⁹⁸ Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 100

²⁹⁹ Joseph Blenkinsopp, “Ecclesiastes 3.1-15: Another Interpretation,” *JSOT* 66 (1995):55-64.

³⁰⁰ Aron Pinker, “Qohelet 3:14-15,” *Biblische Zeitschrift* Jahrgang 24-5 (2010):253-271.

adds to the description of God with specific calls to fear Him, and these calls climax at 12:13-14.³⁰¹ Consider the passages listed in Table 1.

Table 1 – DESCRIPTION OF GOD IN ECCLESIASTES

The Description of what God does	The Purpose of God	The Description of what God does	The Call to Fear God
		3:17-18	5:1-7
1:13		5:18-20	7:15-18
2:24-26	3:14c, 15	6:2	8:12-13
3:10-11		7:13-14, 29	11:9c
		8:15, 17	12:1 12:13-14

There is clearly a significant pattern to this, just as the call to fear God begins in 3:14c and eventually climaxes at 12:13-14. The repeated reminders that are sandwiched between 3:14c and 12:13-14 show a clear intention to persuade one to supplicate to God. More evidently, they reinforce the motive of the speech. Clearly, the intent of these passages can fit consistently the gap between the two pieces of realities.

I will show in the following sections that the crucial themes in the speech also find common ground in the call to fear God, but at this stage, it is safe to conclude that considering the relationship between the juxtaposition of these two pieces of realities and the numerous calls to fear God, the injunction to ‘obey God and to keep His commandments’ is Qoheleth’s worthwhile purpose of life – to Qoheleth, it is what being human is all about.

³⁰¹ Commentators agree on the need to include Qoheleth’s numerous statements on God when developing an overall understanding of the message of Qoheleth. However, insufficient work has been done to trace Qoheleth’s treatment on the subject of God as his speech progresses. The discussion on the subject centres on Qoheleth’s perspective on God as well as His activities and in what ways it helps one to cope with the enigma of life. For example, Seow’s excellent discussion on the “Theological Anthropology” of Ecclesiastes provides a broad survey on the passages of God, in order to point out that one needs to recognise that none can grasp life. See Seow, *Ecclesiastes* 54-60. In a similar approach, much of the attention is directed at the “inscrutability” of God, in most cases painted as negative and its implications in relation to life. See Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 32-36. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 136-138.

2.3.3 CONCLUSION

The analysis above provides sufficient evidence to suggest that the purpose of Ecclesiastes is to persuade and eventually command readers to ‘fear God and keep His commandments’ (12:13b-14). The command in 12:13b-14 is also identical to the concept of the worthwhile purpose of life, which is also found to be consistent with the experience, quest and verdict of Qoheleth. In this respect, it is affirmative that the book teaches not simply a purpose in life but the most worthwhile. Since God judges one’s work in the light of the purpose of existence, it means that living in harmony with this worthwhile purpose is intrinsically good and worthy of one’s utmost effort. Thus, 12:13b-14 not only expresses the purpose of Ecclesiastes, but it also expresses the worthwhile purpose of life.

2.4 THE WORTHWHILE PURPOSE OF LIFE IN ECCLESIASTES: A FURTHER INVESTIGATION

My analysis has shown that Ecclesiastes teaches about the worthwhile purpose of life and addresses the need for coherence therein. This claim is built upon the exegetical analysis of 1:13, 3:10 and 3:14 and by juxtaposing these passages with 12:13b-14. This section will probe the content of Ecclesiastes further by considering the themes of *הבל*, enjoyment and undeserved suffering. These themes are three key variables affecting one’s ability to experience coherence in life. The word “variables” means that changes in one’s perceptions of these themes affect one’s ability to see and experience the meaning of life. Considering my argument on the function and the significance of 12:13b-14 in interpreting Ecclesiastes, it becomes clear that the injunction is likely the solution to the concern. If this is true, Ecclesiastes teaches a distinctive concept in relation to the worthwhile purpose of life, as it also enables one to experience coherence in life.

In order to determine how this is possible, the analysis will first focus on the meaning and function of each theme in relation to the book as a whole. Considering that substantial research has been done on these themes, my attention will be directed at the meaning, function and implication of these themes in relation to the subject of the meaning of life. It will show that I have redefined and offer an alternative position on the meaning and function of these themes in the speech. I will also show the intra-relationship between these major themes, and their relationship as a whole with 12:13b-14.

2.4.1 הבל AND THE WORTHWHILE PURPOSE OF LIFE

הבל is a key word in Ecclesiastes³⁰² and can be found in the discrete units and sub-units³⁰³ of the speech as a verdict on a specific experiment, observations and the life as a whole. The Hebrew expression of the superlative הבל הבלים (1:2) at the beginning, and the “gloomy” reiteration (12:8) near the end of the speech, make it clear that הבל is perhaps ‘the most critical word’³⁰⁴ of the book. With the exception to several passages that associate הבל with the fleetingness of life, there are different views on its meaning. For instance, Crenshaw sees הבל as carrying the ideas of ‘futility’ and ‘ephemerality,’³⁰⁵ while Ogden argues that it means ‘mystery’ or ‘enigma.’³⁰⁶ Seow notes that with הבל ‘one finds a picture of a world that is in every sense impenetrable – not apprehensible and/or not comprehensible. Nothing that human beings accomplish or possess or try to grapple with is ultimately within mortal grasp.’³⁰⁷ Fox’s הבל goes a step further with an explicit emphasis on human reaction to the reality of הבל. In this case, when all is הבל, it means all is absurd.³⁰⁸ Despite the many theories on the meaning of הבל,³⁰⁹ it is generally accepted that the word plays a negative factor in Qoheleth’s speech. Since Qoheleth’s experiments and observations are primarily part of a quest to find the meaning of life, the negating factor has vital implications on Ecclesiastes’ theology on the meaning of life, the function of the worthwhile purpose of life and the ability to see coherence therein.

³⁰² Ingram, *Ambiguity*, 91.

³⁰³ Seow, “Beyond Mortal Grasp,” 1.

³⁰⁴ Eric S. Christianson, *A Time To Tell: A Narrative Strategies in Ecclesiastes*, JSOT, Supp. 280 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 79.

³⁰⁵ Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 57-59.

³⁰⁶ Ogden, “‘Vanity’ It Certainly Is Not,” 307.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.

³⁰⁸ Fox, “The Meaning of *Hebel*,” 409-427. More on Fox’s meaning of הבל in the next few paragraphs.

³⁰⁹ Farmer links the many and varied interpretations to the ambiguity of the term הבל. She explains that ‘Ecclesiastes has been understood in radically different ways by different readers in part because the thematic metaphor “all is *hebel*” is fundamentally ambiguous’. Kathleen Anne Farmer, *Who Knows what is Good? A Commentary on the Books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 146.

2.4.1.1 The Meaning of הבל

The basic meaning of הבל is breath (Isaiah 57:13), vapour or condensed breath (Proverbs 21:6, Psalms 39:11), and it is often used as a metaphor to convey the idea that a subject or an entity (of concern) is transient and ‘could not last,’³¹⁰ i.e. just like vapour or condensed breath that ‘appears and disappears,’³¹¹ an object is unsubstantial (Jeremiah 10:15) or transient (Psalms 39:4-5, 11; 144:4). Qoheleth’s usage of הבל has a similar meaning. In Ecclesiastes 11:10, for instance, הבל is used to express the fleetingness of childhood and the prime of life. However, the peculiar, or in Seow’s words ‘ironic,’³¹² use of הבל in Ecclesiastes lies in the application of the metaphor beyond an object (e.g. life, wealth). The word has also been found to qualify a situation (4:7). Fox observes: ‘Although the ephemerality of vapour is relevant to the way Qohelet applies *hebel* to things and beings, in some verses no quality of a vapour can be applied to situations that he calls *hebel*.’³¹³ Rightly, although metaphors are ‘semantically porous,’³¹⁴ applying a single quality of הבל (breath or vapour) not only to ‘things and beings’ but also to a ‘situation’ can be challenging.

A survey of the translations of הבל in the scholarship of Ecclesiastes sees a wide range of suggestions, including among others ‘*Windhauch*,’³¹⁵ ‘temporary,’³¹⁶ ‘bubble,’³¹⁷ ‘enigmatic,’³¹⁸ ‘ironic,’³¹⁹ ‘incomprehensible,’³²⁰ ‘meaningless,’³²¹ and ‘absurd.’³²² Miller and Meek opt for הבל

³¹⁰ Choon Leong Seow, “Beyond Mortal Grasp,” *Australian Biblical Review* 48 (2000) 1-16. The vaporous connotation is applied to a wide range of objects which include, among others, idols, to highlight their unreliability (Deuteronomy 32:21; 2 Kings 17:15), wealth for its impermanence (Proverbs 13:11; 21:6) and beauty for its illusion (Proverbs 31:30).

³¹¹ Leong, *Our Reason for Being*, 4.

³¹² Seow, “Beyond Mortal Grasp,” 10.

³¹³ Fox, “The Meaning of *Hebel*,” 412.

³¹⁴ John Hobbins, “Max Turner explains why kephalē does not mean source,” Accessed August 27, 2013, http://ancienthebrewpoetry.typepad.com/ancient_hebrew_poetry/2009/09/max-turner-explains-why-kephal%C4%93-does-not-mean-source.html

³¹⁵ Ludger Schwienhorst-Schonberger, *Das Buch Kohelet: Studien zur Struktur, Geschichte, Rezeption und Theologie* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1997), 5.

³¹⁶ Fredericks, *Coping with Transient*, 11-21; Also *Ecclesiastes*, 50-54.

³¹⁷ F.C. Burkitt, “Is Ecclesiastes a Translation?” *JTS* 22 (1921) 27-28.

with different meanings in different contexts within the speech,³²³ whilst Farmer, Ingram and Salyer prefer to maintain that הבל is ‘fundamentally ambiguous.’³²⁴

Fox’s interpretation of הבל as ‘absurd’ is a departure from the “vaporous” quality that הבל carries. The reason for his interpretation is noteworthy:

We should distinguish the *qualities* that evoke the particular *hebel* judgments (ephemerality, inequality, inefficacy, futility, nonsensicality) from the meaning of *hebel*. If we render *hebel* by terms designating the qualities that evoke the *hebel*-judgement, not only does the leitmotiv disintegrate but the judgment becomes banal. Obviously, it is inequitable for the wicked to suffer the fate the righteous deserve and for the righteous to suffer that fate the wicked deserve.... It is not, however, a truism to declare that these examples of inequity and futility are *absurd*, for the predicate then adds new information to the subject.³²⁵

³¹⁸ Graham S. Ogden, “‘Vanity’ It Certainly Is Not,” *The Bible Translator* Vol. 38, No. 3 (July 1987) 301-307. Also, McCabe, “The Message of Ecclesiastes,” 92. McCabe adds ‘frustrating enigmatic’, to express humanity’s frustrating and puzzling search for the meaning and purpose of life.

³¹⁹ E. M. Good, *Irony in the Old Testament* (London: SPCK, 1965; Sheffield: Almond, 1981), 176-83. Also Timothy K. Polk, “The Wisdom of Irony: A Study of *Hebel* and Its Relations to Joy and Fear of God in Ecclesiastes,” *Studia Biblica Et Theologica* 6.1 (1976) 3-17. Whilst both Good and Polk argue for הבל meaning irony, Polk insists that “irony” in his opinion should be read with general negativism. Good, on the other hand, maintains that “irony” in Ecclesiastes is positive and life-affirming.

³²⁰ W.E. Staples, “The ‘Vanity’ of Ecclesiastes,” *Canadian Journal of Theology* 1 (1955) 141-156.

³²¹ Diethelm Michel and Reinhard G. Lehmann, *Untersuchungen zur Eigenart des Buches Qohelet* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1989), 40-51. Also Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 61-65.

³²² Fox, “The Meaning of Hebel for Qoheleth,” 409-427. Also B. Pennacchini, “Qohelet ovvero il libro degli assurdi,” *Euntes Docete* 30 (1977) 491-510 and A. Barucq, *Ecclésiaste* (VS3; Paris: Beauchesne, 1968). Fox’s usage of הבל reflects the tension between one’s expectation and reality. Pennacchini’s usage, however, is about the limitations of human reasoning in understanding happenings in the world. That is, one feels that the situation is absurd, albeit only because the mind cannot comprehend or understand what is transpiring. Barucq’s meaning of *absurdité* refers to the human inability to understand the “mysterious” works of God.

³²³ Theophile J. Meek, “Transplanting the Hebrew Bible,” *JBL* 79 (1960) 331. Meek suggests that the term הבל should be translated differently based on the context in which the word is found. He suggests that the richness of the meaning that הבל carries should provide flexibility in interpreting the word. Douglas B. Miller, in *Symbols and Rhetoric in Ecclesiastes: The Place of Hebel in Qoheleth’s Work*. (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002), 14, on the other hand, suggests that הבל is too rich and cannot be expressed adequately by a single meaning. He proposes that הבל should be seen as a symbol or an image that holds together a set of meanings, although he does agree that in certain contexts within Ecclesiastes הבל might only have one meaning. Also A. Lauha, “Omnia Vanitas: Die Bedeutung von hbl bei Kohelet,” in *Glaube und Gerechtigkeit: In Memoriam Rafael Gyllenberg*, ed. J. Kilunen (Helsinki: Finnische exegetische Gesellschaft, 1983), 19-25. Lauha similarly maintains that הבל is too rich to be confined to one single term.

³²⁴ Farmer, *Who Knows What is Good?*, 146; Ingram, *Ambiguity*, 91-129; Gary D. Salyer, *Vain Rhetoric: Private Insight and Public Debate in Ecclesiastes*, JSOT, Supp. 327 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 248.

³²⁵ Fox, “The Meaning of *Hebel*,” 414.

Fox explains: ‘An action itself is called *hebel* [absurd] by virtue of the distortion between the expectation and outcome; in a situation or event it is the *relationship* between action and outcome that is called *hebel* [absurd].’³²⁶ Fox built his interpretation on the premise that Qoheleth probes ‘not only the value of human action but the logic of the system of worldly events.’³²⁷ The verdict is seen as Qoheleth’s reaction to the offensive violation of justice and ‘deed-consequent’ principles in the system of worldly events.³²⁸

Fox’s interpretation of הבל can be appropriate when it comes to the text on the suffering of the righteous. However, to extend a similar meaning to toil is problematic. Consider his argument:

“Futile” is properly predicated of an intentional action and refers to its failure to achieve its goal. “Absurd” can be applied at a higher level of abstraction. In other words, “toil” may be futile. But *the fact that* toil is futile is absurd.³²⁹

Fox recognises that the meaning of הבל is futility or futile. However, he places a similar emphasis on human reaction on toil when he says ‘*The fact that* toil is futile *is* [emphasis mine] absurd’. Hence, he opts for a reader’s subjective reaction to reality instead of the meaning of the word as it is.³³⁰ In this case, הבל of toil is defined as a response based on a certain framework of assumptions, which Fox assumes to be the same for every reader, and even Qoheleth. Unlike the case of the suffering of the righteous, Qoheleth does not consider the ultimate futility of toil as absurd. Moreover, Qoheleth encourages his readers to give their best (9:10) and to see good in their toil (2:24). It is indeed somewhat tenuous to assume that Qoheleth shares and communicates a similar expectation and reaction when it comes to the futility of toil. Fundamentally, “absurd” is a response to, and not the meaning of, הבל.³³¹

³²⁶ Ibid., 414.

³²⁷ Fox, *A Time To Tear Down*, 48-49. Also “The Meaning of *Hebel*,” 426.

³²⁸ Fox, “The Meaning of *Hebel*,” 426.

³²⁹ Ibid., 412-413.

³³⁰ Leong, unpublished notes.

³³¹ Longman’s understanding of הבל carries a similar idea. He maintains that the literal meaning of הבל is breath, breeze and vapour, it is usually used metaphorically and signifies uselessness or meaninglessness of a thing or its transitory nature. See Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 32. However, a thing that is in nature transitory or useless is not necessarily meaningless, which is a response to the violation of an expectation-based response to transitory things. Hence, whilst הבל could metaphorically mean “useless” when it is applied to things of a transitory nature, it does not

While Fox must be credited for his “out of the box” approach, I suggest that perhaps it is better to start with the possibility that הבל has taken an additional meaning in Ecclesiastes. Stern, in his study of metaphors, argues that a word originally used as a metaphor can take its own (literal) meaning when the context shows it to be so.³³² This is in addition to the fallacy of assuming the meaning, or the usage, of the word will not develop according to the progression of human history.³³³ If a word can take on an additional meaning, in addition to its original meaning and usage, it might be problematic to insist on and limit the meaning of the word by appealing to its original meaning.³³⁴ Therefore, the etymological route alone could be an insufficient direction unless, of course, ‘it can be reasonably demonstrated that the author intended the etymological connections to be made.’³³⁵

Undoubtedly, the meaning of הבל as “transient” is found in Ecclesiastes. However, several passages suggest that it takes on an additional meaning of its own. Consider 7:5-6:

- 7:5 It is better to listen to the rebuke of the wise than to hear the songs of the fools.
 7:6 For as the crackling of the thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of the fools. And also this is profitless (הבל)

It is obvious that the הבל verdict is associated with the laughter of the fool: 7:6 demonstrates wordplay that gives ‘an apt description of the spontaneous bursts of laughter among fools, where there is more noise than substance. Thistles provide quick flames, little heat, and a lot of unpleasant noise’.³³⁶ In other words, the activity itself is profitless. Fox notes this connection. In his words, ‘The fools’ merriment... is undoubtedly *hebel* in almost any sense of the world’.³³⁷ Interestingly, however, Fox explains away the natural reading by noting that since this is

necessarily mean that these transitory things are “meaningless” – they are only meaningless when *expectations* are violated.

³³² Josef Judah Stern, *Metaphor in Context* (Cambridge, The MIT Press, 2000), 301-320.

³³³ James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (London: SCM Press, 1991), 107 -160.

³³⁴ Benjamin J. Baxter, “Hebrew and Greek Word-Study Fallacies,” *MJTM* 12 (2010–2011) 3–32.

³³⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

³³⁶ Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 135.

³³⁷ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 253.

obvious, it is hardly worth saying again. Yet, this is exactly the point, since *this* –profitless activity, *is* in itself הבל,³³⁸ הבל has taken ‘no profit or profitless’ as its own meaning. When הבל in Ecclesiastes can mean profitless activity, it can be applied to any activity that is immediately or ultimately profitless to the person.³³⁹ An analysis of 2:13-16 sees a similar relationship.

- 2:15 Then I said to myself, as is the fate the fool so is why it happens to the wise. Then I said to myself, this is also הבל (profitless).
 2:16 For there is no remembrance of the wise more than of the fool forever and how it shall come the days when all be forgotten. And how the wise and the fool dies alike.

The verdict ‘This is הבל’ is followed by ‘*For* (כי) [emphasis mine] there is no remembrance of the wise in a much as to the fool’ (2:16). Furthermore, since the wise person and the fool will both die alike, it becomes obvious that the verdict refers to the absence of the ultimate advantage of being wise; since being wise has no absolute advantage, the pursuit of wisdom has no ultimate profit.

The association of הבל with the idea of the ultimate profitlessness of human toil is exegetically viable.³⁴⁰ The relationship appears at the start of the speech in the form of a sombre pronouncement that all is הבל (1:2), followed by a rhetorical question on the profits of one’s toil under the sun (1:3). Here, the word behind profit or advantage is יתרון. Fortunately, arriving at the meaning of this word is less problematic than הבל, in that it propagates the idea ‘to survive or to remain’³⁴¹ in the context of war (1 Samuel 25:34), or “excess over” or “advantage over” when two items are compared.³⁴² It also means “net gain” or “profitless” when no comparison is

³³⁸ These distinctions, and the varied usage of *yitron*, were presented in Tien Fock Leong, “Old Testament Wisdom Literature: Interpreting Ecclesiastes” (lecture, East Asia School of Theology, Singapore, 1997).

³³⁹ Other passages that show similar usage are 5:6 [5:7]; 6:11; 7:6; 8:10, 14 (2X).

³⁴⁰ It is interesting to note that while the question of יתרון is so obvious throughout the entire message of Qoheleth, biblical scholars place more emphasis on the meaning of הבל as a metaphor rather than its relationship with the whole question of יתרון. Ingram is right in his observation that ‘The question of יתרון plays a more crucial role in the early chapters after which there is a (possibly gradual) change in emphasis away from the question of what יתרון is to be found “under the sun,” and towards instructing the reader how to cope with, among other things, a lack of יתרון’. See *Ambiguity in Ecclesiastes* (New York: T & T Clark, 2006), 130-149. More accurately, as we shall argue, the instruction in the later part of the speech is not due to the lack of יתרון but to the uncertainty of life, a crucial factor for the eventual absence of יתרון.

³⁴¹ Fox, *A Time To Tear Down*, 112-113. Also Shannon Burkes, *Death in Qoheleth*, 49. Citing Perdue, Wisdom and Creation used 1 Sam 25:34 to show that the root meaning of the word is ‘to survive or remain’ after a battle.

³⁴² Fox, *A Time To Tear Down*, 113-114, and Leong, *Our Reason for Being*, 4-5.

intended.³⁴³ and it has a commercial connotation in the book of Ecclesiastes.³⁴⁴ But interestingly, יתרון qualifies עמל in the speech (1:3). Although עמל captures the idea that all activity is physically or mentally burdensome, or both,³⁴⁵ its usage in Ecclesiastes suggests that it refers to a summation of ‘all human efforts’³⁴⁶ equating to life as a whole, i.e. ‘life itself is עמל’.³⁴⁷ When יתרון qualifies עמל, their relationship amplifies the outcome of עמל and life itself.³⁴⁸ Leong puts this notion into perspective: ‘Qoheleth’s usage of a commercial term on human work indicates one’s lifetime is akin to a “fiscal year.” One eventually “closes” the accounts to discover that there is no net gain from the investment’.³⁴⁹

Recalling that the basic meaning of הבל is vapour and that it can have a metaphorical meaning in relation to “fleeting,” it is also clear that הבל can refer to something that is eventually profitless, as something that is vaporous is eventually profitless (5:14-15 [15-16]). Hence, when הבל is juxtaposed with no יתרון, it is clear that the meaning of הבל in these contexts is no profit (whether intrinsic or ultimate). Since two synonyms can be used next to each other without being redundant, it shows the viability of the argument that הבל has taken the meaning of profitless. In this respect, the declaration that all is הבל in 1:2 is the summation that all is “transient” and thus

³⁴³ Ibid., 113-114; Ibid., 4-5.

³⁴⁴ The commercial connotation attached to this term was suggested by M. Dahood, “Canaanite-Phoenician Influence in Qoheleth,” *Bib* 33 (1952) 30-52. Crenshaw notes, ‘The word *yitron* is possibly a commercial term for what is left after all expenses are taken into account’. See, Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 59. Also Staples, “‘Profit’ In Ecclesiastes,” 87. But note Ogden’s objection. In Ogden’s words, ‘He has assigned it a metaphorical sense to speak of that which is non-material. It might refer, in part, to an inner contentment which abides throughout an enigmatic life, but it seems also to incorporate the possibility of some experience beyond death’. He continues, “Yitron is Qoheleth’s special term for wisdom’s reward, both here and after death.” See Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 25, 29. It is doubtful, though, if yitron is a metaphor or is even used in a metaphorical sense, more so suggesting that it refers to ‘wisdom’s reward after death’. What is clear is that the connotations of “excess over” or “profit” are retained in Ogden’s view. See also, Anson F. Rainey, “A Second Look at Amal in Qoheleth,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 36 (1965) 805 for a non-commercial use of יתרון.

³⁴⁵ Hinckley G. Mitchell, “‘Work’ in Ecclesiastes,” *SBL* Vol. 32 (1913) 123-138.

³⁴⁶ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 168 and De Jong, “A Book On Toil” 107-116.

³⁴⁷ Fox, *Contradiction*, 54. It also encompasses a broad connotation of human endeavour under the sun. See Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 108-109.

³⁴⁸ Unsurprisingly, Ginsburg uses the expression ‘to gain or earn (by toil),’ Seow expresses ‘the outcome of one’s struggle’, while Mitchell indicates ‘The product of wearisome activities’. See Ginsburg, 1; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 104, and Mitchell, “‘Work’ in Ecclesiastes,” 127.

³⁴⁹ Leong, *Our Reason for Being*, 5.

is ultimately “profitless.” The rhetorical question on the absence of the profit of human toil under the sun (1:3) confirms this to be the case.

The idea of zero-gain is vividly implied in the final poem when it explicitly reminds the reader of the certainty of death: the ‘dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it’ (12:7). Although several biblical scholars have associated the poem with cosmic doom as a whole, rather than human death in particular, the reading violates the natural meaning of the poem. It has to assume Qoheleth has ‘superimposed on the metaphor of old age [natural meaning] another level of signification, drawing upon the imaginaries of cosmic doom, to depict the end of human existence [superimposed meaning].’³⁵⁰ This “cosmic deterioration” theory, though, should remain provisional and requires further studies.³⁵¹ In any case, the poem essentially underscores that a person will die eventually and will take no net gain as a result of his or her toil. This emphatic point makes 1:2-3 together with 12:8 an ‘unforgettable refrain that unifies the entire book: first to last nothing profits those who walk under the sun.’³⁵²

2.4.1.2 The Function of הבל

It is certain that functionally הבל is a yardstick through which Qoheleth evaluates life and the objects of the pursuits thereof. When life is הבל, it appears vividly as fleeting and transient; consequently, humans cannot grasp or permanently own whatever they secure for themselves.³⁵³ All that is deemed as “secured” by humans is akin to grasping a ‘puff of air’³⁵⁴ that will eventually disappear from one’s grip. When הבל is applied to human toil, it can mean the immediate and eventual profitless nature of such activities. Consequently, when a pursuit brings

³⁵⁰ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 380. See also Seow, “Qoheleth’s Eschatological Poem,” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 118 No. 2 (1999) 209-234. This could, however, be taken as a possible view on top of the clear meaning that life is fleeting and old age and death are impending. Kruger is also inclined toward the “cosmic deterioration” theory but is cautious that the theory remains provisional and is in need of further study. See H.A.J. Kruger, “Old-Age Frailty versus Cosmic Deterioration? A Few Remarks on the Interpretation of Qoheleth 11,7-12,8,” in *Qoheleth in the Context of Wisdom*, ed. A. Schoor (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1998), 399-411. See also Fox’s *Time to Tear Down*, 333-348, for a more comprehensive discussion on the meaning of the poem.

³⁵¹ Kruger, “Old-Age Frailty versus Cosmic Deterioration,” 411.

³⁵² Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 35. Also Shannon Burkes, “Death in Qoheleth,” 45-79, which highlights Qoheleth’s declaration in the refrain has death in mind.

³⁵³ Seow, “Beyond Mortal Grasp,” 1-16.

³⁵⁴ Farmer, *Who Knows What is Good?*, 145-146.

about this state of affairs, it is deemed a futile activity; accordingly, the object of the pursuit is vanity.

Based on this analysis, when הבל is applied to the human toil, it does not mean that the toil or the objects of one's toil is valueless, meaningless or worthless, and neither does it mean "absurd." Instead, it conveys the idea of not profiting or the absence of net gain from one's toil under the sun, i.e. human pursuits have no ultimate net gain whatsoever. The pursuit is 'chasing after the wind' (1:14, 17; 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4, 16; 5:15 [5:16]; 6:9), thereby vivifying the fact that human activity is ultimately a futile activity.³⁵⁵ Since Qoheleth's quest is also about knowing what is good for humans to do in their fleeting years, the verdict whereby human toil under the sun has no *ultimate* net gain³⁵⁶ shows that nothing is ultimately good in this respect, and the whole pursuit involves chasing after the wind, a point in futility. In the face of such realities, the summation "Vanity of vanities" ... "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity." What profit does man have in all his toil which he does under the sun?' (1:2-3, 12:8) emphasises the profitless and futility of human toil is indeed the case.

2.4.1.3 הבל and the Worthwhile Purpose of Life

הבל is an unprejudiced and objective verdict on the worth of an object of pursuit *as* the pursuit of life. Instead of an open-ended verdict, הבל is the decisive verdict that the object of pursuit is vanity – just as the pursuits of life are a zero-gain endeavour. I have clarified and shown that Qoheleth's experiments and observations are not about whether a purpose in life exists but whether a certain purpose in life can be the most worthwhile. In view of this notion, the summation that human toil is הבל establishes that the worthwhile purpose of life cannot be found in the temporal objects of humanity's pursuits in life. Since all is vanity and human toil is ultimately profitless, it provides an answer to the question on living and toiling when life itself and human pursuit are ultimately profitless and futile. It also raises the relevance of the present

³⁵⁵ Leong, *Our Reason for Being*, 12.

³⁵⁶ I am indebted to Leong's distinction and varied usage of יתרון presented in his lecture *Old Testament Wisdom Literature: Interpreting Ecclesiastes* at the East Asia School of Theology, Singapore, 1997. Leong's study shows that when Qoheleth proclaims that one's activities have no יתרון, he may mean it in the following ways. Firstly, it means that the activities are intrinsically profitless (5:6 [5:7]; 6:11; 7:6; 8:10, 14), while secondly, it may mean that the activities are profitless in the immediate sense (2:1-11). Finally, it refers to ultimate profitlessness in the light of the levelling effect of death (2:14, 15, 17, 19, 21, 23).

activity when the fruits of toil can and will be taken away by death at any point of time. In other words, what then is worthwhile for humans to do?

Recalling my analysis of 3:1-8 and 3:14, the times and human activities (3:1-8) express the dual realities of the certainty of death and the uncertainty of life, both of which act as underpinning factors for the reality of הבל in life and human toil. When God denies humans the ability to know about events that lie ahead (3:11), it creates a sense of uncertainty and aggravates the need to make sense of life. The reason for the works of God, as Qoheleth has shown, is so that humans will fear Him (3:14c). The negative connotation of הבל in fact brings about a positive role of directing one to fear God. Furthermore, when this relationship, which exists in 3:1-15, is considered within the argument of juxtaposition, the relationship between הבל and 12:13b-14 becomes clearer. In other words, through juxtaposition, the declaration that all is הבל, with the injunction or the call to fear God and keep His commandments, makes it clear that the negating verdict of הבל points readers to 12:13b-14 as the worthwhile purpose of life.

2.4.2 ENJOYMENT AND THE WORTHWHILE PURPOSE OF LIFE

The commendation to enjoy life appears for the first time in 2:24-26, followed by 3:12-13, 3:22, 5:17-19 [5:18-20], 8:15, 9:7-10 and 11:7-10.³⁵⁷ Unlike הבל, the call to enjoy life grows progressively more forceful as the speech progresses.³⁵⁸ A casual comparison between the expressions in the first and the final commendations in 2:24-26 and 11:7-10, respectively, prove this point.

- | | |
|-------|--|
| 2:24a | Nothing is better for man except to eat and drink, and let his soul see good in his toil. |
| 11:9a | Rejoice, young man in your youth; and let your hearts be cheerful in the days of your youth. |

³⁵⁷ See Lee, *Vitality of Enjoyment*, 3. Lee, contrary to most scholars, includes 7:14 as one of the *leitmotiv*. He argues that Qoheleth employs 'not only the explicit vocabulary of *smh* but also other metaphors and idioms to communicate his commendation for enjoyment'. It must be noted that 7:14 lacks common expressions that characterise the admonition in relation to enjoyment. Furthermore, 7:14 is more akin to a reiteration of the uncertainty of life rather than the commendation to enjoy life.

³⁵⁸ Whybray, "Preacher of Joy," 88.

2:24a begins with ‘nothing is better for man’ (אֵין־טוֹב בָּאָדָם) *except* to ‘eat and drink’. The entire passage (2:24-16) concludes the narration that begins in 2:1-3³⁵⁹ on the fruitless search for what is good for humans to do. At this point, the commendation is a ‘concession’³⁶⁰ or a ‘plain statement’³⁶¹ of a better thing to do, since the objects that can be often considered as good to pursue, in reality, are actually linked to vanity. Apparently, 2:24a introduces the idea that it is not only good for humans to enjoy their lives, but it is also good for this to be a way of life.³⁶² It is easy to see how this idea progresses when 2:24a is compared to the final passage on enjoyment. Briefly, 11:9a is part of the final passage on enjoyment (11:7-10) that concludes the unit by exhorting readers to live wisely (11:1-6).³⁶³ Contrary to the apathetic tone in 2:24a, the final commendation is an urgent plea to enjoy *now* (11:9a).³⁶⁴ Since this commendation forms the climax to a series of exhortations on wise living, it is unequivocal that the plea, emphasis and solemnity³⁶⁵ express Qoheleth’s conviction that enjoyment is the *wise and sensible way to live*.

In addition to the progression in the intensity in and emphasis on enjoying life, it is also apparent that God has a role in one’s ability to enjoy life. Note the following passages:³⁶⁶

- 2: 26 For God gives the man who is good in his sight wisdom, and knowledge and joy; but to the sinners, he gives the task of gathering and collecting so that he may give to the one who is good in God’s sight.
- 3:13 And every man should eat and drink, and to see good in his toil. This is the gift of God
- 5:18 Every man whom God has given the riches and wealth, he enables them to

³⁵⁹ For Seow, the unit begins at 1:12, a continuation of Qoheleth’s investigation from 1:13. There is also an observable continuity between 1:13-18 and 2:1-3 which can be identified through the phrases such as ‘I set my heart’ (1:13) and ‘I went about with my heart’ (2:3). This includes the mention of ‘God’ in 1:13 and 2:25-26. It is also clear that 2:1-23 and 2:24-26 share a common theme tied by the search for ‘what is good’ (2:1-3). See also Provan, *Ecclesiastes*, 77-78.

³⁶⁰ Lee, *Vitality of Enjoyment*, 17.

³⁶¹ Whybray, “Preacher of Joy,” 87.

³⁶² Provan, *Ecclesiastes*, 77-78.

³⁶³ For a discussion on the unit breaks see Fredericks, “Life storms and structural unity in Qoheleth 11.1-12.8.” See also Whybray, “Preacher of Joy,” 87-88.

³⁶⁴ Lee, *Vitality of Enjoyment*, 72.

³⁶⁵ Ibid., 87. See also Loader, who uses the phrase ‘intensification of the commands’. J.A. Loader, *Polar Structure in the Book of Ecclesiastes* (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 1979).

³⁶⁶ Emphasis is mine.

- [5:19] eat from them, to take his lot, and to rejoice in his toil; This is a gift of God.
- 9:7 Go, eat your bread with joy, and your drink your wine with gladness; for God has already approved your deeds.
- 11:9c But know that for all these God will judge.

The role of God in the enjoyment passages hints at a possible link between the calls to enjoy and to ‘fear God and keeps His commandments’ (12:13b-14). I find it crucial to probe their relationship. Firstly, the call for enjoyment is essentially a call to live life meaningfully. Secondly, if there is a clear relationship between the ability to enjoy and the fear of God, identifying the nature of the relationship will certainly contribute to reconstructing the theology of the meaning of life in Ecclesiastes.

2.4.2.1 The Nature of Enjoyment

The call for enjoyment has been seen by a number of biblical scholars as a call to indulge in a little sensuality and pleasure, both of which serve as a form of respite from years spent toiling. In a similar vein, it is a form of ‘anaesthesia’,³⁶⁷ or ‘some sort of narcotic’,³⁶⁸ to numb the pain of the vanity of life. In Longman’s words:

Qoheleth advocates, though resignedly, pursuing what appears to be the simple pleasure of life. If there is no ultimate meaning in wisdom or one’s work, then one must look to enjoy life as the opportunities present themselves. Such attitude towards life has been given a motto long after Qohelet lived and wrote: *carpe diem*, a Latin phrase that means “seize the day!” ...in darkness of a life that has no ultimate meaning – seize upon temporal pleasures that lighten the burden.³⁶⁹

The call to enjoyment is hence given resignedly in light of the reality of הבל under the sun. It remains doubtful, though, whether this is actually Qoheleth’s idea of enjoyment. To begin with, the argument is built upon the premise that since everything is הבל, then work and life are

³⁶⁷ Fox, *A Time To Tear Down*, 127-128.

³⁶⁸ Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 35.

³⁶⁹ Ibid., 106. Fox makes a connection between pleasure and madness: ‘Pleasure, like the gesticulations of a lunatic, may be senseless, but for the lunatic it makes a sense to gesticulate. These actions have some sort of meaning in his private, circumscribed world, and he seems somehow compelled to make them. They are his. In Qoheleth’s eyes, even normal people are mad (9:3), and their actions are no more meaningful. But these actions are their portion, and it is fitting that they embrace it’. See Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 130-131. Zimmermann even suggests that the counselled advice to enjoy comes from one with a problematic childhood. See Frank Zimmermann, *The Inner World of Qoheleth* (New York: KTAC, 1973).

meaningless. Secondly, building upon this the assumption that not everyone is able to enjoy life, one should enjoy whenever the opportunity is available. However, I have pointed out that **הבל** does not mean the meaninglessness of work or life. More importantly, the views that associate enjoyment as some form of ‘anaesthesia’ or ‘narcotic’ that numbs the pain of vanity will find it hard to be consistent with data from the enjoyment passages. It appears that Qoheleth’s idea of enjoyment expresses a general attitude and disposition about life involving all spheres of human life, as proven by the following passages:

- 2:24a Nothing is better for man except to eat and drink, and let his soul see good in his toil.
- 3:12-13 I know that nothing is better except to rejoice and to do good in one lifetime. And every man should eat and drink, and to see good in his toil. This is the gift of God.
- 9:7-10 Go, now, eat your bread in happiness and drink your wine with cheerful heart for God accepts your works. Let your garment be white all the time and do not let your head lacks of ointment. Live your life joyfully with the woman whom you love, all the days of your fleeting life under the sun. For this is your lot in this fleeting days of your life, and the toil, which you took under the sun. Whatever your hands find to do, do it with all your might for there is neither work nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom in Sheol, where you are going.
- 11:9 Rejoice, young man in your youth; and let your hearts be cheerful in the days of your youth. Follow the way of your heart and after the sight of your eyes. But know that for all these God will bring you to judgment.

It is easy to see that these commendations involve the activity of eating and drinking. Furthermore, 9:7 shows these activities are not the real factors contributing to enjoyment, as one has to eat *in* happiness and drink *with* a cheerful heart (9:7), thereby showing the human disposition aspect of enjoyment. In fact, the distinction between human disposition and the activities of eating and drinking is reinforced when Qoheleth highlights that one may not be able to enjoy life even when food and wine are available (5:10 [11], 6:2). More importantly, there is an emphasis on the deliberate decision to rejoice (9:7; 11:9), to enjoy life with one’s spouse (9:9), to work hard (9:10), to follow the desires of the heart (11:9) and to remove vexation from the heart (11:10). The text in 9:9, for example, calls for the decision to “live joyfully with the woman whom you love” (ראה חיים עם־אשה אשר־אהבת). The identity of אשה has been subjected to various interpretations due to the lack of an article. Whybray, for instance, uses “a” instead of “the” and argues it does not refer to one’s wife and hence the idea of marriage is not a point of

consideration.³⁷⁰ Seow, however, argues that even if this is the case it does not eliminate the possibility of a specific woman, such as referring to one's wife especially when the context demands it.³⁷¹ Fox stresses it most likely refers to one's wife. He notes:

It is hard to see what he could have in mind besides marriage. "Enjoy life" – lit. "see life" – means more than an occasional dalliance, and a concubine was an unusual luxury and unlikely to a man's sole companion ("a woman you love," not "women").³⁷²

The key idea still refers to a specific woman whom one can love, calling the man "to love as himself as his own flesh, to take delight in her company, be pleasant with her, and rejoice in her."³⁷³ Considering the association between the call to fear God and enjoyment, a spouse, rather than just any other woman, is suggested. Hence, the call to enjoy life may apply to those who are already married, while those who are still single should get married.³⁷⁴ Taking this specific exhortation within the context of 9:7-10, Qoheleth's call for the decision to rejoice and enjoy one's life has gone beyond eating drinking and work and moved to an added dimension of spousal relationship. The call for decisions on such a broad scope of life indicates that the enjoyment advocated by Qoheleth cannot be a resigned alternative to numbing the pain of *הבלי*; on the contrary, it is a positive, constructive and sensible way to live life. It is very likely that, for Qoheleth, 'enjoyment is about *life*.'³⁷⁵

Pertinently, Qoheleth's concept of enjoyment has an emphasis on satisfaction, not just pleasure, from the activities in life. Consider the following passages:

³⁷⁰ Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 144.

³⁷¹ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 301.

³⁷² Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 294.

³⁷³ John Gill, "Commentary on Ecclesiastes 9:9", "The New John Gill Exposition of the Entire Bible" , <http://www.studydrive.org/commentaries/geb/ecclesiastes-9.html>. 1999.

³⁷⁴ Leong, *Our Reason for Being*, 70.

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 81.

- 2:1-3 I said in mine heart, “Go to now, I will test you with mirth, therefore experience good” (בטוב): But, behold, this also vanity. I said of laughter, mad: and of mirth, What does it accomplished? I explore with my heart to give myself to wine, yet guiding my heart with wisdom; and to lay hold on folly, till I might see what is good (טוב) for the sons of men to do under the heavens during the few days of their life.
- 2:10-11 I did not keep myself from any desires of my eyes, and did not withhold my heart from any pleasure. My heart found pleasure from all my toil and this was my portion for all my toil.
- 2:24a Nothing is better for man except to eat and drink, and let his soul see good in his toil.

2:1-11 provides narration on one of Qoheleth’s elaborated experiments. In this context, it is an experiment looking at the benefits of pleasure, in order to know whether it is a worthwhile pursuit in life. Passage 2:24-26 closes the section, which includes narration on the experiments on wisdom and success. As 2:1-11 and 2:24-26 share the same unit, it provides a basis on which to compare and consider the possible distinction between the pleasure expressed. Following the description in 2:1-11, the pleasures derived from his lengthy and elaborated projects are established as being הבל, while the entire pursuit is deemed profitless despite his earlier admission that the activities are pleasurable (2:10). The ‘pleasurable’ and yet ‘הבל’ judgments lead to assertions linking the verdicts to the lack of qualitative satisfaction from the pleasure experienced by Qoheleth. Hence, Whybray and Seow posit that the pleasure experienced by Qoheleth could only give him immediate satisfaction³⁷⁶ and limited joy,³⁷⁷ respectively. Considering the amount of diverse pleasurable activities engaged in, it is plausible that the lack of satisfaction in pleasure is indeed the reason for the verdict. After all, since pleasure is his lot, pleasure (only) is what he gets (2:10).³⁷⁸ In other words, although the activities have brought much pleasure to him (2:10), satisfaction and contentment are missing elements.

Considering the nature of pleasure expressed in 2:1-11, Qoheleth commends satisfaction in the enjoyment expressed in 2:24-26, reinforcing the qualitative difference between the two. Fox

³⁷⁶ Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 52-56.

³⁷⁷ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 150-152.

³⁷⁸ Leong, *Our Reason of Being*, 13-16.

raises an objection, arguing that the two expression of pleasure are essentially the same.³⁷⁹ According to Fox, there is not enough evidence to justify the distinction between the pleasure in 2:1-11 and 2:24-26. This notion is based on the observation that the types of pleasure he criticised in 2:1-11 were encouraged in other enjoyment passages. Qoheleth, according to Fox, criticises pleasure because it is ‘not *enough* to redeem’³⁸⁰ the pain from the unpleasant, oppressive and an overall absurdity of toil.³⁸¹ Accordingly, any hindrance to pleasure is not because the toiler makes pleasure the aim of life ‘but [rather] the failure to make enjoyment an immediate goal.’³⁸² However, nowhere in Ecclesiastes did Qoheleth advocate making enjoyment the immediate goal, since it is a gift from the hand of God.³⁸³ In fact, contrary to Fox’s assertion, pleasure cannot satisfy when it is made the aim of life,³⁸⁴ and if enjoyment is only possible through the hands of God (2:25-26), it cannot be the goal but remains a by-product of being good in God’s eyes. More importantly, 2:24-26 is not strictly a response to הבל of pleasure (2:1-11), in that it is also a response to all of the experiments undertaken by Qoheleth, including, among others, the pursuits of pleasure, wisdom and success as objects of pursuits in life (2:1-23). It is more likely that 2:24-26 reflects Qoheleth’s view of life with respect to toil and the fruits thereof,³⁸⁵ i.e. against the backdrop of the futility and the profitless nature of pleasure, wisdom and success as aims in life, it is indeed better that a person experiences satisfaction and contentment from the food and drink, and that the soul is able to say that labour is good.

Fox is right to point out that the verdict is not a condemnation of the agreeable experience of pleasure or the activities that produce it. These activities are in fact consistent with other enjoyment passages (e.g. 11:7-10). In other words, the הבל judgement does not alter the fact that the whole endeavour is pleasurable. The problem arises when it is made the pursuit or the

³⁷⁹ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 124-125. See also Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment*, 33-34.

³⁸⁰ Fox, *Ecclesiastes*, 122-123.

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 122-123.

³⁸² *Ibid.*, 124.

³⁸³ Seow, “Theology When Everything Is Out of Control,” 237-249.

³⁸⁴ Adapted from Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, 45.

³⁸⁵ Garret, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 296. Also, Leong, *Our Reason for Being*, 20.

immediate aim of life. Pleasure when it is a pursuit should not only fail to redeem but also contribute to the pain of the profitless nature of humans toiling under the sun.

Qoheleth's idea of enjoyment is therefore not about avoiding or minimising unpleasant experiences;³⁸⁶ it can take place in the midst of back-breaking drudgery, which Qoheleth accepts as an inescapable feature in life.³⁸⁷ Even as humans live by the sweat of their brow, they can savour the moments of sweet respite and be refreshed by the fruit of their labours.³⁸⁸ Thus, Ecclesiastes teaches not a passive but an active decision to enjoy life. It is about a decision to live life meaningfully while knowing that all human toil is eventually profitless.

2.4.2.2 The Function of Enjoyment

The call to enjoy life is generally seen as a response to the reality of הבל. Whybray, for instance, argues that the seven enjoyment passages are practical and positive conclusions concerning the proper conduct of life for seven problems of human life.³⁸⁹ Lo, similarly, notes that the seven exhortations to joy (enjoyment) intertwine with Qoheleth's ongoing contemplation of death, i.e. 'the reflection on death comes right before the joy [*sic*] statement.'³⁹⁰ Although scholars may disagree on the centrality of the commendation to enjoy life in the light of the overall message of Ecclesiastes, the relationship between this call and the reality of הבל is clear: 'When Qoheleth's frustration at human helplessness peaks, he advises pleasure.'³⁹¹ The passage in 3:12-13 clarifies the role of the commendation in relation to the reality of הבל (3:1-11):

- 3:12 I know that nothing is better except to rejoice and to do good in one lifetime.
3:13 And every man should eat and drink, and to see good in his toil. This is the gift of God.

³⁸⁶ Lee, *Vitality of Enjoyment*, 61.

³⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 61.

³⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 61.

³⁸⁹ Whybray "Preacher of Joy," 91.

³⁹⁰ Lo, "Death in Qoheleth," 88. Opinions differ on the exact number of 'problems of human life' and the specific kind of הבל that the admonition to enjoy addresses. See also Whybray, "Preacher of Joy," 87-89, for a similar observation. Enjoyment as a solution to the problem of vanity is also affirmed by G.S. Ogden, "Qoheleth XI7-XII8: Qoheleth's Summon to Enjoyment and Reflection," *VT* XXXIV 1, (1984), 25-38 and Lohfink, "Revelation of Joy," 625-635.

³⁹¹ Fox, *Qoheleth*, 73.

As argued earlier, the catalogue of times and activities (3:1-8) underscores the realities of the uncertainty of life and the certainty of death. When these realities are juxtaposed with humans' inability to know the "what" (fortunate or unfortunate) and the "when" (timing) of events, they can make humans preoccupied with making sense of the present in light of an uncertain future (3:10-11). It is against this backdrop that enjoyment is commended (3:12-13). As it begins with 'I know' (ידעתי), which expresses realisation, and the fact that a search for an answer has been completed,³⁹² it becomes clear that enjoyment is the wise and sensible way to live in relation to these sombre realities about life.³⁹³ Unsurprisingly, whenever the reality of the uncertainty of life is reiterated in the subsequent parts of the speech, it is usually followed by an instruction to enjoy life. Table Two (2) in the next page shows the relationship among these and the observable pattern in Ecclesiastes. It is thus obvious that enjoyment is a response and a sensible way to live, since life is riddled with the uncertainty of life and the certainty of death. Accordingly, this "problem-solution" relationship is the basic message of Qoheleth.³⁹⁴

³⁹² Levine, "The Appeal to Personal Experience," 341.

³⁹³ See also Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment*, 41.

³⁹⁴ For instance, Crenshaw notes that 'Life is profitless; totally absurd. This oppressive message lies at the heart of the Bible's strangest book. Enjoy life if you can, advises the author, for old age will soon overtake you'. See Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 23. Wright also concludes that 'The idea of the impossibility of understanding what God has done... is in reality the theme, and it is built on the vanity of motif prominent in the first part of the book. The only advice offered is to find enjoyment in life and the fruit of one's toil while one can...' See also Leong, *Our Reason for Being*, 20. He observes 'If the laborious pursuits of pleasure and success, even boosted by wisdom, are in reality profitless, how then should we live? What role should labor and its fruit play in our life? Qoheleth's answer is that we should enjoy the fruit of our labor and thus let our soul find satisfaction'.

TABLE: 2
THE ENJOYMENT PASSAGES AND THE REITERATION OF UNCERTAINTY
IN LIFE

The Tension	The Reiteration	The Contextual Exhortation	The Admonition To Enjoy
3:11b			3:12-13
	3:22b	3:16 – 22	3:22a
	6:10-12	5:9 [10] – 6:9	5:17-19 [5:18-20]
	7:13-14	7:1 – 8:15	8:15
	8:16-17	8:16 – 9:10	9:7-10
	9:11-12	9:10 – 11:10	11:7-10

Nevertheless, the prominent role of God in the enjoyment passages is undeniably obvious. A key point in the commendation to enjoy is that enjoyment is a gift from God (3:12; 3:22; 5:17-19 [5:18-20]; 9:7-10),³⁹⁵ thus suggesting that enjoyment in life is a given by God to every human and it must be sensibly accepted and taken up.³⁹⁶ Although this is the case, it is posited by a number of biblical scholars that not everyone is able to experience enjoyment in life, since the ability to do so is believed to be given *arbitrarily* by God to anyone whom He pleases – the decision is strictly God’s prerogative and is not determined by one’s disposition before Him. Consequently, enjoyment is not within one’s grasp and must be enjoyed ‘whenever there is *opportunity* to do so’³⁹⁷ – an interpretation which suggests a loose relationship between God and one’s ability to enjoy life.

³⁹⁵ Johnston traces the relationship to God’s initial intention for humanity implied in the creation account. In his words, ‘Perhaps most importantly, Ecclesiastes and Genesis exhibit substantial agreement as to the central point of the creation motif – that life is to be celebrated as a “good” creation of God. Seven times in the opening chapter of Genesis, God looks at his creation and calls it “good” (tob)’. Similarly, Qoheleth views life and concludes: ‘There is nothing better (lit., tob, “good”) for a man, than that he should eat and drink, and that he should make his soul enjoy good (tob) in his labor’. See Johnston, “Confession of a Workaholic,” 14-28. McCabe, following Johnston, posits ‘Qoheleth upholds the creational design to celebrate life as a divine gift which is to be enjoyed as good, something to be cherished reverently and something in which man delights continually’. McCabe, “The Message of Ecclesiastes,” 98.

³⁹⁶ Whybray, “Preacher of Joy”; Leupold, *Ecclesiastes*; Lohfink, “Revelation by Joy.” Gordis goes further to stress that a failure to enjoy is a form of negligence and sin. See Gordis, *Koheleth*, 125.

³⁹⁷ Seow, “Theology When Everything Is Out of Control,” 237-249. Emphasis is mine.

This view may find it problematic to reconcile with the obvious relationship between one's merit and God's disposal of enjoyment that is expressed explicitly in 2:24 and 26:

2:24a Nothing is better for man except to eat and drink, and let his soul see good in his toil.

2:26 For God gives the man who is good in his sight wisdom, and knowledge and joy; but to the sinners, he gives the task of gathering and collecting so that he may give to the one who is good in God's sight.

Enjoyment is also *only* possible to one who is *good* in God's sight (2:26). The exegetical relationship is clear regardless of how the words "good" and "sinner" are interpreted; nonetheless, it cannot be denied that the underlying issue relies on the meanings of "good" and "sinner" in the text. A common interpretation of the word "good" is to associate it with the idea of being "favoured (by God)," though not in a religious sense. The word "sinners," then, refers to the one who for whatever reason (or even for no reason at all) is not so favoured by God. In this case, the meaning of the word "sinner" (חַטָּא) has an amoral connotation (in the religious sense). Crenshaw opines, '... the two terms [*tōb* and *hōte*] mean simply the fortunate and unfortunate, lucky and unlucky'. For Qohelet, *hōte* almost 'retains its original neutral connotation of errant, missing the mark.'³⁹⁸ Seow goes further to explain the basis for favouring the amoral connotation. In his words:

It is important to observe that *hōte* is not a religious category in the wisdom tradition. The word *hōte*, etymologically meaning "one who misses, lacks," refers to one who makes mistakes and bungles all the time, who cannot do anything right.³⁹⁹

It appears that Seow has overlooked the religious emphasis of *hōte* in Job 1:5 (*hōte* as the reason for sacrifices), Psalm 51:4 (*hōte* in the context of adultery), 106:6 (*hōte* as the sin of violating the covenant). Admittedly, חַטָּא is not always translated as "sinner" in a religious sense, particularly when the offended party is a fellow human. In the case of Ecclesiastes, its usage can be found in 10:4.⁴⁰⁰ Nevertheless, limiting the usage of חַטָּא to an amoral connotation is problematic on the

³⁹⁸ Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 90.

³⁹⁹ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 141.

⁴⁰⁰ 'If the ruler's temper rises against you, do not abandon your position, because composure always allays great offence (chata)'.

grounds of consistency and textual analysis. In relation to consistency, the word is also used in order to refer to those who are morally wrong (against God's commandments).⁴⁰¹ As for Ecclesiastes, such usage is highly likely in 7:20, 7:26 and 8:12. Furthermore, the assumption that all offences against fellow humans are amoral stands on a shaky ground.⁴⁰² In regard to textual analysis, the offended party in 2:26 is not human at all but has clearly offended God. It is rather clear that the word "sin" has to be understood as an offence in the religious sense, in which case it therefore follows that a moral connotation for חטא in 2:26 indicates that "good" (in God's eyes) equally carries a moral and religious connotation.

A related issue can be found in the meaning of the phrase, 'to do good' in 3:12. Several commentators argue that 'to do good' means 'to do good in life,'⁴⁰³ or 'to realize happiness,'⁴⁰⁴ or 'make happiness a reality.'⁴⁰⁵ This is built on the premise that the phrase carries a similar amoral connotation expressed in 'good in his toil' (טוב בעמלו) in 2:24.⁴⁰⁶ Even Whybray opts for a different reading despite recognising that the phrase normally carries a moral connotation.⁴⁰⁷ I suggest that it is still too early to give the expression in 2:24 precedence and to override the expression in 3:12. Besides, 7:20 has a similar expression, and in this case the phrase most clearly has a moral connotation.⁴⁰⁸ Hence, instead of imposing an external expression into the text, perhaps it would be better to begin by deriving the meaning from the pericope itself. Seow proposes an interpretation based on parallelism, i.e. 'to do good' finds a parallel with 'to see

⁴⁰¹ Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 64-65. Also Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 49.

⁴⁰² Instances of offence among fellow humans that carry moral connotations are found in 1 Samuel 19:4 and 24:11. In 1 Samuel 19:4, Jonathan begged King Saul not to *chata* against David – the context is clear that Saul intends to kill David. Another example is 24:11, where *chata* also implies killing another fellow human.

⁴⁰³ Gordis, *Koheleth*, 232.

⁴⁰⁴ Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 74.

⁴⁰⁵ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 164.

⁴⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁴⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁴⁰⁸ Fredericks, *Ecclesiastes*, 118, and *Coping with Transience*, 88. According to Fredericks, it is 'an antonymous grammatical and lexical phrase to "do evil"' (4:3; 4:17 [5:1]; 8:11-12). He argues that he is praising righteousness in this latter reference (3:12) and it should be clear enough... it is paralleled most closely later [with] 4:17 [5:1] and 7:20. In 4:17 [5:1], the syntactical equivalent of "to do good" is found, that is, 'to do evil'... where it undoubtedly expresses the opposite moral pole. And in 7:20, to "do good" and never sin are moral opposites as well.

good (enjoy).⁴⁰⁹ However, ‘to do (moral) good’ – and as a result ‘to see good (happiness)’ – are equally good parallel phrases. Such rendering will not only find consistency with 2:24-26 (and also 11:10), in that only those who are good in God’s sight get to enjoy, but it is also syntactically consistent with the related thought in 3:13b. Here, ‘*Whenever* a person finds enjoyment available to him, that enjoyment always comes from God’s hand.’⁴¹⁰

The direct relationship between the ability to enjoy and one’s disposition is repeated in 11:9. Consider the text below:

- 11:9a Rejoice, young man, in your youth; and let your hearts be cheerful in the days of your youth
- 11:9b Follow the way of your heart and after the sight of your eyes.
- 11:9c But know that for all these God will bring you to judgment.

Following the call to rejoice (11:9a), and the instructions on how one can rejoice (11:9b), comes the warning that ‘God will judge’ (11:9c). Unfortunately, the warning has been sidestepped as ‘an editorial’⁴¹¹ or ‘a moralistic gloss inserted to counteract Qohelet’s shocking advice.’⁴¹² A possible reason for the editorial theory is the presumed conflict between Qoheleth’s ‘shocking advice’ and the warning in Numbers 15:39,⁴¹³ which prohibits following one’s heart and eyes. Tighter scrutiny shows that the presumed conflict between Numbers 15:39 and Ecclesiastes 11:9c does not occur, as the prohibition in the former passage is intended to direct the Israelites to fashion their lives in accordance with God’s commandments instead of one’s hearts and eyes. The authority of Commandments (12:13) over one’s life was never challenged in Ecclesiastes 11:9c – it simply shows that there is adequate room to follow one’s heart and one’s eyes, without violating any commandments.⁴¹⁴ More importantly, there are sufficient data to show that the

⁴⁰⁹ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 164

⁴¹⁰ Ibid., 74. See Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 164.

⁴¹¹ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 117.

⁴¹² Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 184.

⁴¹³ And it shall be these tassels that you may look at and to remember all the commands of the LORD and do not seek after your own heart and your own eyes that not whoring yourself as you are used to. (Numbers 15:39. Translation mine).

⁴¹⁴ Leong, *Our Reason for Being*, 78.

warning of judgment is not foreign in the speech at all. Interestingly, its occurrences are usually associated with the call to fear God. Consider the explicit relationship between ‘God’s judgement’ and the ‘fear God’ relationship in the speech shown below:⁴¹⁵

- 5:4c-6 Why should God be angry at your words and destroy the works of
[5:5c-7] your hand? Much dreaming and many words are profitless.
 Therefore, fear God.
- 12:13-14 This is the end of the matter. Fear God and keep His commandments.
 For this is every human. For God will bring every work into
 judgment, including every hidden thing, whether good or evil.

The same relationship is applicable to 11:9c. A major view takes ‘God will judge’ to mean that God will judge any failure to enjoy what He has given (context: 11:7-10).⁴¹⁶ This infers that the warning may not necessarily be a warning against moral violation in the religious sense; hence, the idea of fearing God is not relevant in this passage. This inference is problematic, though, as it has not negated the presence of an implicit call to fear God in this text. If Qoheleth does not have in mind that readers should fear God, the warning about God’s judgment will not have served any purpose, as there is no reason to fear God in the absence of any fear of His judgment. More importantly, the interpretation could become problematic, as it limits the call to ‘remember the Creator’ at 12:1 to be limited to the issue of enjoyment.⁴¹⁷ When interpreting 12:1 (as the climax of the speech) one has to consider the numerous calls to fear God (3:14c, 4:17-5:6 [5:1-7], 7:15-18, 8:12-13) as well as God’s role in human enjoyment (2:24-26; 3:12; 5:17-19 [5:18-20]; 9:7-10). It is an interpreter’s bias and an exegetical error to ignore the relationship between the repeated call to fear God with the phrase ‘remember your Creator.’ Whybray is right when he says ‘remember your creator’ (12:1), i.e. remember one’s accountability to Him as the maker, and thus obey Him.⁴¹⁸ Since 11:7-10 is the immediate context for 12:1, it is viable to conclude

⁴¹⁵ Curtis stresses that the expression of the injunctions in 5:6 [5:7] and 12:13b are the same. See, Curtis, *The End of the Matter*, 93.

⁴¹⁶ Gordis, *Koheleth*, 336.

⁴¹⁷ See also Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 351.

⁴¹⁸ Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 163.

that the reminder that ‘God will judge’ (11:9c) is consistent with, and complement the reminder to fear God in 12:1.

What I have shown herein is that the relationship between the ability to enjoy and God as the disposal of enjoyment is not as arbitrary as assumed; on the contrary, it appears that there is a consistent “consequential” relationship between one’s disposition before God and the ability to enjoy life. I suspect that the primary argument against the clear “cause and effect relationship” may have something to do with the interpreters imposing external data into the reading; for instance, Crenshaw says:

This verse takes the traditional categories, wise person and fool (sinner), and empties them of moral content... Qoheleth’s observations transpose the motif, dear to the sages, that wicked people’s wages eventually go to the devout (Prov. 13:22; 28:8; Job 27:16-17). Qoheleth turns this cherished belief on its head. *Since* [emphasis mine] good people can and do lose their possessions to sinners, the disposer of goods must be indifferent to morality.⁴¹⁹

Admittedly, Qoheleth saw anomalies in the fate of the righteous and the wicked. However, this does not at all negate the exegetically verifiable relationship between the ability to enjoy and one’s disposition before God.⁴²⁰ Instead of taking the anomalies as invalidating the clear relationship between enjoyment and one’s disposition, an alternative view is to consider that an exception to the relationship exists and will be dealt with later. But at this juncture, by recognising that there is a clear and consistent relationship between the ability to enjoy and one’s disposition before God, one can see the link between the commendations to enjoy life and the purpose of Ecclesiastes (12:13b-14). As noted earlier, the function of enjoyment is a sensible response to the reality of הבל, and by putting the correlation between one’s disposition and the ability to enjoy into the equation, the commendation to enjoy life has the specific function of encouraging readers to fear God and keep His commandments.

⁴¹⁹ Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 90-91.

⁴²⁰ The section on undeserved suffering will explain that enjoyment, according to Qoheleth, is not necessarily about the absence of “suffering” of the righteous.

2.4.2.3 Enjoyment and the View of Life

An important element of the enjoyment advocated by Qoheleth is its emphasis on the need for an appropriate view of life. This relationship is already expressed in 3:12-13 where an appropriate response to life is called for in the absence of knowing the events ahead. Taking this as a backdrop, Qoheleth's exhortation is a response to God's sovereignty over all human affairs. Instead of being preoccupied by the uncertainty of life, it is better to rejoice and to do good (3:12-13). It is, after all, the gift of God and a lot for everyone good in His sight. The emphasis of being a carefree person is consistent with the description in 5:19 [5:20], in that one whom God has given to enjoyment 'will not often consider the years of his life, because God keeps him occupied with the gladness of his heart.' This means even though that person may face problems and experience sorrows and even have anxious moments,⁴²¹ the person is generally satisfied, fulfilled or contented.⁴²² Undergirded by the appropriate response is a realistic view of realities, i.e. the certainty of death and uncertainty in life and the intended response from human therein.

The dynamic relationship between the view of life and human response is found in the final commendation to enjoy life (11:7-10):

- 11:7 Truly, the light is sweet and the sun is pleasant to the eyes.
- 11:8 For if a man has many years, let him rejoice in them all but let him remember that the days of darkness is many and all that is to come is vanity.
- 11:9 Rejoice, young man, in your youth; and let your hearts be cheerful in the days of your youth. Follow the way of your heart and after the sight of your eyes. But know that for all these God will bring you to judgment.
- 11:10 Therefore remove vexation from your heart and put away pain from your body. For childhood and youthfulness are fleeting.

The importance of an appropriate view of life is repeated in 11:7-8. Contextually, 11:7-10 unites the key themes in the speech. Within the *péricope*, 11:7-8 recapitulates the instructions to enjoy,

⁴²¹ McCabe, "The Message of Ecclesiastes," 48.

⁴²² Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 74. Eaton believes that the passage advocates contentment, not necessarily satisfaction. It is, however, not necessary to draw a thin line between fulfilment, contentment and satisfaction, as fulfilment and genuine satisfaction lead to contentment. As I shall argue in this section, enjoyment passages such as 5:17-19 [5:18-20] show that the enjoyment advocated by Qoheleth also involves having a carefree disposition in life.

which can be found located strategically throughout the speech. 11:8 reinforces the reality of the uncertainty of life and the certainty of death. “Days of darkness is many” is followed by, and affirmed all that is to come will be profitless (11:8). In light of this, the sensible way for humans to live is to enjoy now, which is most realistic when childhood and the prime of life are fleeting (11:10). It is clear that 3:12-13 and 11:7-8 share the same view of life, and so accordingly, Qoheleth admonishes ‘let your hearts be cheerful’ while one is still young, as the phrase reemphasises the disposition of one who is being enabled by God to enjoy, that is, one who is being occupied by God with gladness of heart (5:19 [5:20]).⁴²³

In view of the sombre reality of life, Qoheleth calls his readers to remove vexation from their hearts and put away pain from the body i.e. to remove anger and frustration (5:11 [5:12], 5:16 [5:17]) because of profitless pursuits in life. In addition, one is called upon to be carefree and follow the impulse of the heart and the desires of the eyes (11:9), i.e. to ‘enjoy what is before your eyes’⁴²⁴ or ‘doing what seems good to the person’⁴²⁵ suggesting that one should decide to do what one likes to do as a direction in life.⁴²⁶ Perhaps the exhortation to follow one’s heart and to enjoy what is before their eyes is an exhortation to enjoy what is *really* before their eyes, namely their spouses, fruits of their labour, food and drink (9:7-10), *now*. As the other enjoyment passages are taken into consideration, they enrich the understanding of the enjoyment and the view of life in Ecclesiastes. It embraces the reality of the uncertainty of life and the reality of undeserving suffering (8:15), and it sees works as good to one’s eyes (9:10) and to be able to say that labour is good in the light of הבל. Considering this, life is not about the pursuit of more, not even the pursuit of joy, but the glad appreciation of what is already in one’s possession through the gift of God.⁴²⁷ The warning that God will judge (11:9c) restricts the whole endeavour within the boundaries set by the commandments. To look at this differently, the God factor ensures one lives consistently and in line with the commandments of God which helps one to live in harmony with the reality of the certainty of death and the uncertainty of life.

⁴²³ Leong, *Our Reason for Being*, 77-79.

⁴²⁴ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 349-350.

⁴²⁵ Leong, *Our Reason for Being*, 78.

⁴²⁶ Fox, *Ecclesiastes*, 317.

⁴²⁷ *Ibid.*, 128.

Hence, the enjoyment advocated by Qoheleth is certainly associated with an appropriate view of life, which was inherent in the call to fear God and keep his commandments. This provides additional insights into the commendation to enjoy life in relation to the reality of the vanity of life. It has certainly provides further insight into the ‘problem-solution’ relationship between the themes of enjoyment and הבל, i.e. the call to enjoy life is not strictly a call for a change in activities but a call to embrace an appropriate view of life. To put it differently, enjoyment is an outcome of fearing God and keeping his commandments, which an act of embracing a view of life that accurately reflects the reality of life.

2.4.2.4 The Enjoyment and the Worthwhile Purpose

The theme of enjoyment, similar to the theme of הבל, is capable of tilting the message of Ecclesiastes toward an optimistic or a pessimistic tone. Rousseau’s structural analysis goes to the extent to suggest that the theme of enjoyment is *the* focus of Qoheleth and that it actually surpasses the dominance of הבל.⁴²⁸ Others, such as Whybray and Lohfink, believe that the frequent commendation to enjoy life in the light of the reality of הבל offers an optimistic message on the subject of life in Ecclesiastes.⁴²⁹ The significance of the commendation to enjoy is thus directed primarily at its function in relation to the overall theme of הבל in the speech.

My analysis has shown that such a relationship may not necessarily be the focus of the book. Undeniably, the functional relationship between the commendation and the reality of הבל is exegetically verifiable. Ecclesiastes teaches that in the light of the הבל of life, the sensible way to live is to enjoy and find satisfaction in the fruits of his labour. This is the way to live, and it is built upon the view of life or a set of beliefs anchored on the God factor in the reality of life. An accurate view of life leads to the active decision to embrace a positive attitude thereto, by undertaking activities that reflect this attitude and being mindful of the manner in which the activities are performed.⁴³⁰ It is to live life meaningfully. Enjoyment, hence, is the by-product of the view of life that appropriately reflects the reality of life under the sun.⁴³¹

⁴²⁸ F. Rousseau, “Structure de Qohelet 1.4-11 et plan du livre,” *VT* 31(1981) 200-217.

⁴²⁹ Whybray, “Qoheleth, Preacher of Joy,” 87-98; Lohfink, “Revelation by Joy,” 625-635. W.H.U. Anderson, *Qoheleth and Its Pessimistic Theology: Hermeneutical Struggles in Wisdom Literature* in Mellen Biblical Press Series, V. 54 (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1997), 73. Even if this is the case, as others have asserted, enjoyment will be decisively “levelled” or, in Anderson’s words, ‘invalidated’ by the decisive declaration that all is הבל.

⁴³⁰ John Kekes, *Enjoyment: The Moral Significance of Styles of Life* (Oxford, Clarendon Press: 2008), 70.

The God factor indicated by the juxtaposition between the commendation to enjoy and the reality of הבל⁴³² is noteworthy. Considering my argument that there is a positive correlation between one disposition before God and the ability to enjoy, the call for enjoyment has the additional function of encouraging readers to fear God. If enjoyment is the solution to the reality of הבל, and if enjoyment is only possible for one who fears God, it is thus possible to see the commendation to enjoy as a *motivation* to fear God. This motivation factor is an additional element in the ‘enjoyment-הבל’ relationship, showing harmony with the overall purpose of Ecclesiastes just as it is expressed in 12:13-14.

2.4.3 THE PROBLEM OF UNDESERVED SUFFERING

The theme of undeserving suffering is apparent in the book of Ecclesiastes. In fact, Christianson built upon this theme a reflection on the injustices meted out to the victims of the Holocaust.⁴³³ It is noteworthy that Christianson qualifies his thematic comparison and approach as ‘in no way [presuming] the experience of Qoheleth is comparable to the Holocaust... presuming an *experiential* likeness between their observations and those of Qoheleth.’⁴³⁴ Nevertheless, this reflection reveals Christianson’s conviction that underlying frustration and the mystery of the suffering of the righteous exists in the speech of Qoheleth. The predicament of the righteous is obvious in the speech: a righteous person dies in his righteousness while a wicked person’s life is prolonged in his wickedness (7:14). Certainly, the speech touches on a range of sufferings endured by the righteous. Ultimately, the crux of the problem lies in the “unfair” ends of the righteous. Qoheleth stressed in 8:14 that ‘The righteous received what is due to the wicked while the wicked received what is due to the righteous.’⁴³⁵ Some biblical scholars consider 8:14 to be an expression of Qoheleth’s cynicism regarding the reliability of the maxim of the sages,

⁴³¹ Adapted from Theodore M. Greene, “Life, Value, Happiness,” *The Journal of Philosophy* Vol. 53, No. 10 (May 10, 1956) 317-330.

⁴³² Bartholomew, *Rereading Ecclesiastes*, 252.

⁴³³ Christianson, *A Time to Tell*, 259-275.

⁴³⁴ *Ibid.*, 259.

⁴³⁵ Other passages include 3:16-17 and 9:1-6.

which advocates that the wellbeing of a person in life is linked directly to that person's conduct. Accordingly, the suffering of the righteous is a violation of the 'reward and conduct' principle, or, in Fox's expression, an 'offensive violation of justice and "deed-consequent" principles in the system of worldly events.'⁴³⁶ This 'offensive violation of justice' has led to a theory linking this predicament to a "moody" God, who remains unexpectedly silent at the early death of the righteous and stubbornly unmoved by the prolonged life of the wicked.⁴³⁷ His actions have been considered as mostly 'incomprehensible,'⁴³⁸ showering 'good fortune on one, now on another... whenever God gets in the mood.'⁴³⁹ Unsurprisingly, this is also inferred as the feelings and frustration of Qoheleth. For instance, Schoors says that 'Qoheleth sees the absurdities in the failing of just retribution of the wicked and the righteous.'⁴⁴⁰ Similarly, James notes, 'Qoheleth... recognises the vanity of accepting the Hebrew theory of retribution, if by so doing the person becomes blind to the realities of pain and pointlessness which often form a part of a good person's life.'⁴⁴¹ He has become a 'weary observer, worn down by the days of his absurdity' and has in fact 'rejected the easy notion of retribution.'⁴⁴²

The theme of undeserving suffering, or the problem of suffering and death, is considered in this analysis, as these are key obstacles preventing one from seeing coherence in life. The reality of death, and the pain brought about by undeserving suffering, is a true cause of confusion. Death

⁴³⁶ Fox, "The Meaning of *Hebel* for Qohelet," 426.

⁴³⁷ See Gilbert, *Morale et Ancien Testament*, 152. Also Schoors, "Theodicy in Qohelet," in *Theodicy in the World of the Bible*, ed. Antti Laato and Johannes C. de Moor (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 375-409. See also Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 72, Wayne A. Brindle, "Righteousness and Wickedness in Ecclesiastes 7:15-18," *Andrew University Seminary Studies* Vol. 23. No. 3 (Autumn 1985) 243-257.

⁴³⁸ Klaus Koch, "Is There a Doctrine of Retribution in the Old Testament?" in *Theodicy in the Old Testament: Issues in Religion and Theology*, No. 4, ed. James Crenshaw (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 80.

⁴³⁹ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁴⁴⁰ Schoors, "Theodicy in Qohelet," 403-404.

⁴⁴¹ Kenneth W. James, "Ecclesiastes: Precursor of Existentialists," *TBT* 22 (1984) 85-90, quoted in Christianson, *A Time to Tell*, 267.

⁴⁴² Christianson, *A Time to Tell*, 267.

has long been considered the ‘basic evil of all existence.’⁴⁴³ This ‘unresolved and incomprehensible’⁴⁴⁴ reality, along with its levelling effect, is a primary reason to see labouring and even life itself as ‘absurdity’.⁴⁴⁵ “Solutions” come in the form of avoidance or denial,⁴⁴⁶ or, in Socrates’ words, ‘I evade death’s sting by dying to the world in advance, dissociating myself from the body, so that when physical death arrives, I am no longer home to receive it.’⁴⁴⁷ There is even a form of bold defiance and the refusal to allow the quality of life to be intimidated by this reality.⁴⁴⁸ Although death is an eventual and expected reality, it is the inability to know its exact timing and how it will occur that destabilises the sense of coherence in life. In fact, the existence of suffering itself has brought about the idea that life is not worth living.⁴⁴⁹ This is not an overstatement. Schopenhauer, for instance, sees life generally as a form of undeserved suffering. Most likely, the search for “coherence” is probably his motivation that requires suffering to be seen as an independently positive phenomenon that must be embraced in the same way as life itself. Pleasure, on the other hand, has to be taken as temporary relief or escape from pain. In his words, ‘The happiness of any given life is to be measured, not by its joys and pleasures, but by the extent to which it has been free from suffering.’⁴⁵⁰ Coherence in life therefore requires the need to see the relevance of the present in the light of death. In all practicality, it is the need to see the meaning of undeserved suffering, and its relevance, in the light of the cancelling effect of death.

⁴⁴³ Elias Canetti, *The Human Province*, trans. Neugroschel J. (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), vi. Quoted in Reinhard Steiner, “Against Death” in *Death and Philosophy*, eds. Jeff Malpas and Robert C. Solomon (London: Routledge, 1998), 16-17.

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid. 16-17.

⁴⁴⁵ Nagel, “The Absurd,” 176-185.

⁴⁴⁶ Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Freeback Press Paperbacks, 1973, repr. 1997), 11-24.

⁴⁴⁷ Quoted in Graham Parkes, “Death and Detachment” in *Death and Philosophy*, eds. Jeff Malpas and Robert C. Solomon (London: Routledge, 1998), 83.

⁴⁴⁸ Kai Neilsen, “Death and the Meaning of Life,” in *The Meaning of Life*, 2nd ed., ed. E.D. Klemke (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 153-159.

⁴⁴⁹ David Benatar, “Why It is Better Never to Come into Existence,” in *Life, Death and Meaning: Key Philosophical Readings on the Big Questions*, 2nd Ed., ed. David Benatar (Maryland: Rowman& Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2010), 155-167.

⁴⁵⁰ Schopenhauer, “On the Sufferings of the World,” 493-401.

2.4.3.1 An Explanation on Undeserving Suffering in Ecclesiastes

Firstly, what the sages believed about the principle of “retribution” remains an issue that requires further study.⁴⁵¹ Koch raises the possibility of the error of incorporating the Western *judicial process* in the study of retribution.⁴⁵² By “judicial process” he means ‘The response to one’s action would be by assessment, meted out by a higher authority, and then imposed upon one from the outside... In our day, the consideration of retribution was characterized in such a juridical fashion that it is thought to be reward or punishment *according to a previous established norm*.’⁴⁵³ Instead of the retributive principle that has been fashioned by modern readers’ understanding of a judicial process, Koch believes that it is the ‘action with built-in consequences’ principle that would more accurately reflect the convictions of the sages. The principle states that God has established the ‘laws of nature’, in that a ‘wicked action – just like the laws of nature, which operate so that an action inevitably is followed by a reaction – will *inevitably result in disastrous consequences*.’⁴⁵⁴ The same principle could apply to righteous actions, in that they will inevitably bring expected rewards. Nevertheless, the form and timing of these consequences is unspecified and will often vary. God’s role is to set the “laws of the nature” in motion and bring the ‘action with built-in consequences’ to fruition. Hence, instead of a punishment or a reward meted out by a higher authority from the outside, the punishment or reward is *already* built in to the ‘action with built-in consequences’ system. Since God established this system, it would follow that whatever happens – either reward or punishment – will be the work of God.

Koch’s analysis is stimulating, as it offers fresh insights into interpreting Ecclesiastes. For instance, the principle provides a new insight into the interpretation of the dynamics of double

⁴⁵¹ Sun Myung Lyu, *Righteousness in the Book of Proverbs* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012). We found very helpful the rich discussion on the concept offered by Sun. Among other aspects, the work addresses the nature and mechanism of ‘the principle of retribution principle’. An important issue that is discussed in the work is the nature of God’s involvement in the affairs of humans. That is, the execution of a conduct-reward-punishment system. The author notes that the discussion has yet to arrive at a settled conclusion.

⁴⁵² Koch, “Is There a Doctrine of Retribution in the Old Testament?” 59. See also Marcel Sarot, “Theodicy and Modernity: An Inquiry in the Historicity of Theodicy,” in *Theodicy in the World of the Bible*, ed. Antii Laato and Johanannes C. de Moor (Boston: Brill, 2003), 1-26.

⁴⁵³ *Ibid.*, 59. Emphasis is Koch’s.

⁴⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 58. Emphasis is Koch’s.

agencies in the theme of enjoyment: God as the giver of enjoyment and humans as the decision makers in relation to their own life. To explain further, God has set in motion the law of the system; hence, it is the human's decision that will decide whether he experiences vexation of the heart or enjoyment in life. Another interesting insight is how the concept of enjoyment as the gift of God can be understood. Since this principle is established and set into motion by God, it would be right for Qoheleth to say that enjoyment is the gift of God (3:12), or enjoyment is only possible when one is enabled by God to do so (5:17-19 [5:18-20]). Leong, in his exposition on Ecclesiastes, makes an interesting connection between the obedience of the commandments (12:13-14) and the ability to enjoy. He explains:

For consider the vexation of the heart that we have looked at: being burdened by the cares of this world. We saw how this relates to violating the moral dimension of the created order by breaking the tenth commandment: covetousness... And covetousness is basically about putting too much value on the transitory things of this world.⁴⁵⁵

This “vexation of the heart” is not imposed from the “outside” but is the built-in consequence of the decision to covet transitory things of the world. Hence, the commandments of God are meant to ensure that humans can live according to His will, and as a result experience blessings in life.

Considering the formulation of the ‘action with built-in consequences,’ there is insufficient evidence to conclude that any occurrences of “undeserved suffering” are the result of the arbitrariness of God's actions. In fact, the principle of the ‘action with built-in consequences’ requires the righteous to continually seek wisdom, in order to ensure wise actions and decisions in life. This explains the numerous exhortations for wise living in the second half of the speech. Nevertheless, the same principles also assume neither the specific form nor the timing of the consequence, although the fact that there are consequences for every action is almost a certainty. The non-uniformity of timing between an action and its consequences may explain the reason for one experiencing an immediate הבל (5:12-15 [5:13-16]) while the other enjoys a temporary delay in the execution of justice (8:11). Hence, while the execution of justice is certain, it is often left unclear as to how this will be brought about.

Although Koch's study might have explained the *system* that is at work in the book of Ecclesiastes, it is insufficient in explaining neither the *concern* observed in the book of Qoheleth

⁴⁵⁵ Leong, *Our Reason for Being*, 79.

nor how this can be linked to the *purpose* of the book. A major concern raised in Ecclesiastes is the reality of the uncertainty of life which raises the possibility of no temporal gain for the righteous. Calamity may overtake unexpectedly, which is in addition to the certainty that both the righteous and the wicked will eventually share the same fate, thus revealing exceptions to the ‘action with built-in consequences’ principle set in motion by God. In relating the principle to Ecclesiastes, Koch suggests that the book reflects a ‘radical reassessment of the concept that there was a powerful sphere of influence in which the built-in consequences of action took effect.’⁴⁵⁶ In other words, the limitations of the system become a *reason* to draw one’s attention away from the system and instead to focus on the Creator of the system. Perhaps, consistent with the Wisdom writings that were primarily a reflection of the normal daily experiences in response to their faith,⁴⁵⁷ the ‘action with built-in consequences’ operates in line with the regularities of ordinary life.⁴⁵⁸ The focus of the principle is strictly about regulating an individual’s life⁴⁵⁹ under normal circumstances at home, society and in the courts, so that through this action, the individual may succeed in life.⁴⁶⁰ Since the aim is to ‘teach timeless truths’⁴⁶¹ for normal circumstances, there are exceptions to the rules, which is consistent with the study that shows ‘Proverbial sages were aware that the picture of the world they paint is not entirely accurate [complete].’⁴⁶² Consequently, the system which the proverbial wisdom advocates has its limitations, and it is generally more descriptive rather than prescriptive. Sun’s study on the book of Proverbs suggests that proverbial wisdom is not strictly a dogmatic system, nor does it strongly affirm retribution in formulaic ways. Rather, the proverbial wisdom offers a cohesive set of moral imperatives and beliefs.⁴⁶³ With these insights, it seems probable that instead of being

⁴⁵⁶ Koch, “Is There a Doctrine of Retribution in the Old Testament?” 79.

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid., 130.

⁴⁵⁸ Farmer, *The Wisdom Books*, 130.

⁴⁵⁹ Joel S. Burnett, *Where is God? Divine Absence in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 90-104.

⁴⁶⁰ Thomas Frydrych, *Living Under the Sun: Examination of Proverbs and Qoheleth* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 36.

⁴⁶¹ Clement, *Wisdom and Old Testament Theology*, 280.

⁴⁶² Frydrych, *Living Under the Sun*, 38-39.

⁴⁶³ Sun, *Righteousness in the Book of Proverb*, 37.

frustrated by the “system,” it is more tenable that Qoheleth is affirming the reliability of the ‘action with built-in consequences’ system while at the same time highlighting its exception intentionally. A key passage for consideration is 8:12-13, shown below:

- 8:12 Though a sinner does evil a hundred times and his days are prolonged,
 yet I know surely that it shall be well for those who fear God.
- 8:13 It shall not be well for those who is an evildoer, and he will not
 prolong his days like a shadow because he does not fear God.

This passage comes after a series of observations (and exhortations) on the suffering of the righteous under a despotic king while the wicked “flourish” in their wickedness. Qoheleth states that it will be well with those who fear God, but it will not be well for the wicked. However, due to interpreters’ inferences that the statement ‘collides with the general atmosphere of the book of Qohelet,’⁴⁶⁴ this passage has been considered as an addition by an epilogist.⁴⁶⁵ However, apart from the inferences of the interpreters, the assertion cannot be verified exegetically. A more accepted exegetical argument is to take the passage as a restatement of a traditionally accepted tenet.⁴⁶⁶ Unfortunately, a number of commentators see the link to mean that Qoheleth meant to show that the maxim does not always work that way.⁴⁶⁷ However, the break between 8:13 and 8:14 seems to suggest a problem with this interpretation,⁴⁶⁸ as Qoheleth commonly begins a new unit or sub-unit with ‘there is a הַבֵּל.’⁴⁶⁹ For instance, 8:14 says:

There is a vanity that takes place on the earth, that there are unto the righteous people to whom it happens according to the deeds for the wicked, there are the wicked unto whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous. I said that this is also vanity.

⁴⁶⁴ Schoors, “Theodicy in Qohelet,” 403.

⁴⁶⁵ Lauha, *Kohelet*, 157.

⁴⁶⁶ Gordis, *Kohelet*, 287-288.

⁴⁶⁷ Schoors, “Theodicy in Qohelet,” 393-394;

⁴⁶⁸ Leong, *Our Reason for Being*, 67.

⁴⁶⁹ See 4:7; 7:15 and 8:14.

Hence, it is more probable for 8:14 to share the same sub-unit with 8:15 rather than with 8:12-13.⁴⁷⁰ Considering this point, it is plausible that 8:12-13 expresses Qoheleth's conviction and his awareness of the time gap between an action and its consequences. Accordingly, it appears that he affirms the reliability of the maxim of the sages.⁴⁷¹ Yet, Qoheleth's summary in 8:14, which certainly covers the anomalies stated in 7:15-18,⁴⁷² points out the limit of the tenet. In this case, rather than *relativising*⁴⁷³ the tenet of the sages, it expresses an exception to the tenet, showing an intention to highlight the limit thereof. Qoheleth adduces 'marginal cases which contradict common opinion'⁴⁷⁴ to direct his listeners away from reliance on the system and more towards a proper fear of God. His admonitions that God judges (11:9), even hidden actions (12:14), diverts attention away from the system to a higher authority outside the 'laws of nature' that brings this 'consequence' to fruition. Pertinently, how this is done will remain 'free from humans... calculability.'⁴⁷⁵ A key text on undeserved suffering is found in 7:15-18, shown below:

- 7:15 I have seen all things in the fleeting days of my life. There is a righteous person who perishes in his righteousness and there is the wicked one whose life prolongs in his wickedness.
- 7:16 Do not be overly much righteous neither makes yourself too wise. Why should you destroy yourself?
- 7:17 Do not be overly wicked neither make yourself foolish. Why should you die before your time?
- 7:18 It is good that you should take hold of one and do not withdraw your hands from the other. For the one who fears God comes forth with both of them.

This text is cited as proof that a just "retribution" principle is absent in the book of Ecclesiastes.⁴⁷⁶ Even if this example is not a "marginal case," it nonetheless visualises a reality

⁴⁷⁰ And so Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 122-123; Leong, *Our Reason for Being*, 67; Garrett, *Ecclesiastes*, 328-329.

⁴⁷¹ Passages that express a similar conviction are 3:16-17 and 7:18.

⁴⁷² We shall see more of this passage in this section.

⁴⁷³ Schoors, "Theodicy in Qohelet," 393.

⁴⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 404.

⁴⁷⁵ Schubert, *Schöpfungstheologie*, 138-139, quoted in Schoors, "Theodicy in Qohelet," 408.

⁴⁷⁶ Some biblical scholars see the passage as a critic to traditional wisdom, and a sign of non-existence of theodicy in Ecclesiastes. See Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 72, also Brindle, "Righteousness and Wickedness in Ecclesiastes 7:15-18," 243-257. As this section will show, the focus acts as a critic of neither traditional wisdom nor the absence of theodicy; it is a passage that motivates one to fear God.

that applies to the righteous person – in this case, it is the early death of the righteous person while in the state of righteousness and the prolonged life of the wicked person while in a state of wickedness. Interestingly, even under such a reality, Qoheleth urges his readers to fear God. Considering 7:15 again, Hertzberg suggests that the preposition “in” means “because of,” which renders the reading to mean that the righteous dies because of righteousness and the wicked prolongs life because of wickedness.⁴⁷⁷ This, however, conflicts with 7:17, which states that wickedness is the reason for premature death. Murphy and Crenshaw posit that it means, “in spite of” and “despite,” respectively.⁴⁷⁸ Based on their interpretation, the righteous person dies while still in a state of righteousness or the wicked person enjoys a long life while still in the state of wickedness. This, however, does not explain the reason for the early death of the righteous or the prolonged life of the wicked. Since the righteous person’s early death is not *a result* of righteousness, neither is the prolonged life of the wicked person *a result* of that person’s wickedness – which indicates that the anomaly may not be linked to a person’s predisposition. If the passage is read in the context of the uncertainty of life, it becomes clear that Qoheleth warned against striving for righteousness excessively, as uncertain misfortune in life may surprise and cause tremendous ‘emotional and psychological devastation.’⁴⁷⁹ Perhaps it is in this that excessive righteousness could ruin the person (7:16). On the other hand, the admonition against excessive wickedness is not an approval for minor wickedness. As Fox succinctly puts it, ‘the condemned of much is not the approval of little.’⁴⁸⁰ The possibility that the long life of the wicked person may motivate *more* wickedness is perhaps the warning that they are *still* more likely to die early (7:17).⁴⁸¹

The focus, then, is on the meaning of the phrase ‘be overly righteous’ in 7:16. Whybray suggests the phrase points to one being hypocritically righteous or self-righteous.⁴⁸² In other

⁴⁷⁷ Hertzberg, *Der Prediger* (KAT n.F. XVII, 4. Guttersloh (1963)).

⁴⁷⁸ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 72. Also, Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 140. So, Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 259.

⁴⁷⁹ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 254.

⁴⁸⁰ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 259-262.

⁴⁸¹ This is another example showing Qoheleth conviction on the reliability of the maxim of the sages.

⁴⁸² Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 120-121.

words, one acts more righteously than one really is in disposition. This is consistent with the verb “be,” which emphasises an action or the act of becoming *more* righteous or wicked.⁴⁸³ In the light of this point, it is tenable to consider that perhaps Qoheleth had in mind people who strove for more righteousness through more deeds of righteousness.⁴⁸⁴ Seow is probably right to say that there is perhaps an issue of presumptuousness behind the motivation. In this case, it may have to do with the assumption that righteousness will avert destruction and ensure blessings and long life.⁴⁸⁵ When the righteous do not receive what is “expected” from their “righteous action,” it motivates them to *strive* harder for righteousness, in case they have not been righteous enough. Thus, in the light of this motive, Qoheleth admonishes against one being ‘overly righteous,’ since the uncertainty of life implies that their actions may not guarantee temporal blessing. In any case, perfect righteousness is impossible. To address doubt on this reality, Qoheleth restates ‘For there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins’ (7:20). Following the “action with built-in consequences” principle, the fallacy of perfect blamelessness means unfavourable consequences are always a possibility. For this reason, 7:18a notes that it is good that one does not become overly righteous, foolish or overly wicked, because ‘the one who fears God comes forth with both of them’ (7:18b).⁴⁸⁶ The point is clear: the one who fears God ‘grasps the reality of both imperfection and the reality of sin’⁴⁸⁷ and fears God for who He is.

The instruction to fear God highlights the intention to look beyond the “action with built-in consequences” principle and more toward a proper fear of God. The over-reliance of the system may indicate self-centeredness rather than a fear of God, and the danger is that one can actually view the act of righteousness as a tool for temporal blessings. In other words, righteousness is pursued because it is a tool of blessing, rather than pursuing it out of a proper fear of God. Leong posits an insightful explanation:

⁴⁸³ See Whybray, “Qoheleth the Immoralist?” 191-204; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 267 and also Leong, *Our Reason for Being*, 62.

⁴⁸⁴ We shall use the word “righteousness” solely in our argument, as in the context of 7:15-18 righteousness and wise are synonymous, as are wickedness and folly. See Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 267.

⁴⁸⁵ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 267-268. Also Fredericks, *Ecclesiastes*, 173.

⁴⁸⁶ Leong, *Our Reason for Being*, 62.

⁴⁸⁷ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 208.

Qoheleth is in effect saying that we should not seek to fear God and become righteous in order to receive (temporal) blessings from Him. For this amounts to covetousness, from which the genuinely God-fearing would repent. To fear God is then to fear Him for who He is and not what we can get out of Him....⁴⁸⁸

The anomaly stated in 7:15-18 shows the connection between righteous suffering and the call to fear God. O'Connor rightly raise a good point about the relationship: 'The reason for humans to exist in a condition of partial knowing is that they may fear God, so that they may live in awe and in truthful obedience... it involves the recognition and the acceptance of this limitation. Such inability to know provokes reflection.'⁴⁸⁹ Self-knowledge and the fear of God belong together,⁴⁹⁰ and perhaps there is an implied teaching in this passage. At a time when one goes through undeserving suffering and the absence of rewards from their action, one learns to fear God for nothing in return.

2.4.3.2 The Function of Undeserved Suffering

The problems involved in undeserved suffering and death are noted realities in Ecclesiastes. Yet, it is clear that Qoheleth did not attempt to explain or resolve this anomaly, which raises the question on the intentions of Qoheleth and gives reason to look at the anomalies cited in the speech, in the light of the purpose of the book. Analyses of 8:12-13 and 7:15-18 allude to the possibility of this relationship. A text that clarifies the relationship is 7:14-15, shown below:

7:13 Consider the works of God, for who can straighten the things that He has made crooked?

7:14 In the days of prosperity be glad, but in the days of adversity consider also – He has made the one as well as the other. God has set that no man should find out nothing at the end.

7:14 shares a striking similarity with 3:14c, in that both verses state the purpose of God. In the case of 7:14, 'God makes the one [the day of prosperity] as well as the other [the day of adversity] so that humans may not discover anything that will be after him', and it reiterates the idea in 3:1-15, particularly the tension in 3:11. Is there a possibility that the reiteration of the tension is an

⁴⁸⁸ Leong, *Our Reason for Being*, 62.

⁴⁸⁹ Kathleen M. O'Connor, *The Wisdom Literature, Message of Biblical Spirituality* (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1988), 128. Also Von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, 67.

⁴⁹⁰ Kaiser, "Qoheleth," *Wisdom in Ancient Israel*. 91.

implicit call to fear God? This is highly likely when the intended tension stated in 7:14 is read with the undergirding relationship between the tension and the purpose of God expressed in 3:14. In other words, the intended purpose of the uncertainty of life and the certainty of death is that everyone should fear Him. This becomes clearer when 7:13-14 and 7:15-18 are interpreted as a common unit, because although these passages belong to separate sub-units, they nevertheless share a common thought. In fact, arriving at a proper interpretation of 7:15-18 requires 7:13-14 for contextual consideration.⁴⁹¹ The passage as a whole should be seen with the reality of uncertainty as the backdrop and a basis for consideration.⁴⁹²

It appears that the undeserving suffering passages in the book direct one to acknowledge that the uncertainty of life and the certainty of death apply to the righteous. Rightly, this is the basis of the numerous exaltations for wise living. More pertinently, the relationship between 7:13-14 and 7:15-18 certainly shows a connection between undeserved suffering and the need to fear God, which is perhaps a key function of the text. Should the predicament of the righteous be considered within the motive of 7:14-15, it will be evident that the undeserved suffering passages are intended to urge readers to fear God.

2.4.3.3 Undeserved Suffering and the Worthwhile Purpose of Life

The problem with undeserved suffering is clear in the book. It is also obvious that Qoheleth did not attempt to explain or resolve the situation. However, my analysis has shown that the problem of undeserving suffering can be explained adequately from the theory of the 'action with built-in consequences' principles. Hence, the argument attributing righteous suffering to the arbitrariness of God's actions may not be necessary after all. Neither is the argument that advocates the unreliability of traditional tenets about life. Nevertheless, as I have also pointed out, this system has its intended exception.

An interesting observation from the speech is the tight-knit relationship between the frequent call to fear God and the repeated reiterations emphasising the uncertainty of life. I have shown earlier in the exegesis of 3:1-14 that the uncertainty of life and the certainty of death (3:1-11) are intended to cause humans to fear God (3:14). A possible outcome stemming from the uncertainty

⁴⁹¹ Brindle, "Righteousness and Wickedness in Ecclesiastes 7:15-18," 243-257.

⁴⁹² Ibid., 243-257.

of life is the suffering of the righteous. This is noted in my analysis of 8:12-13, 7:15-18 and 7:13-14. If these are linked with the intended purpose of these realities (3:14c), it suggests that readers should fear God even when they are in pain and suffering.

I have sought to be consistent with data in the speech expressing the purpose of God (3:14c) in relation to the certainty of death and the uncertainty of life. Hence, the analysis has taken the route of interpreting the passages in the light of this intention. This leads to the conclusion that the anomalies are related to the call to fear God. In fact, by considering the relationship between 3:14c and 12:13b-14, it is rather clear that the purpose of the undeserved suffering passages is to persuade one to fear God and keep His commandments – even if it means receiving nothing in return. Based on this perspective, although the pain of undeserved suffering challenges one's ability to make sense of one's present situation, the intended reason for these unpleasant experiences is to lead one to fear God and keep His commandments. On a positive note, it gives one a sense of purpose while in the pain of suffering. This worthwhile purpose becomes a point of reference from which one is able to see how a particular situation fits coherently with the purpose of existence. The ability to maintain a sense of purpose and to see how the current situation may cohere with the worthwhile purpose of life is the needed factor that enables one to see the meaning of life.

2.4.4 CRUCIAL THEMES AND THE WORTHWHILE PURPOSE OF LIFE

The crucial themes have functional meanings in the light of the purpose of Ecclesiastes. There is also a dynamic and interrelated relationship between these themes. The reality of הבל is built upon the realities of the certainty of death and uncertainty in life. It implies that human labour bears no ultimate profit, while the certainty of death and the uncertainty of life give the possibility of anomalies in life. This means that the righteous person is not immune to undeserved suffering. The sensible way to live, then, is by learning to enjoy the fruits of one's labour while one is still able to do so. In addition, as Lee observes, the purpose of the admonitions is ultimately to motivate people to forsake what is harmful to their well-being and to embrace a way of life that will enable them not only to cope with perplexing realities, but also flourish as human beings.⁴⁹³ Enjoyment is thus the sensible way to live under the reality of הבל.

⁴⁹³ Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment*, 126.

These themes, as the analysis has also shown, hinge on the call to fear God. The certainty of death and uncertainty in life encourages one to do so (3:14c) even for nothing good in return. The reality of הבל therein directs one from profitless pursuits in life to being human (12:13b) and to take up the gift of enjoyment (3:12-13). Since enjoyment is only possible from the hands of God, it reinforces the necessity, and hence, motivates one to fear God and keep His commandments. It is unsurprisingly the book summarizes with a similar injunction in 12:13b-14. Therefore, the interrelated and dynamic relationship between the themes finds its common thread in the injunction to fear God and keep His commandments, which is consistent with the intended purpose of the certainty of death and the uncertainty of life (3:14c), though most importantly, it is consistent with the overall intended persuasion of the book (12:13b-14). These intra-relationships suggest a new form of cohesiveness in the speech.

Integrating this with the concerns for the meaning of life, the reality of הבל of human labour shows that the worthwhile purpose of life cannot be found in the pursuit of temporal things. Instead, humans should live consistently with the very purpose of existence expressed in 12:13b-14. The sensible way to live when all is הבל is see the reality in perspective, to live wisely and carefully, and to cherish the food, people and work available to them. This is Qoheleth's notion of enjoyment and meaningfulness in life. However, since such enjoyment is only possible from the hands of God, that is, as a result of living harmoniously with His intended purpose, it is only possible for one who is good in God's sight (2:24-16). This encourages and motivates one to fear God and obey His commandments. When enjoyment is not possible, due to undeserving suffering in life, humans are encouraged to fear Him for nothing in return.

The interrelated and dynamic relationship between the themes in relation to the subject of the meaning of life provides a visible structure for reconstructing a theological definition and framework of the meaning of life in Ecclesiastes. More interestingly, when it finds common thread in the injunction to fear God and keep His commandments.

2.5 THE CONCEPT OF THE WORTHWHILE PURPOSE OF LIFE IN ECCLESIASTES

My analysis so far has shown that 12:13b-14 is conceptually identical to the concept of the worthwhile purpose of life. The injunction challenging readers to ‘Fear God and keep His commandments’ in 12:13b is a call to live harmoniously with their purpose for existing. The warning that God will judge their life and work (12:14) in relation to this purpose reinforces 12:13b-14 as a worthwhile purpose of life. This also finds support in Qoheleth’s quest for the meaning of life. I have argued and shown that when Qoheleth’s quest in this respect is juxtaposed with the injunction in 12:13b-14, therein lie his thoughts on the subject.

My conclusion is further substantiated by the analysis of the key themes in Ecclesiastes, and their correlation with 12:13b-14. The theme of fearing God and keeping his commandments is interwoven throughout the entire book; for instance, a common underpinning motive as seen in the summation is that all is *הבל* and the commendation to enjoy life. Even the “anomalies” of undeserving suffering raised in the speech are meant to draw readers away from relying on the established system of “deed with built-in consequences” to trusting in the creator of the system. In other words, interactions between the themes in relation to 12:13b-14 point to an intentional attempt to persuade readers to fear God and keep His commandments. This is enlightening. As a side note, it strengthens the argument that contrary to a number of interpretations which see “contradictions” in the speech, the book is more coherent, integrated and purposeful than assumed. On the main note, it confirms the centrality of the ‘fear God’ motive in interpreting Ecclesiastes.

2.5.1 THE CALL TO FEAR GOD AND KEEP HIS COMMANDMENTS

The concept of ‘fearing God’ in Ecclesiastes is itself an intriguing subject. A point of contention is the assertion that to fear God is to engage in a resigned response to a ‘distant, indifferent and sometimes cruel’,⁴⁹⁴ deity, which is motivated by the terror before a ‘powerful and dangerous being’,⁴⁹⁵ and a god who ‘sabotages’⁴⁹⁶ humans. The negative connotation on the

⁴⁹⁴ Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 35.

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid., 35-36. See also Loader, *Ecclesiastes*, 41.

‘character’ of God is based on the perception of a number of commentators that He acts arbitrarily when it comes to enabling human enjoyment (2:24-24), His refusal to enable humans the knowledge of His work (3:11), His “inaction” over human suffering (4:1)⁴⁹⁷ and His inconsistency over the established retributive principle (7:15-18). Predictably, God is taken to be as ominous as distant thunder,⁴⁹⁸ the Divine who is not a source of comfort for one who faces unpredictable chaos in life.⁴⁹⁹ The assertions, unfortunately, leave one to grapple with the question of whether these are the feelings of Qoheleth. Certainly, a primary idea in the speech is the ungraspable works of God, but it would be hasty to imply negativism over the character of God when the emphasis of the sovereignty of God over human affairs is apparent in the speech.⁵⁰⁰ Furthermore, it begs the question as to whether the modern lens of religious scepticism has been forced into the text. As Murphy suspects, “the fear of God” may be read by modern readers as servile fear, the connotation of which is different in the Bible. The basic meaning is “numinous,” that is, the profound reaction of human beings before the *numen* or divinity, the *tremendum*.⁵⁰¹

Undeniably, appropriate fear begins with recognising the sovereignty of God over human affairs.⁵⁰² In the description of one’s religious activities and the possible response from God found in 4:17-5:6 [5:1-7], it underscores the need to recognise the place of humans before God. Note 4:17-5:2 [5:1-3] below:

⁴⁹⁶ Murphy, “The Faith of Qoheleth,” 256.

⁴⁹⁷ Luca Mazzinghi, “The Divine Violence in the Book of Qoheleth,” *Bib* Vol 90 (2009) 545-558.

⁴⁹⁸ Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 24.

⁴⁹⁹ Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 35

⁵⁰⁰ Luca Mazzinghi, “The Divine Violence in the Book of Qoheleth.” The author notes that Qoheleth’s presentation of God’s transcendence and of his absolute power looks like an implicit criticism of God’s conduct: arbitrary, despotic and, ultimately, violent. More probably, what appears to us as an act of violence appeared to Qoheleth as the recognition of the appropriate status of creatures. I would claim that, in emphasising the divine transcendence, Qoheleth really wants to highlight God’s freedom.

⁵⁰¹ Murphy, “The Faith of Qoheleth,” 256.

⁵⁰² Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 92.

- 4:17 Guard your steps as you go to the house of God, and draw near to
 [5:1] listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools; for they do not know
 they are doing evil.
- 5:1 Do not be hasty in word or impulsive in thought to bring up a matter
 [5:2] in the presence of God. For God is in heaven and you are on earth;
 therefore let your words be few.
- 5:2 For the dream comes through much effort, and the voice of a fool
 [5:3] through many words.

Noticeably, the words “guard” and “listen” as well as phrases, “do not be hasty” and “let your words be few” underscore the appropriate attitude and responses in the place of worship. Furthermore, the passage stresses the need to recognise and be aware of one’s place before God, who is in heaven. The fear of God must be properly demonstrated, not merely by the offering of sacrifices, prayers and vows but with appropriate and reverent restraint when doing so.⁵⁰³ The emphasis on the need for a healthy distance between God and man is clearly the logic behind the reminder: ‘For God is in heaven and you are on earth’ (5:1b [5:2b]). Such emphasis on the distance between God and humans is undoubtedly consistent with the concept elsewhere in Israelite literature.⁵⁰⁴ It is the underpinning precept in Qoheleth’s interpretation of realities (3:1-15; 6:10-12; 7:15-18) and the role of God (11:9), giving one the realistic perspective with the objects of pursuits, relationship with God and the realities in life.⁵⁰⁵

The focus in the passage, however, is on the practice of making vows during worship.⁵⁰⁶ A major point expressed in the passage is the relationship between fulfilling vows and the fear of God. Consider the text below:

⁵⁰³ Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment*, 95.

⁵⁰⁴ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 174.

⁵⁰⁵ Von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, 67-78. Also, Walther Zimmerli, “Das Buch des Predigers Salomo, Sprüche/Prediger“ (Das Alte Testament Deutsch 16/1; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1962), 174.

⁵⁰⁶ Fox, *A Time To Tear Down*, 229

- 5:3 When you make a vow to God, do not be late in paying it, for He takes
[5:4] no delight in fools. Pay what you vow!
- 5:4 It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not
[5:5] pay.
- 5:5 Do not let your speech cause you to sin and do not say in the presence
[5:6] of the messenger of God that it was a mistake. Why should God be
angry on account of your voice and destroy the work of your hands?
- 5:6 For in many dreams and in many words there is emptiness. Rather,
[5:7] fear God.

Leong provides an interesting observation and interpretation. He suggests that readers may not realise that they do not fear God because of the association of the fear of God with religious practices (Isaiah 29:13 and 2 Kings 17:25-28). The practice of making hasty vows and not fulfilling them may (indicate) that they may not fear God after all. Moreover, since this agreement is entirely between God and the person who has made the vow, only a genuine God-fearer would be conscientious enough to fulfill it.⁵⁰⁷ A perceptive concept raised in Leong's interpretation is the essence of what it means to fear God. As the relationship between fulfilling one's vow and the fear of God has shown, it is essentially about doing what is right and not what is wrong when no one, except God, is watching or holding one accountable.⁵⁰⁸ Interestingly, similar emphasis on the need to fear of God from the within of one's heart is highlighted again in 5:9-16 [5:10-17] only in this time, it was in the context of the *הבל* of greed and covetousness. Such an emphasis on fearing God, and so keeping his commandments even when no one is watching resonates with the warning in 12:14 that God judges even the hidden things, and certainly, one's attitude in life.

Accordingly, Qoheleth's fear of God is a composite idea that begins with an appropriate attitude expressed through visible behaviours and conduct,⁵⁰⁹ covering the ethical and moral dimensions of life (7:15-18; 8:12-13), how one ought to live (11:7-10) and proper decisions in a place of worship (4:17-5:6 [5:1-7]) and court (8:1-3). It is a concept underpinned by the idea that God will hold one's decisions in life in account. It is thus not surprising that 12:13b-14 includes

⁵⁰⁷ Leong, *Our Reason for Being*, 42-43.

⁵⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 42-43.

⁵⁰⁹ Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment*, 98.

the call to ‘keep his commandments.’ Clearly, the moral undertone cannot be discounted (3:16-17). Shanks is right to note:

With respect to ethics, Qoheleth found the fear of the Lord the foundation of his faith and practice in a world in which human wisdom is limited. His keenness [sic] of insight and exceeding fruitfulness of thought was ensured by his fear of God. That fear also ensured the integration of the theoretical and the practical in Qoheleth's perception of this world subjected to vanity... Therefore Qoheleth's God was not some “hidden” Great Unknown who did not have very much to do with his ethical point of view. Rather, Qoheleth found that all of our knowing and applying of personal ethics must be related to humble faith in the Creator God.⁵¹⁰

Considering that ‘fearing God and keeping His commandments’ is a call covering humans’ wholesome response to God who can call everyone to account,⁵¹¹ the worthwhile purpose of life propounded by Qoheleth covers every facet of life. Undergirding injunction is the realistic view on reality of certainty of death and uncertainty in life in relation to the intended purpose expressed in 3:14c and the enjoyment passages. Hence, the call to abide by command in 12:13b-14 is a call to embrace and respect the realities of life. Therefore, the injunction to fearing God and keeping His commandments as the most worthwhile purpose of life can also be appropriately considered as a benchmark and a point of reference through which realities, circumstances of life and even life itself are placed into perspective. Hence, when its function in a time of undeserving suffering is, taken into account, the worthwhile purpose of life propounded by Qoheleth has the quality of comprehensiveness and resilience. In terms of its resilience, holding on to it enables one to engage or build an irrepressible spirit in times of undeserved suffering, and it can be resilient to the threat of the uncertainty of life and the certainty of death. Such a concept is ironic, as on the other hand it has the empowering quality for joy and satisfaction in life. Hence, although it is fundamentally a “purpose” or a type of “goal” (in this case, an overarching goal), it is theoretically not to be pursued; instead, it is to be lived. To put it differently, it is not about the pursuit of more, it is about living harmoniously with the purpose for existing.

⁵¹⁰ Shanks, “Qoheleth’s World,” 57-73.

⁵¹¹ Michael L. Barre, “Fear of God and the World View of Wisdom,” *BTB* 11 (1981) 41-43; Otto Kaiser, “Qoheleth,” *Wisdom in Ancient Israel*, eds., John Day, Robert P. Gordon, H.G.M. Williamson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 89-90, suggest that the context of Ecclesiastes pointed out that any failure to fear God is related directly to poor knowledge of the Torah, thereby provoking God or improper behaviour towards Him.

2.5.2 THE CONCEPT OF COHERENCE IN LIFE

Qoheleth's concerns for coherence in life (3:10) show a possible relationship between the concepts of coherence in life and the worthwhile purpose of life. Conceptually, the search for coherence in life is about the search for the connectedness⁵¹² or the consistency of events in the light of a goal or goals. Moreover, it is a concern for a logical, consistent connection and a meaningful relationship between various parts of life.⁵¹³ Gaining a sense of coherence involves having a dynamic feeling of confidence that one's internal and external environments are cohering with the whole. It assumes a fair amount of predictability and that there is a high probability that things will work out as well as can be reasonably expected.⁵¹⁴ Certainly, it assumes a solid capacity to judge reality.⁵¹⁵ In addition to its emphasis on "feeling," it needs to be supported by the ability to see the meaning of the present in the light of the whole. Hence, when an event does not make sense, it is not due to any inability to address the situation; rather, the difficulty stems from a person's inability to integrate the event into a plot which makes it understandable in the context of the whole.⁵¹⁶

The function and significance of 12:13b-14 as Qoheleth's concluding exhortation points to the possibility that the worthwhile purpose satisfies the concern for coherence in life. As established earlier, the search for the meaning of life concerns the search for the worthwhile purpose of life and coherence therein. Hence, when a person asks, 'What is the meaning of life?' the person wants to know the purpose of existence. The primary impetus of the search is that the reality of death that will cruelly confiscate one's achievements – no matter how great. Related to this notion, the person wishes to know how one's daily activities, as repetitive and mundane as they are, and events such as suffering can provide meaning over a period of time. It is a search for the meaning of the present in the light of the whole, which expresses a yearning for

⁵¹² Baumeister, *Meanings of Life*, 29-57.

⁵¹³ Adapted from *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th Ed (Houghton Mifflin Company: 2000).

⁵¹⁴ Antonovsky, *Health, Stress, and Coping*, 123.

⁵¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁵¹⁶ Polkinghorne, *Narrative Knowing*, 21.

connectedness, consistency and a meaningful relationship between the various parts of life in the light of the certainty of death. Conceptually, such is fundamentally the search for coherence.⁵¹⁷

As noted from the analysis, a direct implication from the poem on time man and human activities (3:1-9) is the declaration of the human inability to either know or control the future (3:11) or, in Perdue's words, 'not to be able to know the larger temporal structure and the specific times in which certain actions are to occur.'⁵¹⁸ Since 'everything [events] is out of [human] control,'⁵¹⁹ life is threatened by the inability to explain the present in the light of the whole or to see how events that happen fit in to any overall integrated pattern.⁵²⁰ Hence, Qoheleth's concerns also involve seeking to integrate his experience into a meaningful whole by connecting the various pieces of his experience and to see each portion in the context of the reality and whole of his life.⁵²¹

A point of departure from the concept of coherence explained earlier, the quest for coherence in Ecclesiastes is about fitting a current event or endeavour into the uncertainty of life and the certainty of death. In other words, it is about being *confident even* when one's internal and external environments are unpredictable, and that probably, things *may not* work out as well as can reasonably be expected. Instead of having a fair amount of predictability and a high probability that things will work out reasonably well, it is the search for coherence when one has no control of events in life or, bluntly, when everything can be הבל in the immediate sense. These ideas were presented as a legitimate concern in the speech of Qoheleth. The reality is acute, though, especially when considering that even the righteous and the wise suffer early death, which marks a distinctive concept of coherence in Ecclesiastes.

Yet the "realities," as far as Qoheleth is concerned, do not form a purposeless nothingness. A fundamental assumption underlying the concept of coherence in Ecclesiastes is the existence of a

⁵¹⁷ Ward, "Religion and the Question of Meaning," 22.

⁵¹⁸ Leo G. Perdue, *Wisdom & Creation: The Theology of Wisdom Literature* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 239.

⁵¹⁹ Seow, "Theology When Everything is Out of Control," *Interpretation* Vol. 55, No. 3 (July 2001) 237-249.

⁵²⁰ Ward, "Religion and the Question of Meaning," 22.

⁵²¹ Caneday, *Enigmatic Pessimist*, 105.

reference point from which the basis of the relationships between the parts can be defined and identified. This is already alluded to in the relationship between 3:1-8 and 3:11. However, it is 3:14c that specifies the fear of God as the motive and the point of reference. This call is further reiterated and presented as the underpinning motive of the rhetoric as a whole. In other words, the worthwhile purpose of life is the reference point through which one finds coherence while living harmoniously with the call to fear God and keep His commandments provides a logical, consistent and meaningful relationship between the parts therein. To put it differently, it enables one to live coherently with the purpose of reality; hence, the worthwhile purpose of life propounded by Ecclesiastes is a framework that helps one to integrate realities and put every aspect of life, including attitudes and behaviours, into perspective.

Hence, the coherence in life, as taught in Ecclesiastes, has its emphasis on ‘fearing God and keeping His commandments’ as a point of reference and as a basis from which meaningful relationships are defined. It is about living harmoniously with the order and the purpose of realities. These form the prerequisite for the experience of meaningfulness that will be explained in the next subsection.

2.5.3 THE PREREQUISITE FOR MEANINGFULNESS IN LIFE

A fitting and sensible way to live harmoniously with the worthwhile purpose of life – to live coherently with all the realities of the certainty of death and the uncertainty of life – as the analysis has shown, is to be carefree and enjoy a contented life. Along with these is the need to rejoice and to appreciate the simple necessities in life such as food, drink, human and spousal relationships and work. This is undoubtedly contrary to indulgences of the epicurean kind, as understood by a number of interpreters. Enjoyment, according to Qoheleth, demands a bold acceptance of the realities of death and uncertainty of life, as opposed to escapism and self-pity, the impetuses for indulgence. Hence, astonishing as it may appear to be, Qoheleth’s exhortation on enjoyment of life is an answer to the apparent meaninglessness of life, which is essentially the outcome of living harmoniously with the worthwhile purpose of life and seeing coherence therein.

Studies have in fact shown that meaningfulness in life can be experienced when one lives consistently with their worthwhile purpose or when one is able to see how events fit in to the

whole of life's experiences. However, knowing the worthwhile purpose in life (or seeing coherence in life) and experiencing meaningfulness are two related but separate ideas, as the latter is associated with a sense of comprehension and significance,⁵²² or a sense and feeling that events and themes in life are connected.⁵²³ It is basically a sense of fulfillment⁵²⁴ and the feeling that life makes sense. Hence, it is an experiential entity associated with life satisfaction,⁵²⁵ self-actualisation,⁵²⁶ the non-alienation of human relationships⁵²⁷ and happiness.⁵²⁸ This is in contrast with apathy, boredom⁵²⁹ and isolation,⁵³⁰ which are commonly associated with meaninglessness. This is distinct from having a sense of goals, aims and direction, as it is an outcome of process prioritisations and the evaluation of components, which among others includes purposes in life.⁵³¹ In this sense, the existence of a purpose can contribute to meaningfulness when one is able to integrate life's past and future goals to enhance the present, thus giving a sense of

⁵²² Login S. George & Crystal L. Park, "Are Meaning and Purpose Distinct? An Examination of Correlates and Predictors," *The Journal of Positive Psychology: Dedicated to Furthering Research and Promoting Good Practice* 8:5 (2013)365-375, DOI: 10.1080/17439760.2013.805801.

⁵²³ Roy F. Baumeister and K. D. Vohs, "The Pursuit of Meaningfulness in Life," in *Handbook of Positive Psychology*, ed. C. R. Synder & S. J. Lopez, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2002), 608-618.

⁵²⁴ Irwin D. Yalom, *Existential Psychotherapy* (New York: Basic Books, 1980), 23.

⁵²⁵ For instance, research by Christopher Peterson, Nansook Park and Martin E.P. Seligman, "Orientations to Happiness and Life Satisfaction: The Full Life Verses the Empty Life," *Journal of Happiness Studies* Vol. 6 (2005) 25-41. Also, Michael F. Steger and Todd B. Kashdan, "Stability and Specificity of Meaning in Life and Life Satisfaction over One Year," *Journal of Happiness Studies* (2007) 161-179, Springer 2006, DOI 10.1007/s10902-006-9011-8.

⁵²⁶ Abraham Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*, (New York, NY: Harper, 1954).

⁵²⁷ Yalom, *Existential Psychotherapy*, 355-447.

⁵²⁸ For instance, research by Johan Brännmark, "Leading Lives: On Happiness and Narrative Meaning," *Philosophical Papers* 32:3 (2003)321-343, DOI: 10.1080/05568640309485130.

⁵²⁹ Frankl, *The Doctor and The Soul*, 109-110.

⁵³⁰ Yalom, *Existential Psychotherapy*, 355, 478-483.

⁵³¹ For instance, Baumeister, *Meanings of Life*, 29-57. See also Jessica Morgan, "The Meaning of a Meaningful Life," (DPhil Thesis, University of Sussex, 3.4.2007), 5.

continuity.⁵³² When this is considered alongside the ability to see an event in the light of the whole, the purpose in life functions as one of the sources of meaningfulness.⁵³³

It will not be too hard to notice the striking resemblances between the characteristics of meaningfulness in life and the exhortation to enjoy life in Ecclesiastes. Enjoyment, according to Ecclesiastes, is associated with satisfaction (compare 2:24-26), happiness (3:12-13; 11:7), non-alienation (9:7-10; 11:9-10). Moreover, the required conditions for experiencing meaningfulness, such as having a sense of purpose, are also found in the speech (2:10), as the call to enjoy is the call to experience it; nevertheless, despite these resemblances, there are fundamental differences that require clarification. Ecclesiastes' prerequisite of meaningfulness is built on the foundation of living harmoniously with the purpose of human existence. Since the injunction to fear God and keep His commandments is the point of reference for every activity, it is also one by which one experiences coherence. The call hence is not a choice between having to either live consistently with the worthwhile purpose of life or to experiencing coherence; it assumes an integration of both factors. Hence, the worthwhile purpose of life in Ecclesiastes is the overarching purpose from which realities are interpreted and connected and various purposes are formed. In short, it involves every sphere of human experience. Considering the nature of enjoyment in the speech, meaningfulness advocated by Ecclesiastes is a wholesome experience covering enjoyment of the fruits of the labour (2:24-26), rejoicing in the midst of uncertainty of life (3:12-13), being carefree (5:19 [5:20]), enjoying meaningful human relationships (9:7) and being able to follow the heart (11:7-10).

This distinction is significant in two ways. Firstly, it implies that meaningfulness in life is a by-product of living harmoniously with the worthwhile purpose of life. Secondly, considering the comprehensive quality of the worthwhile purpose of life, which includes enabling one to see and experience coherence, the meaningfulness asserted in Ecclesiastes is qualitatively superior to the single effect of having a worthwhile purpose or experiencing coherence alone.

⁵³² Ibid., 8.

⁵³³ Dominique Louis Debats, "Sources of Meaning: An Investigation of Significant Commitments in Life," *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 39:30 (1999), DOI:10.1177/0022167899394403.

2.6 THE RECONSTRUCTED FRAMEWORK OF THE THEOLOGY OF THE MEANING OF LIFE IN ECCLESIASTES

Ecclesiastes, as intriguing and sophisticated as it is, is neither a philosophical nor a psychological treatise on the subject of the meaning of life. It teaches one to live meaningfully in a world of uncertainty and in the face of the certainty of death. These two factors are the reasons for the fleetingness of life and the absence of any net profit from human toil. It is in this sense that human pursuits are ultimately *הבל*. In other words, the worthwhile purpose of life and coherence therein cannot be found in human pursuits of temporal things, which forms the basic view of life in Ecclesiastes crucial to the reconstructed framework of the theology of the meaning of life.

A crucial teaching underlying this view of life is God's purpose in relation to the certainty of death and the uncertainty of life. Ecclesiastes teaches that God does all this so that humans will fear Him. To fear God is to recognise His sovereign control over all human affairs and over the 'action with built-in consequences' principles. It is also to realise that it enables one to live harmoniously with these realities. Hence, Ecclesiastes teaches that the worthwhile purpose of life is to fear God and keep His Commandments, i.e. this is the purpose of human existence. Thus, according to Ecclesiastes, it is the meaning of life and is also a point of reference against which one interprets realities and events. Just as the call to fear God and keep His commandments covers a wholesome response to God, who calls everyone into account, it is a view of life, a benchmark and a point of reference by which realities, circumstances and even life itself should be placed into perspective. Moreover, although this forms the overarching purpose of life, it is not intended to be the object of pursuit, but to be lived.

An outcome of living consistently with this worthwhile purpose is meaningfulness in life. Such is a by-product of living consistently with a view of life that accurately reflects the reality, which in turn motivates one to cherish food, drink, human relationships and work available to them. Such is also the quality of life found in contentment and satisfaction and which permeates all spheres of life. Although troubles in life may persist, the person is generally preoccupied by avoiding vexations of the heart brought about by profitless pursuits, by wise and careful living leading to the gladness of hearts. Consequently, enjoyment cannot be a pursuit but must be treated as the outcome of the decision to live harmoniously with the worthwhile purpose of life.

When enjoyment becomes challenging due to anomalies in life, one is called to see beyond the maxim of action with built-in consequences by learning to fear God but without receiving anything in return. Hence, the injunction to abide by God's commandments becomes the framework and the reference point against which humans can understand and see a logical, consistent and meaningful relationship of the parts that make up life as a whole. It is ultimately what being human is all about.

As noted in previous chapter, this research is primarily a work on the theology of the meaning of life, based on the teaching of Ecclesiastes, engaging the approach of interpreting and integrating the crucial themes in light of the complex whole. Just as the interrelatedness and interdependency of biblical themes has to be interpreted with some view of the central idea in Ecclesiastes as a whole, my analysis has shown and rearranged the crucial themes around the central idea of 3:14c and 12:13b-14. This has eventually explained the function, meaning and significance of said themes under investigation, enlightened the relevance of the various themes, namely *ההל*, enjoyment and undeserved suffering, in the rhetoric. Based on the structure in which various themes are arranged around a central idea, I have reconstructed a theological hypothesis on the meaning of life based on the teaching of Ecclesiastes. The following points express the building block or the framework of the theology of the meaning of life:

- A. The worthwhile purpose of life is to fear God and obey His commandments.
- B. This worthwhile purpose of life enables one to explain reality and live coherently with uncertainties and anomalies in life.
- C. Living coherently with the worthwhile purpose of life leads to a carefree and enjoyable life.
- D. The visible outcome of a meaningful life is satisfaction at work and enjoyment of one's family and in one's personal life.
- E. The integration of knowing and living coherently with the worthwhile purpose of life (A, B and C) enables one to live more meaningfully than the single effect of having a worthwhile purpose of life and experiencing coherence alone (D).

2.7 THE THEOLOGY OF THE MEANING OF LIFE IN ECCLESIASTES AND HUMANITY AS A WHOLE

The reconstructed theology of the meaning of life in Ecclesiastes centred on 12:13b-14 because the injunction that one should “fear God and keep His commandments” is conceptually and experientially identical to the concept of the worthwhile purpose of life. It is also the reference point from which one can find and experience coherence. In addition, it sums up the human attitude required for interacting with God and the appropriate respect for the phenomenon of “action with built-in consequences”, which He set in place for this world. Consequently, there is the required conscientious conduct and wise living covering all dimensions of life with the view that God will hold one’s decisions to account. In other words, 12:13b-14 is a focal point from which circumstances and experiences are interpreted and upon which decisions should be based.

As argued earlier, Qoheleth wrote to persuade readers to fear God and keep His commandments, because this is the foundation for the practical wisdom needed for successful and righteous living. Thus, the writing is categorised broadly as a wisdom instruction,⁵³⁴ with the assumption that its applicability will also transcend culture, as it addresses the recurrent issues faced by humanity in general. Sneed notes:

Wisdom literature is focused on what the Germans call *Lebenskind*, that is, “the art of living,” the skill of living life successfully. As such, it is inherently focused on the typical and repetitive and not the specific or particular, especially unique events. It provides guides and rules for effective behaviors and actions that have been passed down for generations. This means that it focuses on general patterns of behavior and the stereotypical, the universal, the cyclical, not the idiosyncratic or linear. Sometimes wisdom literature becomes philosophical, as when treating the problem of evil (e.g. in Qoheleth and Job), but even here the primary focus is always advice for practical, daily living.⁵³⁵

Accordingly, a key characteristic of the theology present in the book of Ecclesiastes is its applicability to humanity in general, and so the reconstructed theology of the meaning of life should show it has a practical character and timeless principle concerning how humanity relates

⁵³⁴ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 153; Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 192.

⁵³⁵ Mark R. Sneed, *The Politics of Pessimism in Ecclesiastes: A Social-Science Perspective* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), 126.

to God and the world.⁵³⁶ Certainly, the theology has to be most relevant and applicable to the community sharing the same culture and worldview. In this case, despite existing debates on the time of its origin, the teaching of Ecclesiastes was directed at the Jews of a particular period of time.⁵³⁷ The injunction thus has its characteristic of “situatedness,” and its relevance may be confined to that particular culture and worldview that expressed the concerns of its human author.⁵³⁸ This raises doubt on the relevance of the theology and hence the legitimacy of generalising 12:13b-14 to humanity as a whole, since it reflects the worldview and concern of Qoheleth and the readers of that time. Nevertheless, if Qoheleth was indeed presenting a wisdom theology, its relevance will no longer be confined to a specific culture or audience but to humanity as a whole. Therefore, an issue that warrants attention is the claim that 12:13b-14, and so the worthwhile purpose of life, is indeed relevant to humanity in this respect. To be specific, the question concerns neither “*how do we apply* 12:13b-14 to all humans” nor “*how similar* are the practices of other cultures comparable to 12:13b-14?” It is about the validity of the claim that 12:13b-14 is relevant to all humans, even in the absence of any belief in God or conscious knowledge of his commands. As noted by Gilliland, a theology can be considered relevant to those of different cultures adhering to a different worldview when it can be demonstrated that it expresses common human language and experience in a way consistent with the meaning presented in biblical fact.⁵³⁹

Internal evidence shows that Qoheleth started with a reflection on the human condition within the context of a world where there were recognizable patterns and moral principles at work, although there were clearly exceptions. The quest in 1:13 and the observation in 3:10 (concerning the “preoccupation” given to “sons of man”) show that the investigation, reflection, scope and the description of the human condition covers and applies to humanity in general. For the terms “sons of man” and “under heaven” (1:13, 2:3, 3:1) refer to humanity as a whole. So the co-occurrences of “sons of man” and “under heaven” in the same sentence in 1:13 and 2:3 and in

⁵³⁶ More of this has already been explained in section 1.2.3 of this thesis.

⁵³⁷ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 19.

⁵³⁸ Village, *The Bible and Lay People*, 50.

⁵³⁹ Dean S. Gilliland, “Contextual Theology as Incarnational Mission” in *The Word Among Us: Contextualizing Theology for Mission Today*, ed. Dean S. Gilliland (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002), 11.

the same context in 3:1-11 all the more underscore that the investigation is about all *humanity as a whole, everywhere*. Also, notably, the use of אלהים in place of יהוה pulls the reader away from confining the book within the covenantal relationship between God and Israel, to a relationship between humans and the Creator. It is thus not surprising that to fear God and keep his commandments is aimed at *every human* (כִּי־יִזֶה כָּל־הָאָדָם). In fact, the phrase כָּל־הָאָדָם actually lifted the readers from reading within and for their time and culture, to reading it as a human in the context of humanity in general. For this reason, therefore, although the injunction is confined to a particular context, it is claimed to be relevant in this regard.

Thus, the applicability and hence the relevance of the injunction expressed in 12:13b-14 can be assumed to be able to transcend the specific culture and audience of Qoheleth. Taking this a step further, the injunction carries specific and general meanings and functions. On its specific functions, Qoheleth, among others, exhorted against pursuits and activities motivated by greed and covetousness which relate to violating the moral dimension of the created order imprinted in the tenth commandment. Since to fear God is to keep His commandments, the exhortation against covetousness is consistent with the tenth commandment, which states, “You shall not covet.” As for its general function there were also many observations such as behaviour in the palace court or dealing with unpredictable rulers that the commandments and laws do not specifically regulate. In such a situation, fearing God becomes the undergirding reference from which humanity employs the conscious and careful exercising of wisdom for appropriate behaviour and the application of intellect. On this point Von Rad notes:

Within the sphere of life thus circumscribed by the commandments there lies a wide field of moral action which remains completely unregulated. If then these commandments do not subject life in any way to a comprehensive normative law, it is more appropriate for us to say that in certain marginal situations they demand avowal of Jahweh [Fear of God], and this avowal consists of precisely in abstaining from doing certain things displeasing to him.⁵⁴⁰

Therefore, the scope and relevance of 12:13b-14 “is not alien to everything Qoheleth has said thus far [1:2-12:8].”⁵⁴¹ Accordingly, 12:13b-14 does have a specific reference, meaning and

⁵⁴⁰ Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology: The Theology of Israel's Historical Traditions*, Vol. 1, trans. D.M.G. Stalker (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 195.

⁵⁴¹ Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 192.

application to the specific audience. Qoheleth's reflection upon humanity in general is certainly undergirded by his theological assumptions shared by his audience. But his theological assumption in 12:13b-14 also assumes the existence of that fear of God and the accessibility of this knowledge to everyone from the start.⁵⁴² For this reason, the relevance of the injunction beyond the culture and audience of Qoheleth has to be considered and built upon a timeless principle supported by Qoheleth's assumption and application concerning this fear.

To begin with, the founder of Christianity, Jesus Christ, summed up *all* commandments into loving God and loving one's neighbour, to which he emphasised 'these two commandments hang all the law and the prophet's'.⁵⁴³ Recognisably embedded in Jesus's teaching, the love of God and one's neighbour is indivisible, and so "to love God was to love the neighbour and vice-versa."⁵⁴⁴ Recently, a stimulating discussion by Levine on 'The Golden Rule in Ancient Israel Scripture'⁵⁴⁵ has linked the commandment 'loving your fellow as yourself' to the ethical dictum commonly known as the Golden Rule, namely "Whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them" (Matthew 7:12),⁵⁴⁶ or in another expression, "One should do as one would be done by."⁵⁴⁷ Here, Levine shows that to "Love your fellow as yourself" (Lev. 19:18) means being kind and caring, and to be fair, in effect, when an Israelite did what the Holiness Code prescribed and avoided doing what it prohibited (which was an expression of fearing God), the person was acting with love toward his fellow Israelite and toward the resident alien as well.⁵⁴⁸ Inherent in this commandment is the concept of reciprocity, where the act of meeting the Golden Rule

⁵⁴² Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 361.

⁵⁴³ Matthew 22:37-40.

⁵⁴⁴ Bruce Chilton, "Jesus, the Golden Rule, and Its Application," 78. Also, Wattles, *The Golden Rule*, 52-67.

⁵⁴⁵ Baruch A. Levine, "The Golden Rule in Ancient Israelite Scripture," in *The Golden Rule: The Ethics of Reciprocity in World Religion*, ed. Jacob Neusner and Bruce Chilton (London: Continuum International Publishing, 2008), 12 - 14. See also Jeffrey Wattles, *The Golden Rule* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 42-51.

⁵⁴⁶ Matt. 7:12 (King James Version).

⁵⁴⁷ *The Chambers Dictionary* (Larousse, 1994), 718 quoted in William Scott Green, "Parsing Reciprocity: Questions for the Golden Rule," in *The Golden Rule: The Ethics of Reciprocity in World Religion*, ed. Jacob Neusner and Bruce Chilton (London: Continuum International Publishing, 2008), 1.

⁵⁴⁸ Levine, "The Golden Rule," 12-14.

expresses an appropriate response to the fear of who God is and what He has done by doing what is good to fellow humans, pointing out the basis and “pivotal principle of human behaviour.”⁵⁴⁹

Hence, 12:13b-14 is relevant to Christianity. Quinn, in his discussion on how Christianity secures life’s meaning,⁵⁵⁰ explained how Christians can experience meaning in life when they answer the call to make God’s purpose (as taught in both the OT and the NT) the main purpose in their own lives.⁵⁵¹ The expression of this notion, which is at the heart of this service to God, is “obedience to the love commandments,”⁵⁵² which can be rightly summed up as loving God with all of one’s heart, soul and mind, and loving your fellow as yourself. Underpinning this response is the assumption that there is a meta-narrative, i.e. “salvation history reveals some of God’s purposes both for individual humans and for humanity as a whole,” while “Christians are expected to align themselves with these purposes and to act to further them to the extent that their circumstances permit.”⁵⁵³ This provides for them a meaningful role and function in “this great drama of salvation history,”⁵⁵⁴ thereby giving them a sense of purpose and meaning. In this case, the Christian “meta-narrative” as the new revelation has now been added to 12:13b-14, thereby providing a bigger picture for what was obviously absent in Ecclesiastes. Quinn’s analysis presupposed a view of life through which the world, events and the role and function of humans are interpreted as well as the necessity to live out fully the worthwhile purpose of life that is consistent with that of 12:13b-14.

Interestingly, this principle is similarly found to be a core tenet in other religious traditions such as Buddhism. Abe’s insightful discussion on ‘The Meaning of Life in Buddhism’ points out that it presupposes a view of human existence as a matter of continuous living and dying. Consequently, one’s present life is an effort to be liberated from living and dying rather than the

⁵⁴⁹ Ibid., 14.

⁵⁵⁰ Quinn, “How Christianity Secures *Life’s* Meaning,” 53-68.

⁵⁵¹ Ibid., 59.

⁵⁵² Ibid., 59

⁵⁵³ Ibid., 65.

⁵⁵⁴ Ibid., 65.

mere conquest of death alone.⁵⁵⁵ Furthermore, “the way to a fundamental emancipation of human existence”⁵⁵⁶ involves living consistently with the principle of *Dharma*, a term that refers to the teaching of Buddhism on the laws of nature and life. A core principle in *Dharma* is doing good to others as to oneself, which is an expression of the Golden Rule. The tight-knit relationship between the Ethic of Dharma and the Golden Rule goes to the extent that the practice of doing good to others has an impact on the cycle of life and death. It is therefore unsurprising that the principle of the Golden Rule is considered as one of the cornerstones of Buddha’s ethics in the 5th Century B.C.E.⁵⁵⁷ The goal as a Buddhist is to cultivate oneself as a moral agent,⁵⁵⁸ and in this sense Buddhists are ‘compelled to do good acts’ by doing good to others, even to a mere ant or any other small insect, as a way to cultivate their own self-potential for enlightenment and escape from the cycle.⁵⁵⁹

Similarly, the principle of the Golden Rule is adopted by the atheist as one of the tenets of their secular ethics. The International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU), a worldwide umbrella organisation for those adhering to the humanist stance, states that it “stands for the building of a more humane society through an ethic based on human and other natural values in the spirit of reason and free enquiry through human capability.”⁵⁶⁰ A key ethical principle adopted and practiced by them is the Golden Rule, similar to the words of Jesus Christ (Matthew 7:12), or in Oscar Wilde’s (a prominent humanist) expression, “Selfishness is not living as one wishes to live, it is asking others to live as one wishes to live.”⁵⁶¹

⁵⁵⁵ Masao Abe, “The Meaning of Life in Buddhism,” in Runzo and Martin, *The Meaning of Life in the World Religions*, 153-154.

⁵⁵⁶ Ibid., 153-154.

⁵⁵⁷ Henry Epps, *The Universal Golden Rule: A Philosopher Perspective* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2012), 42.

⁵⁵⁸ Kristin Sheible, “The Formulation and Significance of the Golden Rule in Buddhism (1),” in *The Golden Rule: The Ethics of Reciprocity in World Religion*, ed., Jacob Neusner and Bruce Chilton (London: Continuum International Publishing, 2008), 116.

⁵⁵⁹ Ibid., 116.

⁵⁶⁰ George H. Smith, *Atheism* (AnVi OpenSource Knowledge Trust, 1974), 112.

⁵⁶¹ Ibid., 112.

A crucial observation from the discussion above is that, to a certain degree, there is an emphasis on the fear of God through the practice of the Golden Rule, although there is some degree of variation in the theological understanding of God. This emphasis (and its meaning) is certainly the closest to Christianity and consistent with Buddhism; nonetheless, it is also prevalent among atheists if the language about God and what it means to believe in God is understood in a non-restrictive way. Eshleman, an atheist, in a recent discussion on atheism and believing in God noted:

Strictly speaking, the word “atheist” refers to one who denies only that a certain kind of ultimate reality exists, namely the god of classical theism – a personal deity that has created the world and is characterized by the standard omni-attributes. If, on the other hand, one understands “God” to refer to whatever it is that exists as a sacred reality, then being an atheist in the strict sense is certainly consistent with belief in God, even in the realist sense of “believe in.” *Many people in the world deny the existence of God in the classical theistic sense but believe that there exists, in contrast to everyday reality, an ultimate reality or dimension of reality which can be experienced by human beings and in relation to which one ought to conduct one’s life* [emphasis mine].⁵⁶²

Back to Buddhism, for instance, although it is essentially different from the religious view of Ecclesiastes, the call to live consistently with the laws of the nature (Dharma), through doing good to others, even to small insects, underscores an awareness and respect for what they believe to be an existing order for living. Such a form of respect is a good comparison (although incomplete) with the concept of “fear,” as understood from the teaching of Ecclesiastes, and more so when it underscores the desire to avoid bad consequences in life (here and after) and is an impetus to become a moral agent focusing on good living and doing good. This is also their worthwhile purpose of life and is a point of reference through which realities and circumstances – and even life itself – are placed into perspective. Since one’s decisions in life have a significant bearing on the present and in the afterlife, it becomes clear that respect for the law of *Dharma*, as well as the law of *Karma*, demonstrates a common human experience and language with the teaching of fearing God and keeping His commandments in Ecclesiastes. Therefore, whilst there are differences concerning specific religious convictions, underpinning the principle of the Golden Rule is the belief that God, or in the case of Buddhism the law of nature, will call everyone and their action to account.

⁵⁶² Andrew S. Eshleman, “Can an Atheist Believe in God?” *Religious Studies* 41, (2005) 185, Cambridge University Press, Doi: 10.1017/S0034412505007602.

The relevance of 12:13b-14 to all humanity is not an overstatement, particularly when the Golden Rule is considered to be complementing the nature of human consciousness, as noted by Green:

As humans, we have, if not a natural inclination, then at least a natural potential, toward reciprocal action. On the basis of our physiological constitution, it seems neither strange nor unusual that we do. Seen this way, the Golden Rule not only complements nature, it extends it. In all the religions examined below, the Golden Rule appears as the consequence not of accidental behavior, but of human consciousness, deliberation, and self-control.⁵⁶³

A recent study drawing research from anthropology, evolutionary biology, experimental psychology and neuroscience validates that the fear of God, expressed in a belief system based on supernatural reward and punishment, is a “ubiquitous part of the human race that spans geographical regions, cultures and human history.”⁵⁶⁴ This belief plays a pivotal role in human moral decisions in all spheres of life. The study notes that although the fear of God may be especially obvious in religion, it is widespread among the unaffiliated and even among atheists,⁵⁶⁵ simply because humanity has a pre-existing cognitive template into which God fits.⁵⁶⁶ Certainly, just by believing in supernatural reward and punishment and acknowledging its role of this phenomenon in human behaviours has not fully expressed the meaning of the fear of God advocated in the book of Ecclesiastes. However, when this is considered along with the fact that the principle of the Golden Rule is part of human consciousness, it validates the notion that 12:13b is indeed “about being human” and such knowledge (to fear God and keep His commandments) is “in-built” and consistent with the nature of humans. More so, the injunction to “fear God and keep His commandments” summarises the required human attitude to God or the ultimate reality, and hence the practice of the Golden Rule is a common expression of “keeping the commandments” in this regard. On this basis, the relevance and application of

⁵⁶³ William Scott Green, “‘Wired for Reciprocity’: Some Concluding Reflections” in *The Golden Rule: The Ethics of Reciprocity in World Religion*. Edited by Jacob Neusner and Bruce Chilton (London: Continuum International Publishing, 2008), 170.

⁵⁶⁴ Dominic Johnson, *God is Watching You: How the Fear of God Makes Us Human* (New York: Oxford University Press: 2015), 57-59.

⁵⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁵⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 229.

12:13b-14 can thus be extended clearly beyond the original audience and culture, and so the theology of the meaning of life is timeless and relevant to all human.

The finding above is crucial for showing the legitimacy and pivotal role of 12:13b-14 in the entire framework expressing the theology of the meaning of life in Ecclesiastes. It shows the validity and reliability of the premise that the worthwhile purpose of life is to fear God and keep His commandments, and it enables one to explain reality and live coherently with uncertainties and anomalies in life. This should be most relevant to Qoheleth and his audience, and those who share a similar culture and adhere to similar religious convictions. The relevance of 12:13b-14 as the worthwhile purpose of life has also shown to be the case for humanity as a whole, even for those with no belief in God or knowledge of his commands. This should neither ignore nor downplay the significance of the variant found in the theology and worldviews of other religious frameworks and cultures discussed earlier. Such a variant does pose certain degrees of implications requiring another thesis or investigation. Yet, if 12:13b-14 expressed through the Golden Rule carries such a crucial function in these frameworks, it actually confirms the validity and relevance of the teaching of Ecclesiastes to all humanity.

2.8 SUMMARY

This chapter has shown that the concept of the worthwhile purpose and coherence exists in the teaching of Ecclesiastes. My analysis of the purpose of Ecclesiastes in relation to the concept of the worthwhile purpose of life shows that the meaning of life, according to Ecclesiastes, is to fear God and keep His commandments. This is the purpose of human existence. In addition, my analysis of the dynamic relationship between הבל, enjoyment and undeserved suffering points to the worthwhile purpose of life being the focus of Qoheleth's persuasion. Hence, to fear God and keep His commandments becomes the common thread placing every theme in perspective, thus enabling one to live life coherently. The by-product of living consistently and harmoniously with the worthwhile purpose of life is meaningfulness permeating personal, family and work life. This forms the reconstructed framework that expresses the theology of the meaning of life in Ecclesiastes. The next two chapters will explain the empirical approach to forming this empirically corroborated biblical theology based on the book of Ecclesiastes

CHAPTER THREE

THE THEOLOGY OF THE MEANING OF LIFE IN ECCLESIASTES: AN EMPIRICAL CONSIDERATION

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In Chapter Two, I analysed and explained the concepts of the worthwhile purpose of life and coherence in life, based on the book of Ecclesiastes. These concepts, as I argued, clarify the conceptual distinction between meaning *in* and *of* life. I also reconstructed from the teaching of Ecclesiastes a building block or framework expressing the theology of the meaning of life, with the hypothesis that living by this framework enables one to *experience* the meaning of life. Although the teaching of Ecclesiastes is essentially empirically-based (since it is built upon Qoheleth's experiments, his experience and reflection), the viability of the reconstructed theological framework remains uncorroborated in relation to the experiences of people who claim to have found and experienced the meaning of life. Resolving this issue is crucial, as it is inadequate to argue for the viability and practicality of a biblical theology by relying on systematic and coherent schemes of arguments alone. It should also be able to provide an adequate and faithful account of reality.⁵⁶⁷ Considering the purpose of this investigation, the reconstructed theology of the meaning of life should be able to account for the experiences of people.

Therefore, this chapter as well as Chapter Four form the empirical section of the corroborative initiative. The first section of this chapter will discuss existing empirical findings relevant to this inquiry, and it will show evidence affirming the viability of the framework for the theology of the meaning of life developed from Ecclesiastes. Nonetheless, the studies are insufficient to

⁵⁶⁷ McGrath, *The Science of God*, 153-168. The need for theology to reflect "reality" has already been discussed in the first chapter of this dissertation. See the work of McGrath, which provides compelling justifications and explanations for theology to meet the growing demand for it to account for observable reality.

account for hypotheses pertinent to the reconstructed theological building block taken from the teaching of Ecclesiastes. To say the least, the empirical works are built mainly on assumptions and premises quite different to the motives of Ecclesiastes. The gap in these works compels my decision to attempt a separate but independent investigation into the reliability of said reconstructed theological framework, and to assess its viability in relation to those who claim to have found the meaning of life. Therefore, the second section will present, explain and describe the process of the empirical research methodology engaged to examine the dependability and the relevance of the reconstructed framework. This will include a systematic and comprehensive description of the processes involved in sample selection, data collection and analysis, as well as the steps undertaken to ensure the rigour, validity and repeatability of this enquiry.

3.2 EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE AND THE RECONSTRUCTED THEOLOGY OF THE MEANING OF LIFE IN ECCLESIASTES

There is yet to be an empirical study undertaken on the theology of the meaning of life based on the book of Ecclesiastes. The reason is obvious. In addition to the insufficient attention given to the concept of the meaning of life in Ecclesiastes, empirical research investigating the question on *the* meaning of life is generally considered to be ‘out of reach of modern objectivistic scientific methodology.’⁵⁶⁸ In any case, few people expect that the meaning of life can actually be found.⁵⁶⁹ Nevertheless, despite the lack of empirical studies on humans in relation to the meaning of life, there are substantially documented studies on humans in relation to meaning *in* life. The philosophical and theological question as to what is *the* meaning of life has been rephrased and replaced with existential and quantifiable questions such as ‘what *causes* one to experience meaning *in* life?’ and ‘what are the *sources* of this meaning, as well as what makes life *worth* living?’⁵⁷⁰ Useful tools are already available to measure meaningfulness,⁵⁷¹

⁵⁶⁸ Dominique Louis Debats, Joost Drost and Prartho Hansen, “Experiences of Meaning in Life: A Combined Qualitative and Quantitative Approach,” *British Journal of Psychology* 86 (1995) 359.

⁵⁶⁹ Jonathan Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis: Putting Ancient Wisdom and Philosophy to the Test of Modern Science* (London: Arrow Books, 2006), 215-216.

⁵⁷⁰ See also, Debats, “Experiences of Meaning in Life,” 395, and Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis*, 218-219.

⁵⁷¹ For instance, Michael F. Steger, Patricia Frazier, Shigehiro Oishi and Matthew Kaler, “The Meaning in Life Questionnaire: Assessing the Presence of and Search for Meaning in Life,” *Journal of Counselling Psychology* Vol. 53, No.1 (2006) 80-93.

satisfaction,⁵⁷² sources of meaning,⁵⁷³ happiness⁵⁷⁴ and even one's attitude towards meaningfulness in life.⁵⁷⁵ These tested tools have their roots in several major studies, the findings of which are intriguingly close to the concepts taught in the book of Ecclesiastes. A leading study among these is Crumbaugh and Maholick's investigation into the correlation between purposefulness and meaningfulness.⁵⁷⁶ Using an empirical tool, known as the "Purpose in Life Test" (PIL),⁵⁷⁷ the authors confirm a close association between these two factors. Meaningfulness in life, as their findings conclude, is strongly associated with the presence of purpose in life, which provides a verifiable claim that the presence of a purpose in life is a key attribute in relation to meaning in life.⁵⁷⁸ A number of follow-up studies have been conducted to verify the reliability of PIL, by focusing on the correlation between purposefulness in life and sociability,⁵⁷⁹ purposefulness and commitment to belief,⁵⁸⁰ purposefulness and satisfaction with

⁵⁷² For instance, Ed Diener, Robert A. Emmons, Randy J. Larsen and Sharon Griffin, "The Satisfaction with Life Scale," *Journal of Personality Assessment* Vol. 49, No.1 (1985) 71-75, which consists of five items measuring the individual's evaluation of satisfaction with life in general.

⁵⁷³ For instance, Gary T. Reker, "Contextual and Thematic Analyses of Sources of Provisional Meaning: A life-span Perspective," in a paper presented at the Biennial Meetings of the International Society of the Study of Behavioral Development at Minneapolis, MN, 1991.

⁵⁷⁴ For instance, Sonja Lyubomirsky and H.S. Lepper, "A Measure of Subjective Happiness: Preliminary Reliability and Construct Validation," *Social Indicators Research* 46 (1999) 137-155.

⁵⁷⁵ For instance, Gary T. Reker and Edward J. Peacock, "The Life Attitude Profile (LAP): A Multidimensional Instrument for Assessing Attitudes toward Life," *Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science* Vol. 13 No 3 (06/1981) 264-273. The LAP is briefly explained in this section.

⁵⁷⁶ J.C. Crumbaugh and L.T. Maholick, "An Experimental Study on Existentialism: The Psychometric Approach to Frankl's Concept of Noogetic Neurosis," *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 20 (1964) 200-201.

⁵⁷⁷ J.C. Crumbaugh and L.T. Maholick, "Manual of Instructions for the Purpose in Life Test," (Munster, IN: Psychometrics Affiliates).

⁵⁷⁸ J.C. Crumbaugh and L.T. Maholick, "An Experimental Study on Existentialism," 200-201.

⁵⁷⁹ For instance, P. R. Pearson, and B. F. Sheffield, "Purpose-In-Life in a Sample of British Psychiatric Out-Patients," *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 30 (1974) 459. Also "Purpose-In-Life and the Eysenck Personality Inventory," *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 30 (1974b) 562-564.

⁵⁸⁰ For instance, Soderstrom, D., and Wright, E. W., "Religious Orientation and Meaning of Life," *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 33 (1977) 65-68. Also, J. R. Crandall, and R. D. Rasmussen, "Purpose in life as Related to Specific Values," *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 31 (1975) 483-485.

one's self and life in general⁵⁸¹ as well as purposefulness and the acceptance of death.⁵⁸² Although the studies have discovered several weaknesses in PIL,⁵⁸³ they nevertheless affirm the correlation between the purpose and meaningfulness. Crambaugh has since added to PIL an additional test known as the "Seeking of Noetic Goals Test" (SONG), to enhance the reliability of the investigation process.⁵⁸⁴ The combination of PIL and SONG in subsequent research further enhances the reliability of the correlation between purposefulness and meaningfulness in life.⁵⁸⁵

The necessity of the purpose in life factor is further strengthened by extensive studies investigating the function of *goals* in life pertinent to a person's subjective wellbeing. Conceptually, a goal may be equivalent to a purpose in life, and in certain contexts, a goal can be one in a cluster of goals contributing to purpose in life. The term, "subjective wellbeing" is generally accepted as referring to one's psychological and physical health,⁵⁸⁶ through which one experiences quality of life, personal growth⁵⁸⁷ and a long-term level of happiness and satisfaction.⁵⁸⁸ The positive correlation between the goal and subjective wellbeing factors has

⁵⁸¹ For instance, Gary T. Reker, and Cousins, J. B., "Factor Structure, Construct Validity and Reliability of the Seeking of Noetic Goals (SONG) and Purpose in Life (PIL) Tests," *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 35, (1979) 85-91. Also, Reker, "The purpose-in-life Test in an Inmate Population: An Empirical Investigation," *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 33 (1977) 688-693.

⁵⁸² For instance, J. A Durlak, "Relationship between Individual Attitudes toward Life and Death," *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 38 (1972) 463.

⁵⁸³ M. J. Dyck, "Assessing Logotherapeutic Constructs: Conceptual and Psychometric Status of the Purpose in Life and Seeking of Noetic Goals Tests," *Clinical Psychology Review* 7 (1987) 439-447. Also, Yalom, *Existential Psychotherapy*, 455-457.

⁵⁸⁴ J.C. Crumbaugh, "The Seeking of Noetic Goals Test (SONG): A Complementary Scale to the Purpose in Life Test (PIL)," *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 33 (1977) 900-907.

⁵⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 900-907.

⁵⁸⁶ Emmons, Cheung and Tehrani, "Assessing Spirituality," 391-422.

⁵⁸⁷ Emmons, "Personal Goals, Life Meaning, and Virtue: Wellspring of A Positive Life," in *Flourishing: Positive Psychology and the Life Well-Lived*, Eds., Corey L.M. Keyes, Jonathan Haidt, Martin E. P. Seligman (American Psychological Association, 2002), 108. Also, William Pavot and Ed Diener, "Review of the Satisfaction with Life Scale," *Psychological Assessment* Vol. 5, No. 2, (1993)164-172.

⁵⁸⁸ Emmons, Cheung and Tehrani, "Assessing Spirituality," 391. Also, Albert Kozma, Susan Stone, M.J. Stones, T.E. Hannah and Kevin McNeil, "Long- and Short-Term Affective States in Happiness: Model, Paradigm and Experimental Evidence," *Social Indicators Research* 22 (1990)119-138; Carol D. Ryff, "Happiness Is Everything, or is it? Explorations on the Meaning of Psychological Well-Being," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* Vol. 57, No. 6, (1989)1069-1081.

stimulated substantial investigations into the nature of goals,⁵⁸⁹ their function⁵⁹⁰ and types⁵⁹¹ in relation to one's subjective wellbeing. Some of these cover the impact of goals across a person's lifespan.⁵⁹² Fundamentally, these studies agree that 'people's priorities *are* [emphasis mine] prime determinants of their well-being, and these priorities are based on their current and long-term goals, projects, and concerns.'⁵⁹³ The process of decision-making⁵⁹⁴ and the process of pursuing goals in life give meaning to and a sense of purpose,⁵⁹⁵ while the strong correlation between goals and subjective wellbeing contributes to the considerable application of "goals" in clinical treatment.⁵⁹⁶

The empirical evidence stated above is crucial to this investigation. Although the subjective wellbeing is conceptually distinct from the meaning of life, the two notions share common indicators in relation to meaningfulness. In particular, studies associating goals and subjective

⁵⁸⁹ For instance, James T. Austin and Jeffrey B. Vancouver, "Goal Constructs In Psychology: Structure, Process, and Content," *Psychological Bulletin* Vol. 120 (1996) 338-375. Also Ian McGregor and Brian R. Little, "Personal Projects, Happiness and Meaning: On Doing Well and Being Yourself," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* Vol. 74, No. 2 (1998) 494-512. Also Unsal Yetim, "Life Satisfaction: A Study Based on the Organizational of Personal Projects," *Social Indicators Research* Vol. 29 (1993) 277-289.

⁵⁹⁰ Emmons, *Ultimate Concerns*, 3-88.

⁵⁹¹ For instance, Paul Karoly, "Goal Systems: An Organizational Framework for Clinical Assessment and Treatment Planning," *Psychological Assessment* Vol. 5 (1993) 273-280. Marlene Wadsworth and Donald H. Ford, "Assessment of Personal Goal Hierarchies," *Journal of Counselling Psychology* Vol. 30 No. 4 (1983) 514-526.

⁵⁹² C. M Haase, J. Heckhausen, & C. Wrosch, "Developmental Regulation across the Life Span: Toward a New Synthesis," *Developmental Psychology* (2012, July 23). Advance online publication. DOI: 10.1037/a0029231. Also Jutta Heckhausen, Carsten Wrosch and Richard Schulz, "A Motivational Theory of Life-Span Development," *Psychological Review* Vol. 117 (2010) 32-60.

⁵⁹³ Emmons, Cheung and Tehrani, "Assessing Spirituality," 391.

⁵⁹⁴ Salvatore R. Maddi, "Creating Meaning Through Making Decisions," in *The Human Quest for Meaning: A Handbook of Psychological Research and Clinical Applications*, eds. Paul T.P. Wong and Prem S. Fry, Personality and Clinical Psychological Series, ed. Irving B. Weiner (Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 1998), 3-26.

⁵⁹⁵ M. E. Ford, & C. W. "Nichols, A Taxonomy of Human Goals and some Possible Applications," in M. E. Ford & D. H. Ford, eds., *Humans as Self-constructing Living Systems: Putting the Framework to Work* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Inc, 1987), 293, cited by Emmons, Cheung and Tehrani, "Assessing Spirituality," 392. See also Robert A. Emmons and Laura A. King, "Conflict Among Personal Strivings: Immediate and Long-Term Implications for Psychological and Physical Well-Being," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* Vol. 54, No. 6, (1988) 1040-1048).

⁵⁹⁶ Paul Karoly, "Goal Systems," 273-280; Marlene Wadsworth and Donald H. Ford, "Goal Hierarchies," 514-526.

wellbeing have implied that the type of goal has important a correlation with the level of happiness and satisfaction in life. Separate studies on this correlation confirm further the presence of a qualitative distinction in the psychological experience between one who pursues ‘a goal in life’ and ‘the ultimate goal’ thereof.⁵⁹⁷ To explain further, “the ultimate goal” of life refers to the human search for the ultimate concerns commonly expressed in attaining religious- and spiritually-related goals and satisfaction.⁵⁹⁸ The pursuit of the ultimate goal is found to be more fulfilling and satisfying. The reason for a superior experience from a religious-related goal, as the studies indicate, lies in the ability of religious doctrine to provide a belief system, a building block or a framework, that expresses a view of life that helps one to explain human experiences. As a result, it enables one to see and place an event or an experience within the larger context of life, which then provides desirable emotional support and a sense of coherence. Interestingly, independent studies investigating the role of religious goals in relation to meaningfulness also affirm that people with goals revolving around the attainment of a spiritual end tend to experience a more worthwhile, unified and meaningful life.⁵⁹⁹ One study goes a step further to show that the God factor and spirituality offer the most satisfying and coherent answers to life’s meaning.⁶⁰⁰

A crucial observation from these studies is the noted relationship between goals and the framework that expresses the view of life. When a goal is in essence a framework that expresses a view of life, it is more likely to contribute to a qualitatively superior experience of meaningfulness. In fact, the correlation between a framework that expresses one’s view of life and meaningfulness therein is unsurprising. Interestingly, Battista and Almond confirmed the existence of such correlation decades ago,⁶⁰¹ by hypothesising that meaningfulness may be associated with a person’s commitment to a system of belief, a philosophy or a set of goals in

⁵⁹⁷ Emmons, *Ultimate Concerns*, 89-116.

⁵⁹⁸ Ibid., 113-136.

⁵⁹⁹ Robert A. Emmons, C. Cheung & Tehrani, “Assessing Spirituality,” 100-107.

⁶⁰⁰ Paul T. P. Wong, “Spirituality, Meaning and Successful Ageing,” in *The Human Quest for Meaning: A Handbook of Psychological Research and Clinical Applications*, eds. Paul T.P. Wong and Prem S. Fry, Personality and Clinical Psychological Series, ed. Irving B. Weiner (Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 1998), 359-394.

⁶⁰¹ John Robert Battista J. & R. Almond, “The Development of Meaning in Life,” *Psychiatry* 36 (1973) 409-427.

life. This system of belief, philosophy or set of goals forms the framework through which the person views life and interprets surrounding events to seek coherence. The *process* of living consistently within a framework, such as by pursuing life goals consistent with the framework, gives meaningful experience to existence.⁶⁰² Battista and Almond tested their hypothesis with an empirical tool known as the “Life Regard Index” (LRI), a synonym for “meaningful life” (index),⁶⁰³ which comes with two subscales. The first is the framework subscale employed to ‘Assess the degree to which individuals can envision their lives within some meaningful perspective or have derived as set of goals or philosophy of life.’⁶⁰⁴ This subscale incorporates different worldviews (by not distinguishing them) into a single questionnaire. The second is the fulfilment subscale, used to measure ‘the degree to which persons see themselves having fulfilled or as being in the process of fulfilling this framework or life goals.’⁶⁰⁵ These extensive tests show a positive correlation between the framework factor and fulfilment in life. Similar to PIL, by Crumbaugh and Maholick, the reliability of LRI has been scrutinised in a number of follow-up studies, further affirming the validity of the framework and life meaningfulness correlation.⁶⁰⁶

The empirical evidence noted above exhibits salient similarities, to the extent of asserting the building blocks of meaningfulness taught in Ecclesiastes. The correlation between a purpose in life and meaningfulness in Crumbaugh and Maholick’s work shows that a person can experience meaning and meaningful experience in ‘daily activities, as mundane as they are’⁶⁰⁷ when they are motivated by purposeful living. This is consistent with Qoheleth’s call to purposefulness in life. However, he also makes a clear distinction between the worthwhile purpose of life (12:13-14) and common purposes (E.g. 2:1-23). The qualitative distinction between a purpose in life and the purpose of life, and its implications on one’s level of meaningfulness, is not explored in

⁶⁰² See also Debats, “Experiences of Meaning in Life,” 239-240.

⁶⁰³ Battista & Almond, “The Development of Meaning in Life,” 409-427.

⁶⁰⁴ Debats, “Experiences of Meaning in Life,” 395.

⁶⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 395.

⁶⁰⁶ For example, Battista and Almond, “The Development of Meaning in Life”; Dominique Debats, Van der Lubbe, P. M., & F. Wezeman, “On the Psychometric Properties of the Life Regard Index (LRI): A Measure of Meaningful Life,” *Personality and Individual Differences* 14 (1993) 337-345; K. Chamberlain and S. Zika, “Measuring meaning in life: An Examination of Three Scales,” *Personality and Individual Differences* 9 (1988) 589-596.

⁶⁰⁷ Frankl, *Man’s Search for Ultimate Meaning*, 142-143.

Crumbaugh and Maholick's investigation. The emphasis in Ecclesiastes is living consistently with a worthwhile purpose rather than purposeful living alone. This, according to Ecclesiastes, is crucial to one's sense and experience of meaningfulness. A vital qualitative difference between the worthwhile purpose of life and a common purpose in life, as explained in Chapter Two, is a view of life inherent in the worthwhile purpose of life that enables one to interpret and explain the vanities and anomalies involved in life. The injunction to 'fear God and obey His commandments' is a purpose, goal and framework in itself, and the qualitative deficiency of purposes in life actually drove Qoheleth to eventually "hate" life.

Fortunately, the gap in Crumbaugh and Maholick's investigation into the teaching of Ecclesiastes is somewhat filled by a series of separate studies investigating the link between goals and long-term happiness. To put this differently, since the type of goal would determine one's level of meaningfulness,⁶⁰⁸ it suggests the possibility that the worthwhile purpose of life taught in Ecclesiastes could in fact lead to a more meaningful life. As noted earlier, the "ultimate goal", which is also known as the "ultimate concern," has brought about more satisfying fulfilment and meaningfulness, and since an "ultimate concern" is associated with the pursuit of spiritual enlightenment and religious experience, it hints of a possible parallel to the function and potential of 'the worthwhile purpose' expressed in Ecclesiastes. At the very least, they share similar functions and importance in relation to life. More importantly, their similarities also hint at a qualitatively superior experience of meaningfulness brought about by the worthwhile purpose of life advocated in Ecclesiastes.

Evidently, a key aspect derived from empirical evidence pertaining to the meaning of "quality" when it refers to a goal, is its correlation with its ability to interpret experiences in life. Therefore, the quality of the ultimate goal lies in its ability to provide adequate information through which a person can interpret experiences in life. Accordingly, a goal is qualitatively more superior than another goal by virtue of the nature of the goal itself. When the goal is itself a building block of one's belief system or philosophy, the process of achieving goals leads to qualitatively superior meaningfulness. This correlation, as shown earlier, has been accounted for and supported in studies investigating the importance of a framework expressing the views of life

⁶⁰⁸ Lisa L. Harlow & Michael D. Newcomb, "Towards A General Hierarchical Model of Meaning and Satisfaction in Life," *Multivariate Behavioral Research* Vol. 25, Issue 3 (1990) 387-405.

in relation to one's ability to experience meaningfulness. Battista and Almond's emphasis on a framework that expresses the view of life in order to experience meaningfulness shows that when a goal is in essence a framework expressing a view of life, it leads to superior meaningfulness. The problem, however, is the lack of distinction and investigation into how different frameworks may affect the quality of meaningfulness. As the studies by Crumbaugh and Maholick aptly demonstrate, the concern is with the existence of a framework rather than the type of framework in relation to meaningfulness. Nevertheless, the existing findings are still promising, as they evidently affirm the potential of Qoheleth's motive and his functional concept of the worthwhile purpose of life in relation to one's experience of meaningfulness.

In addition to the inadequate attention given to the types of framework and their effects on meaningfulness, studies have not adequately considered the function of and distinction between the concepts of "consistency" and "coherence" in relation to the framework expressing the view of life. The presence of activities as consistent with the ultimate goal in life, as well as the ability to see one's experience as cohering with one's ultimate goals, are two separate and distinct issues. Whilst both might very well enable one to experience meaningfulness, the differences between the two and their implications for meaningfulness have not been explored adequately. The need to consider this factor is implied in several subsequent studies by researchers. A study by Debats, Drost and Hansen, for instance, establishes that traumatic events in a person's life change the LRI reading dramatically.⁶⁰⁹ These events are 'moments of change in life,'⁶¹⁰ as they have the potential to challenge and paralyse one's framework of belief or philosophy. This finding is consistent with a separate study by Thompson and Janigian⁶¹¹ on the impact of traumatic events on one's meaningfulness. The authors' investigation shows that 'severely negative events can challenge parts of the life scheme, disrupting one's sense of order and/or

⁶⁰⁹ Salvatore R. Maddi, "The Existential Neurosis," *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* Vol. 74, No.4 (1967) 311-325; Debats, "Experiences of Meaning in Life," 395; "Sources of Meaning: An Investigation of Significant Commitments in Life," *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 39 (1999) 30-57; "Measurement of Personal Meaning: The Psychometric Properties of the Life Regard Index," in Paul T.P. Wong and Prem S. Fry, *Personality and Clinical Psychological Series*, ed. Irving B. Weiner (Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 1998), 237-259.

⁶¹⁰ Debats, "Experiences of Meaning in Life," 371-372. Also, S. C Kobasa, S.R. Maddi and S. Kahn, "Hardiness and Health: A Prospective Study," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 42 (1982) 168-177.

⁶¹¹ Suzanne C. Thompson and Aris S. Janigian, "Life Schemes: A Framework for Understanding the Search for Meaning," *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* Vol. 7, Special Section: Attributions, (1988) 260-280.

purpose.⁶¹² These studies suggest that when the reliability of a framework expressing views on life is unsettled, one may seek to find stability, through a process of improving or discarding part of the framework, so that control, order and purpose can be restored. In other words, the process of discarding or improving the framework is an attempt to improve the quality or the ability of the framework to explain and interpret experiences in life. Underlying such an effort are the needs to see and experience coherence. Evidently, this is quite different from seeing one's present activity as being consistent with life goals. More importantly, the potency of a traumatic event altering one's life framework raises a possible correlation between the quality of the framework and meaningfulness. A qualitatively superior framework should provide order, direction and a sense of coherence, even in the face of anomalies. In other words, the better a framework, the better it can explain and cushion the impact of traumatic events. Consequently, the better a framework is able to explain and enable one to experience coherence in line with complexity in life, the more positive is one's experience of meaningfulness. Such a framework, as I have already argued, is inherent in the worthwhile purpose of life presented in the teaching of Ecclesiastes. In terms of its resilient quality, the worthwhile purpose of life propounded in Ecclesiastes enables one to engage or build an irrepressible spirit in times of undeserved suffering. It can be resilient to the threat of uncertainty in life and the certainty that comes with death. On the other hand, it has the empowering quality of joy and satisfaction.

Interestingly, the work by Debats et al. reveals an additional element with regard to meaningfulness. Their study concludes that meaningfulness or meaninglessness are related to being in the state of *in contact* or being in the state of *alienation*,⁶¹³ respectively. Alienation occurs when one is blocked from one's own potential (alienated from the self) and isolated from others (alienated from society) and lives without a purpose (alienated from a purpose in life). This finding shows, on the one hand, the significance of relationships and interpersonal dimensions to meaningfulness,⁶¹⁴ but it also shows, on the other hand, the importance of the

⁶¹² Ibid., 260-280.

⁶¹³ Debat, "Experiences of Meaning in Life," 359-375. Also Debats, "The Life Regard Index: Reliability and Validity," *Psychological Reports* 67 (1990) 27-34.

⁶¹⁴ K. De Vogler & P. Ebersole, "Categorization of College Students' Meaning of Life," *Psychological Reports* 46 (1980) 387-390; "Young Adolescents' Meaning in Life," *Psychological Reports* 52 (1983) 427-431; P. Ebersole & S. De Paola, "Meaning in Life Categories of Later Life couples," *Journal of Psychology* 12 (1987) 185-191; B. L. Hedlund, "The Development of Meaning in Life in Adulthood" (Unpublished dissertation, University of Southern

attitude factor to the ability to find meaningfulness. Both of these points raise the possibility that a framework (regardless of its quality) may be *independent* of a person's ability to see life coherently, as one must be motivated to do so. Indeed, the work by Antonovsky on the "sense of coherence dispositional construct" (SOC) suggests that the sense of coherence is fundamentally about a person's ability to handle unpredictability and disorderliness and to manage issues in life. He argues that three important components influence how one processes and arrives at a sense of coherence, namely comprehensibility, manageability and meaningfulness.⁶¹⁵ Korotkov summarises the meanings of these concepts aptly:

The *comprehensibility* component refers to the degree in which individuals perceive the stimuli that face them as predictable, ordered, and as making "cognitive sense." The more consistent people's early life experiences are growing up, the stronger their sense of comprehensibility... The *manageability* component is defined as the extent to which individuals perceive that they have the personal and social resources to confront and cope with demand. Given a set of life experiences characterized by balance between an overload and underload of stimuli, they learn to cope and survive with varying levels of demand and are therefore strengthened because of it... *Meaningfulness*, the emotional counterpart of comprehensibility, refers to the degree to which people's life makes emotional sense and that the demands confronted by them are perceived as being worthy of energy investment and commitment. In general, if individuals' experiences are characterized by participatory decision making in which they are free to select their own outcomes, a strong sense of meaningfulness develops. However, when individuals have no say in any matter, they tend to see life a void of meaning.⁶¹⁶

An individual's access to participatory decision making is crucial to the development of a sense of meaningfulness; however, it is assumed that one is motivated to do so – something that is found to be not always the case. Such a possibility is evident in the work by Steger on meaning in life questionnaire (MLQ),⁶¹⁷ as the author notes that the MLQ recognises the presence of those who are no longer motivated to find meaningfulness.

California, 1987); E. Klinger, *Meaning and void: Incentives in People's Lives* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1977). These studies found interpersonal relationships as a key source of meaning for all age groups. Other frequently mentioned sources are services toward people in general, living according to beliefs and self-growth, including goal attainment.

⁶¹⁵ Antonovsky, *Health, Stress, and Coping*, 123-159.

⁶¹⁶ Korotkov, "The Sense of Coherence," 54-55.

⁶¹⁷ Michael Steger, Frazier, Oishi and Kaler, "The Meaning in Life Questionnaire," 80-93.

The required attitude factor cannot be underestimated. An important component in the framework taught in Ecclesiastes is the inclusion of one's attitude in life. That is, in addition to cognitively rationalising life events into context, the concept of coherence includes exhortations on how one should live. In this case, one should live consistently with a worthwhile purpose of life. Underlying this notion, however, is the motivation needed to do so. As argued earlier, a key factor within the theological framework reconstructed from the teaching of Ecclesiastes is a promising and attractive life characterised by carefulness, carefreeness and enjoyment in a context where everything is vain. Since enjoyment is only possible for those who fear God and obey His commandments, this fact motivates one to live consistently and coherently with a worthwhile purpose of life. In other words, the framework that expresses the theology of the meaning of life in Ecclesiastes requires one's attitudes to cohere with this worthwhile purpose.

Interesting, the importance of the attitude factor was also found to be crucial in the investigation by Reker and Peacock, who demonstrated the presence of a positive connection between attitude and meaningfulness. Based on Frankl's will to meaning and transcendence meaning theories, they developed the life attitude profile (LAP),⁶¹⁸ which was later revised to the LAP-R, to measure six dimensions related to attitude,⁶¹⁹ namely purpose, coherence, life control, death acceptance, existential vacuum and goal seeking. The goal is to identify 'the degree of existential meaning and purpose in life and the strength of motivation to find meaning and purpose.'⁶²⁰ The extensive applications of LAP and LAP-R show the positive link between the two factors. Since one's attitude is connected to meaningfulness, it also suggests that personal choices and responsibilities play a key role in the *ability* to experience said meaningfulness.⁶²¹ Interestingly, Harlow and Newcomb suggest that it is possible to denote a 'higher' degree of meaning when

⁶¹⁸ Gary T. Reker & Edward J. Peacock, "The Life Attitude Profile (LAP)," 264-273. Also, by the same authors, "The Life Attitude Profile (LAP): Further Evidence of Reliability and Empirical Validity," *Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science* 14 No.1 (12/1981) 92-95.

⁶¹⁹ Gary T. Reker, *Manual of the Life Attitude Profile-Revised (LAP-R)* (Peterborough: Student Psychologists Press, 1992).

⁶²⁰ Reker and Peacock, "The Life Attitude Profile," 264-273.

⁶²¹ An example of the correlation between attitude and choices is found in Hicks, Terence, "A Profile of Choice/Responsibleness and Goal-Seeking Attitudes among First-Generation and Non-First-Generation College Students" (2005), Faculty Working Papers from the School of Education, Paper 2.

additional factors or sources of meaning are taken into account and are integrated into an existing framework.⁶²²

The discussion above highlights empirical evidence crucial to this investigation. Although the above studies were undergirded by assumptions rather different to those in my study, empirical evidence affirms the viability of the theology of the meaning of life framework developed from the book of Ecclesiastes. The function of the purpose, goals, frameworks and attitude factors to meaningfulness is consistent with the teaching of Ecclesiastes. However, the above studies are fundamentally about humans in relation to a meaning *in* life rather than the meaning *of* life. Furthermore, Ecclesiastes teaches distinctive concepts of the worthwhile purpose of life and coherence in life. The unexplored distinctiveness, and hence viability, of the framework reconstructed from Ecclesiastes' teaching leaves unanswered questions warranting further investigation, verification and validation. It is also crucial to find out in what ways the theological framework reflects the experiences of people who claim to have found and experience the meaning of life.

The following section will explain the methodology and the process undertaken to investigate these unanswered questions.

3.3 EMPIRICALLY CORROBORATED THEOLOGY OF THE MEANING OF LIFE IN ECCLESIASTES: RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following points state the hypotheses expressing the framework of the theology of the meaning life:

- A. The worthwhile purpose of life is to fear God and keep His commandments.
- B. This worthwhile purpose of life enables one to explain reality and live coherently with uncertainties and anomalies.
- C. Living coherently with the worthwhile purpose of life leads to a carefree and enjoyable life.
- D. The visible outcome of a meaningful life is satisfaction at work and enjoyment of one's family and in one's personal life.

⁶²² Harlow and Newcomb, "Towards A General Hierarchical Model of Meaning and Satisfaction in Life," 387-405.

- E. The integration of knowing and living coherently with the worthwhile purpose of life (A, B and C) enables one to live more meaningfully than the single effect of having a worthwhile purpose in life and experiencing coherence alone (D).

Punch, followed by Silverman, emphasises that workable research questions have to include the following factors, namely answerability and substantively relevant and connectivity factors.⁶²³ Based on this premise, I have designed four workable, answerable and connected questions to probe the hypotheses above.

1. How did the research participants arrive at meaningfulness? The purpose of this question is to trace the research participants' journey to meaningfulness. This will capture whether a change of purpose in life has taken place, and if so, how has it contributed to meaningfulness? Pertinent to the propositions in this study, the outcome will shed light on hypotheses A and B.
2. How does the purposes of life offer meaning to painful events in life? The purpose of this question is to identify the relationship between the research participants' purposes in life and the reliability of these purposes (at least from the perspective of the research participant) in explaining anomalies. This will enable me to evaluate and compare different purposes (if a change of purposes has taken place) based on their abilities to explain said anomalies. This research question sheds additional light on hypotheses A and B, but most importantly it answers hypothesis C.
3. How does the purposes of life offer meaning in relation to work, family and personal life? Similar to research question 2, this question seeks to identify the impact of the purposes of life on the research participants' work, family and personal life. This research question provides additional information to determine the reliability of hypothesis D.
4. Is there an experiential difference between meaning in life and the meaning of life? The purpose of this question is to find out, from the research participants' experience, whether there is a qualitative difference between the meaning *in* and *of* life. Answers to this question may be contested as subjective deduction; however, since differences, if any, are

⁶²³ Keith Punch, *Introduction to Social Research: Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1998), 49. Also David Silverman, *Doing Qualitative Research: A Practical Handbook*, 2 ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2005), 90.

detected and experienced by the research participants, they represent valid data and will remain invaluable to my investigation.⁶²⁴ This research question answers hypothesis E.

3.3.1. OPERATIONALISING CONSTRUCTS IN THE THEOLOGY OF THE MEANING OF LIFE IN ECCLESIASTES

As noted above, the hypothesis expressing the theology of the meaning of life, based on the book of Ecclesiastes, as well as the research questions designed for this investigation, has several key concepts, also known as constructs in the field of empirical investigation. These constructs are: the purpose of life, the meaning of life, meaningfulness of life, coherence in life and fear God and keep His commandments. Since the teaching of Ecclesiastes has made distinctions between the purpose of life and other common purposes, it is evidently clear that the conceptual contrast between the constructs and their respective variables needs to be clarified as well. In this context the variables refer to factors that are associated with and contributed to constructs. Since these constructs are not directly measurable, they have to be defined and operationalised so that they can be tested, measured and documented objectively. The challenge with this particular task rests on the wide range of variables associated with these constructs which, in some cases, may overlap. Furthermore, each construct may carry terminology subjectivity and complexity, and in certain cases the possibilities of synonymy. Nevertheless, these steps are necessary in order to ensure observability and measurability and to establish what would count as evidence in this investigation.

In order to operationalise and objectify the constructs, this research considers existing empirical studies associated with those relevant to this investigation. This has several advantages. Firstly, it shows that the operationalised constructs presented in the subsequent subsections are built upon existing scholarly research and thus establishes the required objectivity. Furthermore, the possible variables associated with the constructs have been empirically considered in scholarly works. Hence, secondly, it sets the parameters associated with the constructs, which in turn provides the necessary boundaries for the range and the types of variables considered for each construct. Finally, it contributes to the reliability and rigour of this investigation. The following

⁶²⁴ Steinar Kvale, ed., *Issues of Validity in Qualitative Research* (Lund: Studentlitteratur, 1989), 79.

subsections explain the rationale behind and the process leading to the formation of the operationalised constructs for this empirical investigation.

3.3.1.1 A Purpose in Life and the Purpose of Life

The distinction between a ‘purpose in life’ and the ‘purpose of life’ constructs is clear in the field of philosophy, since both examine the assumption of one’s existence and the role of an Ultimate Being or an ultimate reality as the giver of purpose. When these constructs are considered through the lens of their relationship with one’s well-being in the field of personality psychology, however, the distinction becomes blurred. In the context of well-being, purpose in life refers to any goals that give one a sense of direction and the sense that life is fulfilling.⁶²⁵ Yalom, for instance, views purpose in life as activities that give one a sense of intentionality, functionality and direction.⁶²⁶ The use of such terms suggests that there is no distinction between the two constructs apart from the possibility that instead of *a* meaning in life, there is *the* meaning in life, referring to one’s ultimate concerns or a single ultimate purpose. In this case, ultimate concerns or a single purpose in life may or may not be associated with the existence of God or the question of one’s existence on Earth. Even when it is associated with the question of the existence of God or of one’s existence, it is operationalised by the frequency of one’s religious activities such as prayer, church attendance, etc.⁶²⁷ Although these variables may indicate the presence of purpose and its association with religious belief, they are still insufficient and not broad enough to assess the role of religion in relation to purposefulness. Furthermore, they cannot tell how important these activities are to one’s overall purpose in life.

For this reason, this investigation maintains the distinction propounded in the field of philosophy whilst keeping to its function as understood in the context of one’s well-being. Since a purpose can refer to goals that give one a sense of direction and a sense of fulfilment, a purpose in life construct refers to any goals that are not associated with meeting the demands associated with an Ultimate Being or an ultimate reality. Accordingly, the purpose of life construct refers to one’s direct activities that go towards meeting the religious demands associated with an Ultimate Being or an ultimate reality. Instead of looking at the frequency of religious activities, attention

⁶²⁵ Baumeister, *Meanings of Life*, 29-57.

⁶²⁶ Yalom, *Existential Psychotherapy*, 423.

⁶²⁷ See for instance, Wong, “Spirituality, Meaning and Successful Ageing,” 359-394.

will focus upon the key ingredients pertinent to the concept of the worthwhile purpose of life, based on the book of Ecclesiastes.

As noted in section 2.5.1, to ‘fear God and keep His commandments’ is to give a wholesome response to God, who can call everyone to account. This, as I have argued, includes that in keeping His commandments one lives a conscientious life, covering all spheres of life, and that undergirding this injunction is the realistic view on the reality of the certainty of death and uncertainty in life, put into effect by the ‘action with built-in consequences’ phenomenon. Accordingly, the call to abide by the command in 12:13b-14 is also a call to embrace and respect the realities of life. The injunction to fear God and keep His commandments as the most worthwhile purpose of life can also be considered as a benchmark and a point of reference through which realities, circumstances and even life itself are placed into perspective. Although it is fundamentally a “purpose” or a type of “goal” (in this case an overarching goal), it is theoretically not to be pursued; instead, it is to be lived.

Therefore, the purpose of life construct is operationalised and measured with the following variables.

One’s life purpose may indicate that it answers the purpose of one’s existence and such an existence is associated with what one believes in relation to an ultimate reality or an Ultimate Being. Secondly, it may also be associated with the sense of respect for the reality of the ‘action with built-in consequences’ phenomenon. In other words, one’s actions and decisions are associated with such respect and the fear of violating it. Thirdly, it may be the point of reference from which all circumstances and spheres of life cohere and are placed into perspective.

Considering that one of the research questions for this investigation involves tracing the change in one’s purpose in life, and whether there is a transition from a purpose in life to the purpose of life, a transition would be considered as to have taken place when it meets one or more of the variables of the operationalised construct, which in this case is the purpose of life.

3.3.1.2 A Meaning in Life and the Meaning of Life

The constructs ‘(a) purpose in life’ and ‘(a) meaning in life’ are often used interchangeably in scholarly works investigating the role and function of these constructs in relation to one’s well-being. Nevertheless, whilst a sense of purposefulness gives meaning to one’s life, the meaning in

life construct defers from that of the purpose in life by including a sense of coherence as a key factor for meaning.⁶²⁸ Thus, scholarly works define the meaning in life construct as the ‘cognizance of order, coherence and purpose in one’s existence, the pursuit and attainment of worthwhile goals, and an accompanying sense of fulfilment.’⁶²⁹ It is often conceptualised as the subjective experience of perceiving life as fitting into a larger context and finding significance therein,⁶³⁰ and one is able to feel a sense of comprehension and significance in the notion that life as a whole makes sense.⁶³¹ Hence, although these two constructs are often used interchangeably, the measure of meaning consistently consists of several more dimensions, only one of which refers to purpose.⁶³² The other key variable is the sense of coherence,⁶³³ followed by significance, intimacy and relationships, religion, fair treatment and self-acceptance.⁶³⁴ Even so, more weight is given to the purpose and coherence factors. As noted by Reker and Wong, a ‘full understanding of personal meaning requires both a top-down (holistic) and a bottom-up (elemental) view of life...[and] life only contains meanings that are actualized through specific activities, quests, and goals’.⁶³⁵ In addition, ‘to achieve an enduring type of personal meaning, specific sources need to be integrated into a larger and higher purpose.’⁶³⁶ Although the element of subjectivity in the measurement of meaning remains apparent, consistency in the variables and dimensions considered in the measurement provides an element of objectivity to this investigation. Therefore, by adopting the variables and dimensions used in empirical researches,

⁶²⁸ Yalom, *Existential Psychotherapy*, 423.

⁶²⁹ Gary T. Reker & Paul, P. T. Wong, “Aging as an individual process: Toward a theory of personal meaning” in J. E. Birren & V. L. Bengtson (Eds.), *Emergent Theories of Aging* (New York, NY: Springer, 1988), 221.

⁶³⁰ Yalom, *Existential Psychotherapy*, 423.

⁶³¹ Login S. George and Crystal L. Park, “Are meaning and purpose distinct? An Examination of Correlates and Predictors,” *Journal of Positive Psychology*, Vol. 8, No. 5, (2013) 365–375, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2013.805801>

⁶³² Jessica Morgan & Tom Farsides, “Measuring meaning in life,” *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 10 (2009) 197–214. DOI:10.1007/s10902-007-9075-0

⁶³³ *Ibid.* 197-214.

⁶³⁴ Paul T.P. Wong, “The Brief Personal Meaning Profile (PmP-B)...

⁶³⁵ Gary T. Reker and Louis C. Woo, “Personal Meaning Orientations and Psychosocial Adaptation in Older Adults,” DOI: 10.1177/2158244011405217

⁶³⁶ Reker and Paul, “Aging as an Individual Process,” 214-246.

when one's life is said to have found meaning, one may express that one's life has purpose and/or coherence, followed by at least one of the following: enjoying fair treatment, meeting religious demands, finding self- acceptance, a loving relationship and intimacy.

Operationalising the meaning of life construct is more complicated, though. Similar to the distinction between the purpose in life and purpose of life constructs, the distinction between meaning in life and the meaning of life constructs also involves the assumption of one's existence and the role of an Ultimate Being or God as the giver of one's life meaning. For this reason, there should be evidence that one has found a worthwhile purpose of life derived from the Ultimate Being or ultimate reality and, as a result, is able to identify coherence. It must be noted, though, that the religion factor is also present in measuring the meaning in life construct. However, the focus is limited to acknowledging the willingness to do God's will or glorify God, or the presence of a personal relationship with God.⁶³⁷ This is distinct from the religion factor considered in the meaning of life construct as the latter's weight upon the presence of a worthwhile purpose and that its importance is primary to every sphere of one's life. For this reason, whilst the other factors considered in measuring the meaning in life remain relevant, the main distinction between the two constructs lies in the type of purpose being considered. One is said to have found meaning in life when one has found a purpose in life and/or other sources that give meaning. On the contrary, when one is said to have found the meaning of life, it means the person has found a worthwhile purpose which answers the question of existence (as derived from their religious convictions) and by doing so sees coherence in all events and spheres.

3.3.1.3 Meaningfulness in Life and the Meaningfulness of Life

Unlike the measurements for "a meaning in life" and "the meaning of life" constructs, which primarily address factors related to sources of meanings, meaningfulness concerns the "feelings" or "experiences" derived from these sources. Therefore, whilst having a meaning in life or the meaning of life are associated with purposefulness, comprehension and significance,⁶³⁸ and whether one sees that events and themes in life are connected,⁶³⁹ meaningfulness is an

⁶³⁷ Ibid. 214-246.

⁶³⁸ George & Park, "Are Meaning and Purpose Distinct?" 365-375.

⁶³⁹ Baumeister and Vohs, "The Pursuit of Meaningfulness in Life," 608-618.

experiential entity associated with contentment, fulfilment,⁶⁴⁰ life satisfaction,⁶⁴¹ the non-alienation of human relationships⁶⁴² and happiness,⁶⁴³ in contrast with apathy, isolation,⁶⁴⁴ boredom⁶⁴⁵ and sadness. The primary difficulty with the measurement of “feeling” and “experience” is the subjectivity of such entities. For instance, in works that attempt to measure one’s life satisfaction, the focus is directed at how one feels about life, i.e. whether it is close to ideal, or whether one is satisfied with life or one would change the way one lives if one could do it all over again.⁶⁴⁶ Even works that measure the level of happiness are riddled with subjectivity and suffer the same limitations. For instance, the questionnaire being employed to measure one’s subjective happiness would ask the sample to rate on a numerical scale whether one considered oneself as ‘generally a happy person’ or ‘generally not a very happy person.’⁶⁴⁷ Fortunately, the measurement of “feeling” has an element of objectivity, as such an experience is often an outcome of one’s feelings about or quality of life as a result of an assessment⁶⁴⁸ based upon ‘a comparison of one’s circumstances with what is thought to be an appropriate standard.’⁶⁴⁹ Instead of a comparison between individuals as to who is happier or more satisfied with life, the comparison is primarily for the same person, whereupon an honest assessment is able to distinguish and identify the quality or the intensity of the same experiential entity.

⁶⁴⁰ Yalom, *Existential Psychotherapy*, 23.

⁶⁴¹ Peterson, Park and Seligman, “Orientations to Happiness and Life Satisfaction,” 25-41; Steger and Kashdan, “Stability and Specificity of Meaning in Life,” 161–179.

⁶⁴² Yalom, *Existential Psychotherapy*, 355-447.

⁶⁴³ Brännmark, “Leading Lives: On Happiness and Narrative Meaning,” 321-343.

⁶⁴⁴ Yalom, *Existential Psychotherapy*, 355, 478-483.

⁶⁴⁵ Frankl, *The Doctor and The Soul*, 109-110.

⁶⁴⁶ Diener, Emmons, Larsen and Griffin, “The Satisfaction with Life Scale,” 72.

⁶⁴⁷ Sonja Lyubomirsky & Lepper, H. S., “A measure of Subjective Happiness: Preliminary Reliability and Construct Validation,” *Social Indicators Research*, 46 (1999) 137-155.

⁶⁴⁸ Shin D.C. and Johnson D. M., “Avowed happiness as an Overall Assessment of the Quality of Life,” *Social Indicators Research*, No. 5 (1978) 475-492.

⁶⁴⁹ Diener, Emmons, Larsen and Griffin, “The Satisfaction with Life Scale,” 72.

Considering existing works on the meaningfulness construct, this investigation will adopt the accepted factors for meaningfulness established in existing scholarly works. They are the sense of satisfaction, contentment, connectedness (non-alienation) and happiness. These variables are consistent with the concept of enjoyment in Ecclesiastes presented earlier. Enjoyment, according to Ecclesiastes, is associated with satisfaction (compare 2:24-26), happiness (3:12-13; 11:7) and non-alienation (9:7-10; 11:9-10). Moreover, the required conditions for experiencing meaningfulness, such as having a sense of purpose, are also found in the speech (2:10), as the call to enjoy is the call to experience it accordingly. Evidently, these variables are relevant and can be true for both the meaningfulness in life and the meaningfulness of life constructs. Nevertheless, consistent with the philosophical distinction between a meaning in life and the meaning of life, the meaningfulness of life will carry the assumption that such a feeling or experiential entity is associated with living the worthwhile purpose of life and having found coherence. The decision for making this distinction is also consistent with the teaching of Ecclesiastes, as its prerequisite of meaningfulness is built on the foundation of living harmoniously with the purpose of human existence, which is the point of reference for every activity and upon which one experiences coherence. In view of this distinction, as well as considering the nature of the experiential entity under consideration, the search for evidence will be directed at the intensity of such an experiential entity as felt by an individual, i.e. as a result of an honest assessment of whether there is a difference in intensity and wholesomeness after changing life purposes.

3.3.1.4 Coherence in Life

As noted in the discussion on the constructs above, the coherence in life construct is crucial to determining whether one is living in accordance to the worthwhile purpose of life and thus has found the meaning of life. A key factor in the meaningfulness of life is the feeling that life makes coherent sense, indicating that one has found coherence. Conceptually, coherence in life is about seeing the connectedness⁶⁵⁰ or the consistency of events. Hence, when one is said to have experienced coherence, it means one can see a logical, consistent connection and a meaningful relationship between various parts of one's life, which includes undeserved or unexpected suffering. A common tool used by researchers to measure the presence of coherence is the 'Sense

⁶⁵⁰ Baumeister, *Meanings of Life*, 29-57.

of Coherence Scale – Meaningfulness subscale’.⁶⁵¹ This scale assesses one’s global orientation regarding experiences based on a sense of comprehensibility, manageability and meaningfulness.⁶⁵² Although widely used, this scale has a poor correlation with measuring meaningfulness.⁶⁵³ Nevertheless, several variables relevant to the concept of coherence, such as the ability to see life in the context of the whole (past, present and future), making sense of unpleasant situations and seeing the connection between events, are adopted for this investigation.

A crucial variable pertinent to this construct is the role and function of the worthwhile purpose of life as the reference point from which one derives coherence. This is the case even when one’s internal and external environments are unpredictable and when, probably, things *may not* work out as well as can reasonably be expected or there is no control over events. As noted in section 3.2, traumatic events which bring about a sense of undeserved or unexpected suffering in a person’s life change the sense of meaningfulness dramatically.⁶⁵⁴ Suffering can be considered as undeserved when, regardless of the intensity of the suffering or pain, a sense of unfairness or injustice is felt or is considered as unexpected. This suffering involves ‘moments of change in life’⁶⁵⁵ and may challenge and paralyse one’s framework of belief or philosophy.⁶⁵⁶ For ‘severely negative events can challenge parts of the life scheme, disrupting one’s sense of order and/or purpose,’⁶⁵⁷ thus challenging the ability to see and experience coherence.

⁶⁵¹ Aaron Antonovsky, *Unraveling the mystery of health: How People Manage Stress and Stay Well* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass. 1987).

⁶⁵² Crystal L. Park & Login S. George, “Assessing Meaning and Meaning Making in the Context of Stressful Life Events: Measurement Tools and Approaches,” *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, (2013) DOI: 10.1080/17439760.2013.830762

⁶⁵³ Ibid., 8.

⁶⁵⁴ Maddi, “The Existential Neurosis,” 311-325; Debats, “Experiences of Meaning in Life,” 395; “Sources of Meaning: An Investigation of Significant Commitments in Life,” 30-57; “Measurement of Personal Meaning,” 237-259.

⁶⁵⁵ Debats, “Experiences of Meaning in Life,” 371-372. Also, Kobasa, Maddi and Kahn, “Hardiness and Health: A Prospective Study,” 168-177.

⁶⁵⁶ Thompson and Janigian, “Life Schemes,” 260-280.

⁶⁵⁷ Ibid., 260-280.

A fundamental assumption underlying the concept of coherence in Ecclesiastes is the existence of a reference point from which the basis of the relationships between the parts, such as family life, personal life and work life, and even the relevance of traumatic experiences, can be defined and placed into perspective. In other words, the worthwhile purpose of life is the reference point through which one finds coherence, i.e. living harmoniously with the call to fear God and keep His commandments provides a logical, consistent and meaningful relationship between the different aspects of life, even undeserved or unexpected suffering, putting them coherently into perspective. Therefore, the factors that are counted as evidence that one has found coherence must point to the ability to see and experience a logical, consistent and meaningful relationship between family life, work life, personal life and even undeserved suffering as a result of living consistently with the worthwhile purpose.

3.3.1.5 Fear God and Keep His Commandments

A key difference, as noted in the operationalised constructs above, is whether one's purpose is built upon a belief that its action or direction in life, or sense of meaning, is an appropriate response to an Ultimate Being or an ultimate reality, and in doing so experiences coherence in all aspects of life. This distinction is also noted and accepted in the field of philosophy and is consistent with the teaching of Ecclesiastes, in particular on the relevance of 12:13b-14. In keeping with the teaching of Ecclesiastes, to "fear God" expresses one's appropriate response to God through the reverence of who He is and the respect for the 'action with built-in consequences' phenomenon as an important reality through conscientious living. Certainly, the injunction has specific references, meanings and applications for a specific audience. Nevertheless, as noted in the discussion in Section 2.7, Qoheleth's reflection upon humanity in general also assumes the existence of that fear of God and the accessibility of this knowledge to everyone and that the injunction is also built upon a timeless principle commonly expressed through the Golden Rule, i.e. "Whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them" (Matthew 7:12). For this reason, the construct "fear God and keep His commandments" expresses an idea that one's action is consistent with the Golden Rule and is motivated by the belief that actions or activities are appropriate responses to an Ultimate Being or an ultimate reality. Accordingly, the "fear God and keep His commandments" construct is operationalised through the following variables. One may be considered as fearing God and keeping His

commandments when one's life purpose is undergirded by respect for God or an Ultimate Being, and/or respect for an ultimate reality, such as the "action with built-in consequences" phenomenon. Evidence of such a life purpose is expressed through actions or activities that are consistent with the Golden Rule. Table Three (3) shows the summary of the construct and an operationalised definition.

TABLE 3: THE CONSTRUCT AND OPERATIONALISED DEFINITION

Construct	The Meaning of the Construct	Construct Operationalised Definition	Measures / Evidence
A purpose in life	A life purpose in life that is not associated with meeting the demand associated with an Ultimate Being or the ultimate reality.	Any goals in life that is not associated with meeting the demand of an ultimate Being or the ultimate reality.	A transition of life purpose takes place when it meets one or more of the variables of the operationalised construct for the purpose of life.
The purpose of life	The overarching purpose directed towards meeting the religious demands associated with an Ultimate Being or an ultimate reality.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Life purpose that answers the purpose of one's existence and such existence is associated with one's believes of an ultimate reality or an Ultimate Being. 2. Life purpose that respect the reality of the 'action with built-in consequences' phenomenon. 3. Life purpose which is the point of reference from which every circumstance and spheres of life cohere and placed into perspective. 	
A meaning in life	Living a purpose in life and seeing coherence in life.	Living a purpose in life and experiencing other sources that give meaning such as seeing coherence in life, significance, intimacy, relationship, religion, fair-treatment and self-acceptance.	A transition of life meaning takes place when it meets one or more of the variables of the operationalised construct for the meaning of life.
The meaning of life	Living the worthwhile purpose of life which answers the question of existence and seeing coherence in all events and spheres of life.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Living the worthwhile purpose of life that it answers the purpose of one's existence and such existence is associated with one's believes of an ultimate reality or an Ultimate Being. 2. Living a life purpose consistent with the respect for the reality of the 'action with built-in consequences' phenomenon. 3. See the worthwhile purpose of life as reference from which every circumstances and spheres of life coheres and placed into perspective. 	

TABLE 3: THE CONSTRUCT AND OPERATIONALISED DEFINITION (Cont.)

Construct	The Meaning of the Construct	Construct Operationalised Definition	Measures / Evidence
Meaningfulness in life	A positive feeling or experience with life as a result of living a purpose in life and seeing coherence in life.	A sense of satisfaction, contentment, connectedness and happiness as a result of living a purpose in life and seeing coherence in life.	A transition takes place when upon an honest assessment, a person expresses a difference in the intensity and wholesomeness of the experience after having a transition in life purposes.
Meaningfulness of life	A positive feeling or experience with life as a result of living the purpose of life and seeing coherences in all events and spheres of life.	A greater sense of satisfaction, contentment, connectedness and happiness as a result of living the purpose of life and seeing coherence in all events and spheres of life.	
Coherence in life	Seeing connectedness or the consistency of events life	Seeing a logical, consistent connection and a meaningful relationship between various parts of life, which include undeserved or unexpected suffering in life as a result of living the worthwhile purpose of life.	The ability to see and experience meaningful relationship of events in life for living consistently with the worthwhile purpose of life.
Fear God and Keep His Commandments	Activities in life are motivated by the belief that they are appropriate responses to an Ultimate Being or an ultimate reality.	Life purpose may be undergirded by: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Respect for God or an Ultimate Reality or an ultimate reality and/or 2. Respect for the “action with built-in consequences” phenomenon. 	Life purpose is expressed through actions or activities that are consistent with the Golden Rule, motivated by their respect for God and/or an Ultimate Being and/or ultimate reality and/or the “action with built-in consequences” phenomenon.

3.3.3 OPERATIONALISED CONSTRUCTS IN THE CONTEXT OF CHINESE BUSINESSPEOPLE IN MALAYSIA

The sample for this investigation was Malaysian-Chinese Businesspeople in Malaysia. The decision was necessary and strategic for several reasons. The Malaysian-Chinese stepped onto Malaysian soil as early as the nineteenth century and have maintained their cultural identity ever since. In fact, the Chinese in Malaysia are the only people in the world provided with the privilege of maintaining and retaining their race-based education, heritage and culture.⁶⁵⁸ Although they have been on Malaysian soil for about two centuries and have undergone significant transformations, such as with their economic and education positions, the existing scholarly and empirical research on Malaysian-Chinese businesspeople has concentrated primarily on their historical background, the impact of their business culture, education policy and political identity and the complexity of their religious practices. To the best of the author's knowledge, no study has investigated their experiences surrounding the meaning of life and how these have shaped their lives when they have found one.

With respect to the subject of the meaning of life, their cultural, historical and psychological factors make a good and strategic case for this investigation. To explain further, the ancestors of these Malaysian-Chinese businesspeople can be traced to those from the southern regions of China who, for reasons of escaping poverty and despair, political discrimination and natural calamities, migrated to the then Malaysia in the nineteenth century.⁶⁵⁹ Unlike other ethnic groups, such as the Indians who were brought into Malaysia by the then British government to fill a certain gap in the economy, the Chinese left their homeland in an act of what was seen by the Chinese government as treason, in order to create their own opportunities, fortunes and freedom, thus creating a certain quality of resourcefulness, survival and psychology pertinent to this group. As Ye notes,

⁶⁵⁸ Tan Liok Ee, "Chinese Schools in Malaysia: A Case of Cultural Resilience" in *The Chinese in Malaysia*, eds., Lee Kam Hing & Tan Chee Beng, (Shah Alam, Malaysia: Oxford University Press, 2000), 228.

⁶⁵⁹ Yen Ching Hwang, "Historical Background" in *The Chinese in Malaysia*, eds., Lee Kam Hing & Tan Chee Beng, (Shah Alam, Malaysia: Oxford University Press, 2000), 1-2.

Being an immigrant is all about raising yourself by your own bootstraps, working hard for what you want, making your fortune, being resourceful, enterprising and adaptable, and above all, struggling and surviving.⁶⁶⁰

They were driven to “make it” in a hostile environment and thus, naturally, “wealth was the gauge of social worth”⁶⁶¹ and success. The purpose behind migrating and the threat of a hostile environment inevitably shaped their psychology and perception of importance, such as purpose in life. Research on the sources of meaning among Chinese (in Canada) shows this to be the case, with sense of achievement and acceptance rated the highest among the sources of meaning in life.⁶⁶² Although Chinese in Malaysia and Canada are two distinct groups of people, the finding indicates the psychology of the immigrants and what may constitute a worthwhile purpose. Impetus for such a pursuit can be traced to the Chinese emphasis on the importance of family ties. An interesting finding, as noted by historians, is the unbroken ties between these immigrants and their family and relatives in China, and many of them built a more comfortable environment and created opportunities for those left behind in China to join them.⁶⁶³ Whilst most remained relatively poor, quite a number eventually started family-based businesses, with the larger scale of these firms contributing significantly to the economy⁶⁶⁴ and education of the community in Malaysia.⁶⁶⁵ These phenomena hint at a close link between purpose in life and family obligations.

The Chinese in Malaysia are known for their adaptability, perhaps for the purpose of surviving in a hostile environment, and thus they viewed suffering and hardship as expectedly necessary processes for success. Such adaptability is also seen in the way they

⁶⁶⁰ Ye Lin Sheng, *The Chinese Dilemma* (New South Wales, Australia: East West Publishing Pty Ltd, 2003), 102.

⁶⁶¹ Ibid., 102.

⁶⁶² Annie Lim, “Exploring Sources of Life Meaning Among Chinese” (M.A Thesis, Trinity Western University, September 2011), 57.

⁶⁶³ Yen, “Historical Background,” 1-2.

⁶⁶⁴ Phang Hooi Eng, “The Economic Role of the Chinese in Malaysia” in *The Chinese in Malaysia*, eds., Lee Kam Hing & Tan Chee Beng, (Shah Alam, Malaysia: Oxford University Press, 2000), 94-120.

⁶⁶⁵ Ibid., 94-120.

treated religion. Historians note that the immigrants brought with them religions from their homeland, such as Taoism and Buddhism. Due to their religious worldview, i.e. non-exclusivity and an emphasis on practicality, their belief systems eventually integrated and evolved into a complex set of beliefs and practices that are uniquely Malaysian-Chinese.⁶⁶⁶ In fact, there is evidence that the function of religion for them is primarily for personal safety and prosperity. Even though most of the Chinese in Malaysia have been born and raised in Malaysia, the pursuit of and emphasis on material success through entrepreneurship and education, and their pragmatic view of religion, has remained a distinct characteristic of the race in Malaysia.

A key reason, in addition to environmental factors, can be traced to the long-held values on life founded from a long history of philosophical (Confucianism) and religious (Taoism and Buddhism) influence which shaped the way the Chinese in Malaysia interpret meaning and reality. Although Confucianism is a branch of Chinese philosophy distinctly different from religions such as Taoism and Buddhism, its values and teaching are often mixed and integrated and are usually seen as one wholesome entity. Confucian emphasis on virtuous living and righteousness, expressed in loyalty to oneself, family, society and states, is evidently a key reason for an emphasis on strong family ties. This, to Confucianism, is being human. In fact, as noted by the sage himself,

The Ancients who wished to perpetrate great virtues throughout the empire first learned to govern their states well. Wishing to govern their states well, they first put their family relationship in order. Wishing to have their families in order, they first cultivated their own lives. Wishing to cultivate their lives, they first regulated their minds.⁶⁶⁷

This principle about living becomes more complex when it is considered alongside the teaching of Daoism, which advocates adaptability to a changing environment. For instance, a key teaching point in Daoism says,

⁶⁶⁶ Tan Chee Beng, "The Religions of the Chinese in Malaysia" in *The Chinese in Malaysia*, eds., Lee Kam Hing & Tan Chee Beng, (Shah Alam, Malaysia: Oxford University Press, 2000), 283.

⁶⁶⁷ Da Liu, *The Tao and Chinese Culture* (New York: Schocken Books, 1979), 28.

Existing and not existing derive from each other; difficult and easy complement one another; long and short are mutually formed; high and low are relative to each other on an incline...⁶⁶⁸

The teachings of Confucius and Daoism do affect the ways in which Chinese view the purpose of existence and the way to live. When all of this is considered with the teaching of Karma, which essentially teaches that good deeds beget good outcomes and vice versa, it forms a complex worldview from which they interpret their actions, reality and meaning. Nonetheless, as noted above, there is yet to be an empirical study on the subject of the meaning of life for Chinese-Malaysian businesspeople. The existing perceptions of their sources of meanings are based on historical and cultural factors and their impacts on their psychology on what is important in life. Undoubtedly, considering these factors in the light of the operationalised constructs explained in the sections above, Malaysian-Chinese business people do have meaning in life, as the pursuit of success and acceptance evidently point to directed goals. Therefore, it can also be said that they have found meaning in life. Furthermore, their pragmatic view of suffering, their emphasis on family ties and success in work do indicate that there are some forms of coherence, too. Nevertheless, there is still a glaring absence of empirical evidence highlighting their ideas of what truly is their purpose in life and, accordingly, their views on meaning in life and on the meaning of life. More importantly, it is yet to be seen whether variables relevant to the meaning of life outlined above are consistent with those who claim to have found the meaning of life and are experiencing meaningfulness. More interestingly, although they are basically religious, the relationship between the way they embrace religion and see reality with respect to their purpose of existence and meaning remain not investigated. Therefore, whilst it can be said that, based on their cultural or historical context, Malaysian-Chinese businesspeople have found meaning in life, it cannot be asserted beforehand that they have found the meaning thereof.

Hence, consistent with the research questions in this investigation, this research will select Malaysian-Chinese businesspeople who claim to have found the purpose and meaning of life. The focus will be on investigating how they arrive at meaningfulness and whether a change in their purpose in life has taken place. And if there has, in what way is

⁶⁶⁸ Christian Jochim, *Chinese Religions: A Cultural Perspective* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1986), 130-131.

their purpose consistent with the injunction to fear God and keep His commandments (12:13b-14)? Furthermore, since suffering and pain have been accepted as part of their philosophy and religious belief, this research seeks to determine how the purpose in life offers meaning to unexpected painful events. The research will also seek to uncover in what way their purpose in life offers meaning in relation to work, family and personal life. And finally, is there an experiential difference between meaning in life and the meaning of life? The next section explains the research strategy of this investigation.

3.4 THE RESEARCH STRATEGY

The complexity of the research questions requires a research strategy that can trace and show a person's journey towards meaningfulness in life, as opposed to a simple statement expressing an experience or an event. The emphasis is on seeing the research participant's life as a whole. This is crucial, as it will help me to understand as clearly as possible the research participants' perspectives on the process, decisions, shifts of priority and worldviews. In this respect, a complete understanding of each research participant's ideas and experiences regarding the meaning of life can only be adequately gathered and understood from the participant's life as a whole, especially their experience of meaningfulness, by comparing their past and present actions, experiences or events.⁶⁶⁹ Hence, the strategy should, as Debats puts it, 'ensure that the subjects [research participants] describe actual incidents from their own lives... to elicit real and experiential accounts of these experiences, rather than intellectualized responses, to insure the validity of the answers.'⁶⁷⁰ Furthermore, as McAdams rightly notes, 'People... reconstruct the personal past, perceive the present, and anticipate the future in terms of an internalized and evolving self-story, an integrative narrative of self that provides modern life with some modicum of psychosocial unity and purpose.'⁶⁷¹ This further affirms that a

⁶⁶⁹ Catherine Kohler Riessman, *Narrative Analysis*, Qualitative Research Method Series 30 (Newsbury Park: Sage Publications, 1993), 19.

⁶⁷⁰ Debats, "Experiences of Meaning in Life," 360.

⁶⁷¹ Dan P. McAdams, "The Psychology of Life Stories," *Review of General Psychology* Vol. 5 No. 2 (2001) 100-122.

“story” and “narrative” expressing a life journey are important data capable of revealing their convergent and coherent views on the meaning of life.⁶⁷²

A key aspect of a life story lies on the fact that its formation is based on a ‘delimited set of temporally and thematically organized scenes and scripts.’⁶⁷³ In addition, while a life story differentiates one person from the next,⁶⁷⁴ a thematically organised script makes it possible for a researcher to compare and contrast details between individuals, and between an individual and the community.⁶⁷⁵ This will certainly make it possible for me to analyse the research participants’ journey to meaningfulness in life as a unit, and at the same time identify whether or not there are common patterns that are true to every unit. More interestingly, a life story can be recollected and directed when one is guided and directed to “life time periods” such as general events (attainment of or failure to attain goals) or event-specific knowledge – nuclear episodes in life (high point, low point or turning point).⁶⁷⁶ Hence, instead of the overwhelmingly large amount of information from the life story of an individual, I can direct the research participants to focus on a few themes and ‘life time periods’. This is particularly helpful, since this investigation seeks to analyse and compare the themes of the book of Ecclesiastes with the experiences of the research participants. To explain this further, the life story approach, in addition to its ability to illuminate the journey of the research participants on the way to meaningfulness, allows me to direct them to themes in their lives comparable to those in Ecclesiastes.

A problem with this approach is the need for the research participants to recall experiences from memory. Moreover, the experience of meaningfulness is only accessible and can only be verified by the research participants. In other words, although an outsider, in this case, as a researcher I may perceive and interpret a participant’s

⁶⁷² Ibid., 100.

⁶⁷³ Ibid., 117.

⁶⁷⁴ Ibid., 101.

⁶⁷⁵ Ibid., 101.

⁶⁷⁶ Martin A. Conway and Christopher W. Pleydell-Pearce, “The Construction of Autobiographical Memories in the Self-memory System,” *Psychological Review*, 107 (2000) 261-288.

experience and meaningfulness, the validity of which can only be verified by them. As Polkinghorne noted, ‘Each of us has direct access to only one realm of meaning – our own. Because it is not available to direct public observation, the region of meaning must be approached through self-reflective recall or introspection in our mental realm.’⁶⁷⁷ Drawing a parallel to the life story approach, it depends heavily on the participants’ ability to recall events and experiences; hence, their state of mind may influence the quality of the data collected. Consequently, it is essential that the research strategy engages a carefully crafted interview questionnaire as a data collection method,⁶⁷⁸ as it is not only useful in helping the research participant to recollect experiences, but it will also help me to ‘capture the thinking of the participants from the participants’ perspective as accurately as possible’.⁶⁷⁹

3.4.1 A Qualitative Study

It is evident that the research strategy requires a qualitative study as a means of enquiry. Denzin and Lincoln explain:

The word *qualitative* implies an emphasis on the qualities of entities and on processes and meanings that are not experimentally examined or measured (if measured at all) in terms of quantity, amount, intensity or frequency. Qualitative research stresses the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researchers and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry.⁶⁸⁰

Creswell notes that this involves trying to ‘get as close as possible to the participants being studied... [where] subjective evidence is assembled based on individual views’.⁶⁸¹

⁶⁷⁷ Polkinghorne, *Narrative Knowing and Human Sciences*, 7.

⁶⁷⁸ Interviewing is the most important data collection technique a qualitative researcher possesses. See M. Fetterman, *Ethnography: Step by Step* (Thousand Oaks: Sage 1989), quoted in Jack R. Fraenkel & Norman E. Wallen: *How to Design and Evaluate Research in Education*. 7th ed. (Boston: McGraw-Hill Higher Education, 2009), 445. Also, Rubin & Rubin, *Qualitative Interviewing*, 25-40. Steinar Kvale, *Doing Interviews* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publication, 2007), 33-50

⁶⁷⁹ Fraenkel and Wallen: *How to Design and Evaluate Research in Education*, 423.

⁶⁸⁰ Norman K. Denzin and Yvonne S. Lincoln, “The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research,” 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publication, 2011), 6-8.

⁶⁸¹ John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, 3rd Ed (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2013), 20.

Creswell continues, ‘This is how knowledge is known – through the subjective experiences of people’.⁶⁸² Based on this point, it is clear that the procedures of qualitative research, or its methodology, are inductive, emerging and shaped by the researcher’s experience in collecting and analysing data.

Since the qualitative methodology has aspects of subjectivity, I have adopted the “Methodological Coherence” principle⁶⁸³ to ensure the reliability of the study, which ensures congruence between the research question and the method components.⁶⁸⁴ This can be done by employing the “verification strategies,” involving the process of checking, confirming, making sure and being certain the mechanisms used during the process of research contribute incrementally to ensuring the reliability and validity, and thus the rigour, of a study.⁶⁸⁵ Based on Morse’s proposal, I have also taken the following steps:⁶⁸⁶

1. Ensuring the sample is appropriate and consists of participants who best represent or have knowledge of the research topic. This includes sufficient data to account for all aspects of phenomena.
2. Collecting and analysing data from the sample concurrently. This includes consistent and mutual interaction between what is already known and what needs to be known.
3. Thinking theoretically by comparing and confirming emerging ideas derived from new and collected data.
4. Theory development by means of considering the data between micro and macro conceptual/theoretical perspectives.

⁶⁸² Ibid., 20.

⁶⁸³ Janice M. Morse, Michael Barrett, Maria Mayan, Karin Olson & Jude Spiers, “Verification Strategies for Establishing Reliability and Validity in Qualitative Research,” *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* (2002) 13-22.

⁶⁸⁴ Ibid., 13-22.

⁶⁸⁵ Ibid., 17. Emphasis is Morse’s.

⁶⁸⁶ Ibid., 17-18

The following sections highlight the methodological and verification strategies that will be employed in this investigation.

3.4.2 A Case Study Design

The complexity of the research questions led to my decision to engage a case study design for the enquiry. This design is suitable, since it is known to be useful for enquiries into contemporary phenomena within a real-life context, when the boundaries between the phenomena and context are not clear and when multiple sources of evidence are used.⁶⁸⁷ It is also a preferred strategy when a researcher needs to explore in-depth one or more individuals.⁶⁸⁸ Researchers have also found it appropriate for research seeking to investigate “how” and “why” questions⁶⁸⁹ and phenomena in real-life and complex social contexts.⁶⁹⁰ It is used particularly in an attempt to understand in-depth and holistically how one or two issues might shape a subject.⁶⁹¹ Considering the inherent complexity of the subject of the meaning of life, and the purpose of my investigation, I found this to an appropriate investigative tool.

I noted that the focus of a case study is particularisation, rather than generalization,⁶⁹² as it aims at taking a ‘particular case and [coming] to know it well, not primarily as to how it is different from others but what it is, what it does.’⁶⁹³ Explicitly, the emphasis is on the

⁶⁸⁷ Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research: Designs and Methods Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, 4th ed., (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publication, 2009), 3. Also, Donna M. Zucker, “Teaching Research Methods in the Humanities and Social Sciences: How to do Case Study Research,” in Donna M Zucker, “How to Do Case Study Research,” *School of Nursing Faculty Publication Series*. (2009) Paper 2.

⁶⁸⁸ Robert Stake, *The Art of Case Study Research* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publication, 1995), 1-6. Also John W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Method Approaches*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, Sage, 2003), 15-16.

⁶⁸⁹ Yin, *Case Study Research*, 7-9. See also Donna, “Teaching Research Method,” 4.

⁶⁹⁰ Yin, *Case Study Research*, 7-9.

⁶⁹¹ G. Sjoberg, N. William, T. Vaughan and A. Sjoberg, “The Case Study in Social Research,” in J. Feargin, A. Orum and G. Sjoberg, eds., *The Case for Case Study* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 27-79. Also Tellis, “Application of a Case Study Methodology,” Accessed in August 27, 2014 <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR3-3/tellis2.html>.

⁶⁹² Creswell, *Research Design*, 15.

⁶⁹³ Creswell, *Research Design*, 15.

uniqueness of a case.⁶⁹⁴ Accordingly, each research participant in this investigation is a unit case of analysis in itself, which should help me to understand each case well. However, a case study design could also include an investigation into multiple cases in a single research, which would involve a comparison of every unit case, in order to identify common patterns. In fact, the case study design allows for a study of several cases in a single research. The “logic” underlying the use of multiple case studies is that each one must be selected so that it will predict similar results (a literal replication) or produce contrasting results, albeit for predictable reasons (theoretical replication).⁶⁹⁵

Table Four (4) summarises the case study protocol adapted from Yin.⁶⁹⁶

⁶⁹⁴ Stake, *The Art of Case Study Research*, 8.

⁶⁹⁵ Donna, *Teaching Research Method*, 4.

⁶⁹⁶ Yin, *Case Study Research*, 79-90.

Table 4: CASE STUDY PROTOCOL

Phases	Activities	Description of Activities
One	Establish purpose and rationale for the research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider the significance of the phenomena of interest • Establish research questions • Design research based on the purpose of the research and its questions
Two	Collect and manage data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Determine the sample • Data management sheet • Interviews • Transcribe interviews • Collect secondary data
Three	Analysis and interpretation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Code the interviews • Computer assisted analysis • Analysis built on themes linked to the research questions • Analyze findings based on the purpose, rationale and research questions • Cross-case comparison • Identify the themes and thematic relationships • Establish rigour – credibility and transferability
Four	Reporting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describe the case study • Describe every unit of analysis • Report findings • Limitations and bias • Future study

3.5 DATA SOURCES AND DATA COLLECTION

The reliability of this inquiry relies on the quality of the collected data. Hence, the sample selected for this investigation has to be appropriately sufficient to furnish the research questions.⁶⁹⁷ To put it differently, the selected sample must help me to understand the case, whether typical or not.⁶⁹⁸ Following this line, I have followed several steps to ensure sample sufficiency is enough to reflect and account for the themes

⁶⁹⁷ Morse, "Verification Strategies," 18.

⁶⁹⁸ Stakes, *The Art of Case Study Research*, 56.

expressed in the book of Ecclesiastes. The term “sufficiency” refers to “sampling adequacy”, that is, ‘sufficient data to account for all aspects of the phenomenon.’⁶⁹⁹ In this case, the sample becomes sufficient when the addition of a research participant no longer yields significantly new information pertaining to the research question. Accordingly, the size of the sample is not the emphasis of this investigation.

In order for the data to account for the teaching of Ecclesiastes on the meaning of life as well as the themes expressed in the book, I have decided that the research participants will fulfil all the following criteria:

1. The participant has experienced the meaning of life.⁷⁰⁰
2. The participant is married.⁷⁰¹
3. The participant has had painful experiences in life. This may include the loss of loved ones, setbacks in businesses, illness, etc.
4. The participant is financially independent.⁷⁰²

The sample may, however, include people of different age groups (above 18 years of age), genders, industries, education and religious inclination.

⁶⁹⁹ Morse, “Verification Strategies,” 18.

⁷⁰⁰ It is difficult to identify who has actually found and is experiencing the meaning of life. In view of this difficulty, the selection of suitable research participants was based on peers’ perceptions. This means that they were perceived to be experiencing the meaning of life. The subjectivity of peer observation was mitigated by a follow-up assessment using the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) test. A high score in the presence of meaning test indicates that the research participants are indeed experiencing the meaning of life.

⁷⁰¹ As explained in Chapter One, this criterion is used in order to be consistent with the societal background of Ecclesiastes, where marriage and having a family is expected and considered appropriate. Furthermore, this criterion permits an investigation into experiences of life meaning, from singlehood to married life, thus providing a fuller range of life experiences and, hence, richer data for analysis and interpretation.

⁷⁰² “Financial independence” means the research participants have enough money to live on, and they no longer need to work for necessities. The stated criterion does not imply in any way that those who are less wealthy or have not achieved financial independence cannot experience the meaning of life. This particular criterion is based on the observation that an important issue observed in Ecclesiastes is tension between wealth and meaningfulness in life.

3.5.1 The Sample and the Sampling Process

I adopted a criterion sampling strategy and conducted the sampling process in four stages. The first stage took a decision to consider people representing different religious orientations and life experiences and claiming to have found meaningfulness of life. The selection of different people representing different circumstances is necessary in order to explore the characteristics of each case and to establish common patterns across cases. The second stage involved reading a number of printed materials and publications as well as attending to videos about people who may be considered to have experienced the meaning of life. I also paid a close attention to their experiences in the light of the themes in Ecclesiastes; for instance, I sought evidence that they had had some form of painful event in their lives. Through this process, I identified and selected 23 potential research participants for the investigation.

The third stage involved sending emails with four attached documents to the selected potential participants. The documents were:

1. An invitation letter.⁷⁰³
2. A participant information sheet.⁷⁰⁴
3. A participant consent form.⁷⁰⁵
4. The meaning in life questionnaire (MLQ).⁷⁰⁶

The invitation letter included information on the purpose of the interview and the reason for the participant consent form. The participant information sheet described the project in detail. This included what the research participant could expect from the project. In order to ascertain that the potential participants were experiencing a meaningful life, I requested them to complete the meaning in life questionnaire (MLQ). Participants with high scores in this respect would be recruited as sample for the interview. The process

⁷⁰³ Please refer to Appendix 1.

⁷⁰⁴ Please refer to Appendix 2.

⁷⁰⁵ Please refer to Appendix 3.

⁷⁰⁶ Please refer to Appendix 4.

has therefore undergone two non-discriminate steps, in order to ensure an unbiased sampling process.

The third stage generated the following results:

1. Twenty-three people were invited to the project. However, only nine (9) out of the 23 gave consent to be interviewed, after several follow up emails and phone calls. Two (2) from the nine (9) requested to meet me and explain the project in detail, in order to ensure the trustworthiness of the researcher and the motivation behind the project. One (1) of these two (2) cited possible business rivalry as the reason for requesting to meet me in person prior to giving his consent.
2. Only three (3) out of the nine (9) who had agreed to the project replied with completed MLQ and consent letter. Due to this “disruptions”, I proceeded to meet potential research participants in person and have them complete the score and consent letter.
3. Two (2) of the nine (9) who agreed to be interviewed offered several names for the project. After repeating the first stage of the sampling selection process, I decided to invite four (4) persons from the recommended names into the project. These four (4) persons completed the MLQ scores after meeting them in person.
4. Eleven (11) out of the thirteen (13) persons’ MLQ scores indicated the presence of meaningfulness. Two (2) MLQ scores indicated no presence of meaningfulness. Table Five (5) shows a brief profile of the research participants.
5. Out of the eleven (11) persons with high MLQ scores in the presence of meaning in life, seven of them were Christians, two Buddhists and another two did not adhere to a religious belief.
6. The two (2) persons who registered low MLQ scores in the presence of meaning in life were one Christian and one Buddhist.

Table 5: RESEARCH PARTICIPANT BASIC PROFILE

Participant Codes	Gender	Age Range	Industries	Family	Suffering	MLQ Score
RP1	Male	45-50	Printing	Yes	Yes	Qualify
RP2	Male	45-50	Stationery	Yes	Yes	Qualify
RP3	Female	50-55	Property	Yes	Yes	Qualify
RP4	Male	50-55	Engineering	Yes	Yes	Qualify
RP5	Male	55-55	Investment	Yes	Yes	Qualify
RP6	Female	50-55	Household	Yes	Yes	Qualify
RP7	Male	50-55	Property	Yes	Yes	Qualify
RP8	Male	60-65	Construction	Yes	Yes	Qualify
RP9	Male	45-50	Consultancy	Yes	Yes	Qualify
RP10	Male	50-55	Trading	Yes	Yes	Qualify
RP11	Male	50-55	Food	Yes	Yes	Qualify
RP12 (N)	Male	25-30	Transportation	Yes	No	Not Qualify
RP13 (N)	Female	50-55	Beauty	Yes	Yes	Not Qualify

In the fourth stage, I have identified and categorised from these potential research participants four separate cases based on their religious orientations and MLQ scores. Three of these cases are represented by research participants with a high score for their MLQ on the presence of meaning in life. The fourth case is represented by research participants with a low MLQ score, indicating the lack of meaning in life. I have identified and selected a case for Christians with high MLQ scores, a case for Buddhists with high MLQ scores, a case for non-religious with high MLQ scores and a case represented by one Christian research participant and one Buddhist research participant with low MLQ scores. These cases represent genders, different life experiences,

industries and, of course, religious affiliation. Table Six (6) shows a brief profile of the four cases and the research participants.

TABLE 6: BRIEF PROFILE OF THE FOUR CASES

Cases	Religion Orientation	MLQ Score on The Presence of Meaning	Participant Codes	Gender
Case One	Christianity	High	RP1	Male
			RP2	Male
			RP3	Female
			RP5	Male
			RP7	Male
			RP8	Female
			RP11	Male
Case Two	Buddhism	High	RP4	Male
			RP9	Male
Case Three	Non – religious	High	RP6	Male
			RP10	Male
Case Four	Christianity and Buddhism	Low	RP12 (N)	Male
			RP13 (N)	Female

3.5.2 Data Collection

There are three main sources of data in this inquiry, namely MLQ scores, interview data and printed documents. The following explains each method used to collect each type of data.

3.5.2.1 The meaning in life questionnaire (MLQ)

I used Steger's MLQ to measure the presence and level of meaningfulness in potential research participants.⁷⁰⁷ In addition, it is also useful to track a person's attitude to meaningfulness. Steger explains: '[MLQ] assesses two dimension of meaning in life using ten items rated on a seven-point scale, from "Absolutely True" to "Absolutely Untrue."' The Presence of Meaning subscale measures the how full respondents feel their lives are of meaning. The Search for Meaning subscale measures how engaged and motivated respondents are in efforts to find meaning or deepen their understanding of meaning in their lives.⁷⁰⁸

Every research participant was asked to fill in the questionnaire by answering ten items rated on the seven-point scale mentioned above. Based on a scoring system provided by Steger, each potential research participant may be represented by one of the following score categories:⁷⁰⁹

1. The score is *above* 24 on both the Presence of Meaning subscale and on the Search of Meaning subscale. This means that the research participant feels that life has a valued meaning and purpose. Yet, at the same time, the research participant is still openly exploring that meaning or purpose. Life's meaning, according to the research participant, is an ever-unfolding and ever-deepening process. The person is more drawn to the question 'what can my life mean?' than to any single answer.
2. The score is *above* 24 on the Presence of Meaning subscale and *below* 24 on the Search of Meaning subscale. The research participant feels life has a valued meaning and purpose, and he or she is no longer actively exploring that meaning or seeking meaning in life. It may be said that the person is satisfied and has

⁷⁰⁷ Michael F. Steger, Patricia Frazier, Shigehiro Oishi and Matthew Kaler, "The Meaning in Life Questionnaire: Assessing the Presence of and Search for Meaning in Life," *Journal of Counselling Psychology* Vol. 53, No.1 (2006) 80-93.

⁷⁰⁸ Ibid., 80-93.

⁷⁰⁹ Ibid., 80-93.

- grasped what makes life meaningful, why the person is here and what the person wants to do with life.
3. The score is *below* 24 on the Presence of Meaning subscale and *above* 24 on the Search of Meaning subscale. The research participant probably does not feel life has a valued meaning and purpose. The person is actively searching for something or someone that will give meaning or purpose.
 4. The score is *below* 24 on the Presence of Meaning subscale and *below* 24 on the Search of Meaning subscale. The research participant probably does not feel life has a valued meaning and purpose, and is not actively exploring that meaning or seeking meaning in life. Overall, the person probably does not find the idea of thinking about life's meaning very interesting or important.

Although MLQ is essentially a measure of the presence of meaningfulness rather than the meaningfulness of life, the score categories help to identify people who are experiencing the presence of high levels of meaning in life. Hence, as the MLQ has become a tool for sample selection, it also functions as an interview data verification and triangulation tool.

3.5.2.2 Interview

I decided to employ interviews as the primary data collection method, which in fact is a key method for any case study design. Accordingly, I also adopted the guidelines suggested by Kvale, to construct a semi-structured questionnaire with thematic questions adapted from the themes in the book of Ecclesiastes.⁷¹⁰ The questionnaire was constructed and tested in a pilot interview, in order to ascertain that potential research participants would understand the interview questions. The interview questionnaire went through two cycles of amendments before being used on the actual research participants.

⁷¹⁰ Steinar Kvale, *Interview: An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications 1996), 96. Kvale notes that the thematising of interview questions must consider the “what” question, i.e. obtaining pre-knowledge of the subject matter to be investigated. In this investigation, it refers to the hypothesis developed from the book of Ecclesiastes. The interview questions must also consider the “Why,” in order to clarify the purpose of the study. Also, from the same author, *Doing Interviews*, 36-50. See also Rubin & Rubin, *Qualitative Interviewing*, 131-147 for more comprehensive guidelines and suggestions.

A semi-structured interview questionnaire gave me the control over the process of obtaining information from the research participants and at the same time the chance to follow new leads as they arose.⁷¹¹ This is particularly important, because whilst the research participants have the information required, I may only have ‘a partial understanding of the research participant’s viewpoint.’⁷¹² There is also a possibility that the research participant may have complex and contradictory perspectives,⁷¹³ which in turn may lead to ‘incomplete recollection’⁷¹⁴ i.e. data secured may not be complete or accurate even though the research participants are convinced about the authenticity of their life stories.⁷¹⁵ Hence, a semi-structured interview questionnaire, with open-ended questions, is useful, as it provides room for follow-up questions that provide more detail and clarification.⁷¹⁶

Potter and Hepburn advised exercising caution in relation to the validity and accuracy of data collected with this method. Among their concerns, two had direct implications on the validity of this investigation. The first concern refers to the possibility of ‘the flooding of the interview with social science agendas and categories,’⁷¹⁷ which means that I could be seen as steering the conversation, both explicitly and implicitly, so that it would reproduce ‘a refined or filtered or inverted form’⁷¹⁸ of findings that would finally support the hypothesis. The second concern deals with the possibility of a vested stake

⁷¹¹ Gary Partington, “Qualitative Research Interviews: Identifying Problems in Technique,” *Issues in Educational Research* Vol. 11 (2001) 32-44.

⁷¹² *Ibid.*, 33.

⁷¹³ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁷¹⁴ Yin, *Case Study Research*, 101-103.

⁷¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 101-103.

⁷¹⁶ Please refer to Appendix 5.

⁷¹⁷ Jonathan Potter and Alexa Hepburn, “Action, Interaction and Interviews: Some Responses to Holloway, Mischler and Smith,” *Qualitative Research Psychology* 2 (2005b) 319-325.

⁷¹⁸ Potter & Hepburn, “Some Responses,” 319-325. See also Anna Madill, “Interaction in the Semi-Structured Interview: A Comparative Analysis of the Use of and Response to Indirect Complaints,” *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 8 (2011) 333-353.

and interest between me and research participants.⁷¹⁹ Left unchecked, the collected data may reflect a ‘response bias’⁷²⁰ or ‘reflexivity’,⁷²¹ thus placing the reliability of the gathered data into question. Response bias refers to the tendency of the research participants to give politically correct answers to guard against other people’s perceptions of them, while reflexivity refers to the possibility of the research participants expressing what the interviewer wants to hear.⁷²² While there is no *complete* solution to the concerns that are raised, the validity of the data can be mitigated by looking at the consistency of the research participants’ stories as well as engaging some form of triangulation method. Furthermore, the concerns are more in line with a single case study rather than the multiple case studies employed by this investigation. As this is a multiple case study in a single research where cases will be compared and analysed, it increases the reliability and validity of the data. Some other forms of mitigation will be explained in the “data management and validity” section of this chapter.

I also sought to avoid being the actual pitfall in this investigation, due to exerting excessive control over the interview, inappropriate summary interpretation or paraphrasing and inadequate probing of feelings and meanings.⁷²³ In light of this concern, I ensured I made the minimum amount of interruptions possible while the participant was talking, provided supportive nods, listened and questioned so that I may frame a follow up question that was developmental rather than one which would shift direction,⁷²⁴ thereby opting for restatement rather than paraphrasing the answers. This approach proved to be useful, as it allowed me to demonstrate that I listened to the responses and

⁷¹⁹ Potter and Hepburn, “Some Responses,” 319-325.

⁷²⁰ Yin, *Case Study Research*, 101-103.

⁷²¹ *Ibid.*, 101-103.

⁷²² *Ibid.*, 101-103.

⁷²³ Ruth McNair, Angela Taft and Kelsey Hegarty, “Using Reflexivity to Enhance In-depth Interviewing Skills for the Clinician Researcher,” *BMC Medical Research Methodology* 8:3 (2008) 1-6.

⁷²⁴ Partington, “*Qualitative Research Interviews*,” 37.

allowed questions that clarified the responses.⁷²⁵ More importantly, it encouraged the research participants to talk more.

I recorded 13 interviews, out of which eleven were conducted in the research participant's working place, two at their homes and one in a coffee shop. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed by professional transcribers. These interviews helped me identify the religious inclinations and circumstances surrounding the potential research participants. Accordingly, I have identified and categorised from these potential research participants four separate cases based on their religious orientations and MLQ scores.

3.5.2.3 Documentary Evidence

In addition to using interviews as the primary source of data collection, I also collected documentary evidence as supporting data in the form of hard-copy publications and short video clips. Of the eleven (11) research participants, two (2) had documentary evidence in the form of testimonies by peer group members, which enriched the collected data. For instance, interview data from Research Participant 1 (RP1) shows that his purpose in life enabled him to enjoy his work. This was consistent with records from video clips and publications about RP1. The video reveals RP1's effort in ensuring integrity in business practices, while publication gives details on how his work has brought satisfaction. In other words, in addition to confirming the interview data, the documentary evidence enriched my understanding of what RP1 meant by 'enjoying his work.' Hence, in addition to enriching the collected data, data from the documentary evidence were useful for tracking consistency in the interview data. Table Seven (7) shows a summary of documentary evidence associated with the research participants.

⁷²⁵ Ibid., 34-38.

Table 7: RESEARCH PARTICIPANT DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE

Cases	Religion Orientation	Participant Codes	Documentary Evidence		
			Video	Publication	Testimony
Case One	Christianity				
		RP1	Yes	Yes	No
		RP2	No	Yes	No
		RP3	Yes	Yes	No
		RP5	No	Yes	No
		RP7	No	Yes	No
		RP8	Yes	Yes	No
		RP11	Yes	Yes	No
Case Two	Buddhism	RP4	No	Yes	Yes
		RP9	No	Yes	No
Case Three	Non – religious	RP6	Yes	Yes	No
		RP10	No	No	Yes
Case Four	Buddhism	RP12 (N)	No	No	Yes
	Christianity	RP13 (N)	No	Yes	Yes

3.6 DATA MANAGEMENT AND VALIDITY

In view of the substantial data size, I adopted Yin's guide to manage and organise the collected data.⁷²⁶ The following table shows an example of a record in the database.

⁷²⁶ Yin, *Case Study Research*, 99-123.

Table 8: DATA MANAGEMENT SHEET

Data Management Sheet		
Participant	Primary Data Source	Video and Printed Source
Participant ID:	MLQ Score:	Video ID:
	Date:	Original Date:
Contact:	Data ID:	Origin:
	Comment:	Transcribe Date:
		Data ID:
	Interview:	Printed Document ID:
	Site :	Original Date:
	Audio Data ID:	Origin:
	Transcribe Date:	Comment:
	Data ID:	
	Comment:	
	Coded Data ID:	
	Comment:	

3.6.1 DATA VALIDITY THROUGH TRIANGULATION

In order to increase the validity of the study data, I applied a data triangulation approach. Data validity does not refer to arriving at a point of consistency across data sources or approaches. It is about increasing confidence in the research data, a move

which will eventually enable a better understanding of the problems or situations.⁷²⁷ I identified four methods for the triangulation process, namely:⁷²⁸

- Investigator Triangulation – involves different investigators to analyse the research process.
- Data Triangulation – involves using different sources of information to increase data validity.
- Theory Triangulation – involves using multiple perspectives to interpret a single dataset.
- Environment Triangulation – involves the use of different locations, settings and other key factors related to the environment in which the study is taking place.

Considering the nature of this investigation, which relies heavily on the validity and consistency of the interview data, I adopted the data triangulation method. For this reason, in addition to using different sources of information, such as documentary evidence, I also used the MLQ scores to evaluate and verify the responses from the research participants, as the consistency of their scores and their current states of meaningfulness would increase the validity of the study.

A key measure engaged in this study is the use of a negative case, that is, research participants with a low MLQ score in the presence of meaning in life as one of the main cases for investigation and comparison. This, as I observed, helped me understand the similarities and differences between the research participants' experiences. Furthermore, I have also evaluated, analysed and interpreted the rest of the cases for verification purposes. In some sense, it became a form of theory triangulation process for this investigation. This measure ensured data validity and reliability.

⁷²⁷ See Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2002), 55-565. Also V. Thurmond, "The Point of Triangulation," *Journal of Nursing Scholarship* 33(3) (2001) 254-256.

⁷²⁸ Lisa A. Guion, David C. Diehl, and Debra McDonald, "Triangulation: Establishing the Validity of Qualitative Studies," *Family, Youth and Community Sciences* 6014 (2011) 1-3. Also, Patton, *Qualitative Research*, 555-565.

Additional measures include a self-correcting mechanism,⁷²⁹ which includes ensuring methodological coherence,⁷³⁰ sampling sufficiency,⁷³¹ as well as consistent sampling, data collection and analysis.⁷³² I also used an interviewee transcript review method to ensure data accuracy.⁷³³ For this reason, I requested that the research participants review any transcribed interview data. The process involved sending the transcribed data back to the research participants for verification. Since this may lead to potential loss of data by the research participants, they were asked to clarify rather than to delete the data. Several participants brought to my attention some grammatical mistakes in the transcript, which is understandable, since the interviews were transcribed verbatim and English is their second language.

3.6.2 RESPONSE BIAS

As noted earlier, the weaknesses of data collected through semi-structured interviews includes response bias, reflexivity and incomplete recollection.⁷³⁴ Accordingly, I also adopted the following measures to mitigate any weaknesses. First, I assured the participants on the confidentiality of their identities and information. I also assured them that their responses would not affect my respect for them. Second, in order to avoid reflexivity, I designed a questionnaire that would enable me to identify inconsistency in the responses. To explain further, I divided the interview questionnaire into four thematic sections, each of which was capable of counter-checking the consistency of responses from the research participants.⁷³⁵ For instance, the first section on the research participants' work, family and personal life was useful in verifying the final section on

⁷²⁹ Morse, "Verification Strategies," 13-22.

⁷³⁰ Ibid., 18.

⁷³¹ Ibid., 18.

⁷³² Meadows and Janice Morse, "Constructing Evidence within the Qualitative Project," in Janice M. Morse, J. Swanson & A. Kuzel, eds., *The Nature of Evidence in Qualitative Inquiry* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2001), 187-202.

⁷³³ See Victoria Hagens, Mark J. Dobrow and Roger Chaf, "Interviewee Transcript Review: Assessing the Impact on Qualitative Research," *BMC Medical Research Methodology* 9:47 (2009) 1-8.

⁷³⁴ Yin, *Case Study Research*, 99-123.

⁷³⁵ For more detail, see Appendix 5.

the impact of the worthwhile purpose of life on these three elements. Additionally, I also intentionally designed questions that would be useful for verification purposes. For instance, in section two in relation to the worthwhile purpose of life:

Question 1: Your MLQ score indicates that you have discovered a satisfying life purpose. Can you tell me what that satisfying purpose is?

Question 12: Do you consider that your present purpose of life is the ultimate purpose of your life?

- A. If 'yes', why?
- B. If 'no', what is the ultimate purpose of your life? Why?
- C. If you are unsure, what should an ultimate purpose look like, and why?

Furthermore, the semi-structured questionnaire allowed me to ask questions, in order to ensure the clarity and authenticity of their answers. Incomplete recollection was not a major issue in this project, as the required data did not require the interviewees to recollect in detail their life events.

3.7 DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis is an extensive and systematic process that involves data codification, which means assigning themes and categorising data, the recoding the coded data and finally interpreting it, in order to account for the hypotheses under investigation.⁷³⁶ In actual practice, data analysis begins at the point of data collection. In this case, the process of making notes during the data collection stage is a process of producing a conceptually coherent explanation of the phenomena being studied.⁷³⁷ These processes should ensure four major aspects that demonstrate the validity and reliability of qualitative research, i.e. 'credibility, transferability, dependability and confirm-ability'.⁷³⁸

⁷³⁶ Juliet Corbin & Anselm Strauss, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2008), 65-263.

⁷³⁷ Matthew B. Miles and A. Michael Huberman, *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Expanded Sourcebook* 2nd ed., (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publication, 1994). Also Peta Darke, Graeme Shanks & Marianne Broadbent, "Successfully Completing Case Study Research: Combining Rigour, Relevance and Pragmatism," *Information Systems Journal* 8 (1998) 273-289.

⁷³⁸ Egon G. Guba and Yvonna S. Lincoln, *Effective Evaluation* (Michigan: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1981), 82-85.

Along with these aspects are strategies that demonstrate “rigour,” which means that the research has to follow a strict process of verification involving an audit and checking member details, negative results and the adequacy of referential materials.⁷³⁹

I have adopted and explained the process of verification considered relevant to this investigation in the earlier sections. However, a major factor that determines the validity and reliability of this investigation is the rigour of data interpretation. In fact, the most distinctive characteristic of any qualitative inquiry is its emphasis on interpretation,⁷⁴⁰ in that the ultimate goal is to show “evidence” that the study is valid and reliable. By “evidence” it means ‘information bearing on the truth or falsity of a proposition.’⁷⁴¹ My goal is to show that the “information” that I possess will more likely, or probably, either establish the truth or disprove my hypotheses on the theology of the meaning of life. I began vigorous data interpretation at the data gathering stage, recording objectively and examining meaning, which included the direct observation of the participants’ expressions, to verify those meanings. The following explains the data analysis strategy.

3.7.1 OVERVIEW OF DATA ANALAYSIS STRATEGY

I adopted several steps in the analysis strategy. The first step was to transcribe the digital data. Accordingly, I hired professional transcribers to convert the audio data into written data verbatim. The second step involved codifying and analysing the data based on the themes of Ecclesiastes with the aid of Atlas.ti qualitative data interpretive software.⁷⁴² It is a workbench and tool for the qualitative analysis of large bodies of textual data (structured and unstructured). The second step continued with the analysis of each case, in order to understand their journey to meaningfulness of life as well as to understand the dynamic relationship (correlation, causal) between purpose, suffering,

⁷³⁹ Ibid., 82-85. Also, Morse “Verification Strategies,” 4.

⁷⁴⁰ Robert E. Stake, *Qualitative Research: Studying How Things Work* (New York: Guilford Press, 2010), 55.

⁷⁴¹ S. Miller, & M. Fredericks, “The Nature of ‘Evidence’ in Qualitative Research Methods,” *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 2(1) (2003) Article 4, <http://www.ualberta.ca/~ijqm> . See also Morse, *The Nature of Evidence*, 187-202.

⁷⁴² Thomas Murh, Atlas.ti, Ver. 7.5.11 (GmbH, Berlin: 1993-2016).

enjoyment and the meaning of life. This included identifying the relationship between a specific account stated by a research participant and his or her whole story. I ensured authenticity of the meaning of the data by permitting the research participants to determine the meaning of their own answers. The third step involved comparing data from every case, in order to identify identical patterns and themes. Since the investigation was essentially about the experiences of the research participants in relation to the hypotheses based on Ecclesiastes' teaching, I sought to compare and contrast these patterns and themes with the teaching of Ecclesiastes. Any similarities or differences between the two elements were then recorded, analysed and explained. Since this is a work on theology, the empirical results based on the experience of the research participants were evaluated primarily based on the teaching of Ecclesiastes, though insights and references from the fields of philosophy and psychology were also considered.

3.7.2 INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

As the focus of this investigation is about the journey of the research participant toward their experience of meaningfulness of lives, I decided on a transcription approach that would reflect their words verbatim. A popular transcription system in this respect is Jefferson's transcription system, in which the transcript captures intonations, long and short pauses and even sniffs.⁷⁴³ Whilst Jefferson's system is a well-established and widely used system, it is still best used for research related to language and social interaction.⁷⁴⁴ Since the purpose of this research is to trace the journey of the research participants towards meaning of life, I decided to employ a simpler transcription system, so that it would not impede the clarity of the data.

The transcribed data revealed an issue that needed to be addressed. Since English is not the first language of the research participants, grammatical errors and non-idiomatic expressions were clearly present in the answers to the interview questions. Considering

⁷⁴³ Gail Jefferson, Pirjo Nikander, "Working with Transcripts and Translated Data," *Qualitative Research In Psychology* 5 (2008) 225-231.

⁷⁴⁴ Ibid., 225-231

the requirement for academic work, I edited these grammatical errors; however, I kept existing non-idiomatic expressions, as long they did not impede the clarity of the data. These non-idiomatic expressions have to be accepted as uniquely Malaysian English and therefore should be accepted in academic research.⁷⁴⁵ I also ensured that the interview transcription kept the structure and sequence of the interviews, in order to ensure data integrity.⁷⁴⁶

3.7.3 DATA CODIFICATION

I began the data analysis and interpretation with two cycles of data codification. A code in a qualitative inquiry is most often a word or a short phrase assigned to a summative, salient, essence-capturing, evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data.⁷⁴⁷ The choices of code and codification are based on the purpose of the specific enquiry. In the case of this enquiry, the codes had to, on the one hand, enable me to distinguish and track the distinct parts of the research participants' journey and experiences. On the other hand, they should provide the basis for a comparison with the teaching of Ecclesiastes. Hence, this as this enquiry set out to investigate human experiences in the light of the theology of the meaning of life from Ecclesiastes, the codes reflect the key themes in the book.

The first cycle of coding was a combination of InVivo codification. This means codes were generated from the responses of the participants themselves, with the purpose of identifying discrete aspects⁷⁴⁸ based on their journey and the themes of Ecclesiastes. Accordingly, the codes came in the form of a short paragraph or phrase from the interview. Since the research participants expressed their thoughts differently, as a result quite a few different codes were created. This process enabled me to identify the more

⁷⁴⁵ Loga Baskaran, "Malaysian English: Morphology and Syntax," in "A Handbook of Varieties of English," (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2004), 1073-1085.

⁷⁴⁶ Illiot G. Mishler, *Research Interviewing: Context and Narrative* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 277 notes, 'How we arrange and rearrange the text [interview data]... is a process of testing, clarifying and deepening understanding of what is happening.'

⁷⁴⁷ Saldana, *The Coding Manual*, 3.

⁷⁴⁸ Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2006). Also Corbin and Strauss, *Basics of Qualitative Research*, 159-274.

discrete expressions in the data that revealed the specific period in the research participant's journey such the period of meaninglessness and painful event. I also identified discrete parts or expressions that resemble the themes of Ecclesiastes. This process was repeated, in order to ensure that the codification was thorough and complete. Due to the nature of InVivo coding, I can only show a few samples of the code in Table 9 below:

TABLE 9: THE INVIVO CODING

Themes in Ecclesiastes	Codes (Samples)	Data Excerpts
Vanity	<p>'No Meaning in Life'</p> <p>'Meaningful but not what I wanted'</p>	<p>I finished the three hundred dollars, how was I going to pay my rent?! So, where is meaning? There's no meaning in life...</p> <p>Yes, it was meaningful, but it wasn't a happy period. Meaningful, yes. It's meaningful, but it is not what I wanted.</p>
Undeserved Suffering	<p>'I have suffered'</p> <p>'Most regrettable thing'</p>	<p>I have suffered for a period of, say... suffered in a sense, emotionally in the working environment for about easily... nine years.</p> <p>But the one that really hit me was my... the passing away of my mother. Because... to tell my story [RP2 caught by emotion]... I think that is the most... regrettable thing in my life.</p>
Enjoyment	<p>'Satisfied with life'</p> <p>'I am very happy'</p>	<p>I came from, you know... I came from nothing. Now I'm satisfied, I don't have the best things in the world, but I'm satisfied. I can't ask for anything better.</p> <p>So... I'm very happy with what I have right now. I'm happy.</p>
Fear God and obey His Commandments	<p>'Give my life to God'</p> <p>'Ultimate purpose as a Buddhist'</p>	<p>Of course, all these changes, all these things happen because when I start really to give my life to God, all those things change. So that's why I said I'm very happy. I can't ask for anything better.</p> <p>Ultimate purpose as a Buddhist is about enlightenment. Again, this is a very abstract definition. So that's ultimate.</p>

During the second cycle of the codification process, I engaged a pattern coding approach. This is an explanatory or inferential code that is useful for identifying and differentiating an emergent theme, its configuration or explanation. This method pulls the data together into a more meaningful unit of analysis. In order to achieve this stage of the process, I assigned new and concise codes to the coded units or passages, which helped to mould the coded materials into smaller but more specific numbers of sets, themes or constructs.⁷⁴⁹ This allowed me to identify the stages at which the research participants were in their journey to meaningfulness. In addition, it showed the relationship between the more discrete parts of the data.⁷⁵⁰ This process was also repeated, in order to ensure that every detail was accounted for. The Table 8 (Eight) below shows and explains the meanings of these codes.

TABLE 8: PATTERN CODING

Codes	Meaning for the Codes
PIL	Purpose In Life
Happy-P1-PIL	Happiness in relation to Purpose One in the context of PIL
Self-PIL	Self-management in the context of PIL
Happy-PIL	Happiness in the context of PIL
Family-PIL	Family in the context of PIL
Work-PIL	Work in the context of PIL
Pain-PIL	Pain in the context of PIL
God-Pain-PIL	God in relation to pain in the context of PIL
MIL	Meaning In Life
Happy-MIL	Happiness in association to MIL
Pain-MIL	Pain in relation to MIL
Search-MOL	Search for the Meaning of Life
Search POL	Search for the Purpose of Life
Search-P1-POL	Search of Purpose One in the context of POL
Search-P2-POL	Search of Purpose Two in the context of POL
Search-P3-POL	Search of Purpose Three in the context of POL

⁷⁴⁹ Matthew B. Miles and A. Michael Huberman, *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Expanded Sourcebook*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publication, 1994), 69.

⁷⁵⁰ Ibid., 149-182

TABLE 8: PATTERN CODING (Cont.)

Codes	Meaning for the Codes
POL	Purpose of Life
PI-POL	Purpose One in the context of POL
P2-POL	Purpose Two in the context of POL
P3-POL	Purpose Three in the context of POL
Self-POL	Self-Management in the context of POL
Happy-POL	Family in the context of POL
Work-POL	Work in the context of POL
Family-POL	Family in the context of POL
Pain-POL	Pain in the context of POL
God-POL	God and POL
God- Self-POL	God in association with self-management and POL
God-Happy-POL	God in association to happiness and POL
God-Pain-POL	God in association with pain and POL
Happy-P1-POL	Happiness in relation to Purpose One in the context of POL
MOL	Meaning of Life
God-MOL	God in relation to MOL
Pain-MOL	Pain in relation to MOL
Happy-MOL	Happiness in relation to MOL
Positive attitude	Refers to an attitude or disposition of seeking to fulfill POL

The analysis began by investigating the inter-relationship between these codes found in the single case unit, in order to assess how the themes and concepts were systematically interrelated and in what ways they could surface as a theory.⁷⁵¹ The process continued by comparing every unit of analysis, in order to identify common patterns (if any) in these cases.⁷⁵²

⁷⁵¹ Corbin and Strauss, *Basic of Qualitative Research*, 55.

⁷⁵² Rubin & Rubin, *Qualitative Interviewing*, 189-210.

3.7.4 DATA INTERPRETATION

A major part of data analysis began during the data codification stage. In the data codification process, I identified patterns for every case unit and across cases. These patterns enabled me to establish a clear relationship between the themes under investigation, and they formed a clear framework which would be useful for the next step in the interpretation process.

In the data interpretation stage, I followed the techniques of “pattern-matching” and “explanation-building” analysis strategies proposed by Yin⁷⁵³ and Trochim.⁷⁵⁴ These strategies are consistent with the purpose of this study, which requires the data be analysed and compared with the hypotheses of the investigation. “Pattern-matching” is an approach that requires the development of patterns based on empirical data. These patterns are then compared with the predicted pattern;⁷⁵⁵ in this case the reconstructed hypotheses deriving from the book of Ecclesiastes. This approach satisfies the requirement of the study, which seeks to understand human experiences in relation to the themes and teaching of Ecclesiastes. The ‘explanation-building’ analysis strategy pursues an understanding of the possible relationships inherent in the observable patterns. Since the analysis involves multiple cases, the goal is to build an explanation that is consistent in every individual case.

I applied both strategies in the individual cases and cross-cases. As a result of the analysis, common patterns were established for comparison with the teaching of Ecclesiastes. In order to ensure objectivity and that all other factors would be considered, the interpretation deliberately sought findings in the current research to triangulate this interpretation.⁷⁵⁶

⁷⁵³ Yin, *Case Study Research*, 127-160.

⁷⁵⁴ William Trochim, “Outcome Pattern Matching and Program Theory,” *Evaluation and Program Planning* 12(4) (1989) 136-140.

⁷⁵⁵ Tellis, “Application of a Case Study,” Accessed in August 27, 2014 <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR3-3/tellis2.html>. Also, Trochim. “Outcome Pattern Matching,” 136-140.

⁷⁵⁶ Stake, *The Art of Case Study Research*, 53.

3.8 LIMITATIONS AND BIASES

The primary limitation of the investigation lies in the nature of the qualitative study when the reliability and credibility of the study are in proportion with the skill and the objectivity of the researcher. Furthermore, the nature of evidence, and its interpretation, in the field of qualitative study may give the perception that the findings are subjective and susceptible to researcher bias. As noted in an earlier section, manipulation may begin from the stage of data collection. Moreover, the data interpretation stage is also susceptible to bias and pre-determined agendas. In the case of this investigation, since it is a work on theology based on the themes and teaching of Ecclesiastes, empirical data were evaluated primarily against the teaching of Ecclesiastes. There is thus the possibility that other possible theories and interpretations may have been overlooked, but I took all necessary steps to consider and evaluate the findings from existing research related to the subject matter.

Furthermore, due to the nature of the investigation, in that it requires an in-depth study of every unit of analysis, only a small number of cases could be studied and analysed. Accordingly, an obvious limitation in this investigation is with its difficulty in generalising its findings. Although these findings answer the research questions and are able to show that the theology of the meaning of life can account for human experience, it can still be argued that they account only for the number of cases in this particular investigation, though of course this is the actual point of the investigation. Human experiences can be consistent with the theology of the meaning of life based on the teaching of Ecclesiastes, and any patterns expressing the thematic correlations of every case show and can infer that the findings do represent a larger part of the population.

There is also an issue with the researcher bias. It is noted that interpretive researchers should acknowledge the subjectivity of their analysis, in that their predispositions, beliefs, values and interests ‘always intervene to shape their investigations’.⁷⁵⁷ In this case, my attempt to construct an empirically corroborated theology of the meaning of life

⁷⁵⁷ Wanda Orlikowski and Jack J. Baroudi, “Studying Information Technology In Organizations: Research Approaches and Assumptions,” (A Working Paper Series for Center For Research On Information Systems, Leonard N. Stern School of Business, New York University, Feb 1998), 17. Also Peta Darke, “Successfully Completing Case Study Research,” 273-289.

may lead to selective data interpretation. Data collection and interpretation can be done purportedly in order to conform to the hypotheses propounded. Nevertheless, I wish to maintain, and indeed took, the necessary steps to ensure that the investigation to understand the experiences of people was a stand-alone and independent piece of enquiry. The findings from this enquiry were then compared to the hypotheses constructed from the teaching of Ecclesiastes. I counteracted any possible bias from the point of data collection and the analysis of case data, by using primary and secondary data for triangulation. Using multiple sources of evidence strengthens reliability and objectivity in the collection and interpretation of the data, while Yin noted that the convergence of information from a variety of sources strengthens the objectivity of the study and its findings.⁷⁵⁸ I also followed the required research procedure, including documenting data triangulation details, in order to allow for repetition in the research.

3.9 ETHICAL CONSIDERATION⁷⁵⁹

The primary ethical concern is the effect of the interview on the participants, particularly as the inquiry may negatively affect their feelings in relation to the meaning or purpose in their life.⁷⁶⁰ In order to address this possibility, in every section of the questionnaire I sought their feelings about the interview and whether it should proceed. The participants were given the freedom to withdraw from the project at any point of time and whenever they felt uncomfortable about the questions being asked. This decision turned out to bear positive responses from the research participants. One research participant excitedly responded in the interview that the questions had enabled him to organise his thoughts on the subject matter and reflect upon his experiences. Other than this particular research participant, the rest of the cohort was positive about the process and did not express any sign of discomfort.

⁷⁵⁸ Yin, *Case Study Research*, 101-103.

⁷⁵⁹ See Appendix 7 for a copy of the ethical approval from the College of Arts and Humanities Ethics Committee.

⁷⁶⁰ Kvale, *Doing Interviews*, 65.

The other ethical concern is the research participants' rights to privacy and non-disclosure. In addition to the consent letter, which emphasised that their rights to anonymity and confidentiality would be respected, the research participants were also assured that the transcripts would not reflect any information about their real names, addresses or the site of the interview. Field notes or data containing any forms of identity, such as names and addresses, would be destroyed after the research period. In light of the above measures, this research has adhered to the highest ethical standards in academic research.

3.10 SUMMARY

This chapter has presented the rationale behind and method used in the empirical enquiry design. It has described and shown the steps taken in the processes of sample selection, data collection, data codification and analysis. In particular, this chapter has also outlined and explained steps that were taken to ensure the rigour, validity and reliability this research. The next chapter reports the findings of this investigation.

CHAPTER FOUR

EMPIRICAL FINDINGS AND REPORTING

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter I constructed four interdependent research questions to assess the reliability of the framework that expresses the theology of the meaning of life, based on the teaching of Ecclesiastes and its viability in relation to human experiences. The research questions are:

1. How did the research participants arrive at meaningfulness of life?
2. How has the purpose of life offered meaning to painful experiences in life?
3. How does the purpose of life offer meaning in relation to work, family and personal life?
4. Is there an experiential difference in meaningfulness between meaning in life and the meaning of life?

This chapter will report on the findings from interviews conducted with 13 research participants (RPs) who were divided into four cases representing different circumstances. The first case consists of Christian RPs with a high MLQ score on the presence of meaning in life. The second case has Buddhist RPs with a high MLQ score on the presence of meaning in life. The third case is represented by non-religious RPs with a high MLQ score on the presence of meaning in life. The final case comprises RPs with a low MLQ score on the presence of meaning in life.

Presenting a comprehensive report from data compiled in qualitative research is a familiar challenge to researchers, due to the need to maintain a careful balance between readability and comprehensiveness.⁷⁶¹ This chapter is no exception. Considering that this

⁷⁶¹H. L. Goodall, Jr., *Writing Qualitative Inquiry: Self, Stories, and Academic Life* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2008), 97-130.

portion of the research is a wide-ranging inquiry into every RP's journey to the meaningfulness of life, and its significance in regard to their work, family harmony, personal growth and painful events, the selected data presented in this chapter could be viewed as overwhelming. This level of data collection is nevertheless necessary, especially considering the need to maintain the uniqueness of every case and to bear in mind the fact that it is also crucial to show that despite the complexity and distinctiveness of the cases, they reveal common patterns that are enriching and vital to the investigation. Furthermore, they are essential to my subsequent analysis and arguments pertaining to the reconstructed framework expressing the theology of the meaning of life based on the teaching of Ecclesiastes.

I shall report the findings in two parts. In the first part, I shall present the report in the order of the cases, beginning with Case One, which will be done according to the arrangement of the research questions. The process will begin with a report on how the individual RPs have found the meaning of life in relation to the way their newfound purposes have enabled them to experience meaningfulness permeating the key aspects of their existence. This will include a report on how these life purposes have been helpful in coping with painful experiences. At this point it is useful to note that the RPs do not share a common understanding of several terminologies pertinent to this investigation. For instance, one of them comprehended what it means to have found a worthwhile purpose and the meaning of life, whilst responses from others indicated their understanding was conceptually different from how these concepts are generally understood, i.e. in one or two cases the phrases "meaning of life" and "meaning in life" were used interchangeably. This report will not underestimate or downplay the significance of their experience, although their understanding appears to be conceptually and distinctly different from Ecclesiastes' teaching on the meaning of life and meaningfulness. For the purpose of report standardisation I shall therefore use the phrases "meaning in life" and "meaningfulness in life" when they are associated with the RPs' purpose in life. I will use the phrases "meaning of life" and "meaningfulness of life" when they are associated with the RPs' purpose of life. The phrases "purpose in life" and "purpose of life" are technical terms, hereby known as constructs, where the construct "purpose in life" refers to any purpose for which one lives, prior to the transition to the "purpose of life". The construct

“purpose of life” refers to the RPs’ most worthwhile purpose of life which, as I argued in the earlier chapter, corresponds to their purpose for existing and the purpose of life taught in Ecclesiastes.

Following the arrangement of the research questions, the report will include descriptions of the common factors and thematic patterns found in each case which are essential for further analysis. The second part of the report will present a cross-cases comparison and will conclude with a report on the common factors and thematic patterns found in all the cases for analysis and interpretation.

4.2 REPORTING THE FINDINGS FROM EVERY CASE

4.2.1 CASE ONE: CHRISTIAN RPs WITH A HIGH MLQ SCORE ON THE PRESENCE OF MEANING IN LIFE

4.2.1.1 How did the Research Participants Arrive at Meaningfulness of Life?

All RPs expressed that they had found the purpose of life and were experiencing meaningfulness of life. The data reveal that every RP had had a distinctively unique journey leading to meaningfulness, which can be placed into two broad categories. Four RPs (RP1, RP5, RP7 and RP11) felt that their lives were meaningless prior to the discovery of their present purpose. Although there was purposefulness (and, hence, some meaning), they were unhappy and dissatisfied (overall meaninglessness) with their experiences. Table 11 shows the RPs’ verbatim comments on meaningfulness in relation to their purposes in life.

The reasons for their conclusions about their lives in the past vary. RP1, RP5 and RP7’s conclusions were given retrospectively, by comparing their earlier experiences with the present, whilst RP11 insisted that he was already unhappy with his life at that time. The following excerpts from the RPs shed more light on their unique journey to meaningfulness.

TABLE 11: RPs ON MEANINGLESSNESS FROM THE PURPOSE IN LIFE

RP	Comments
RP1	So all I did was working something like at least 16 hours a day, 16 to 17 hours a day, every day. So, we had no time to think about the meaning of life (Id. 1:32)... Living for yourself, there's no meaning (Id. 1:47). ⁷⁶²
RP5	At that point in time, this idea of being meaningful or whatever didn't cross my mind. It is like a beggar. What you need is food. So you don't talk about anything else but food and shelter (Id 5:22).
RP7	Never (meaningful). I didn't really think about what the impact would be in the future (Id. 7:38).
RP11	I think definitely not meaningful. No meaning! (Id.11:20).

RP1 disclosed that his motive and purpose in life were primarily about finding security through the accumulation of financial wealth. He revealed:

I wanted to make as much money as possible. In fact, my ambition, when it came to business, was to be a millionaire by 30, which I achieved. Then to be [a] multi-millionaire and then to be a billionaire (Id. 1:28).

Money in the bank was security for me (Id. 1:38).

Nothing moves me away from the focus of making money (Id. 1:40).

The effort was intense to the point of neglecting his family. He confessed:

I would go home; I disregarded dinner with my family. I never had dinner with my family except maybe on Saturday. Even Saturday, sometimes, I was out entertaining people. Friday was happy hour night. I would not come back home until the next morning, about 3am (Id. 1:37).

RP1 achieved his goals in life eventually, but this was followed by a crisis of purpose and a sense of meaninglessness. This led to an increasing commitment to his religious beliefs, which eventually directed him to the purpose of existing and life. RP1 now devotes his

⁷⁶² For future quotes from interview transcripts, the first number refers to the transcript number, while the second number refers to the line. For example, ID. 1:47 is transcript one, line 47.

life to serving others as an expression of following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. He explained, ‘Our Lord said, “I come not to be served but to serve”’ (Id. 1:51) and ‘He said that you have to serve, not be served’ (Id. 1:70).

Two more RPs’, namely RP5 and RP7, journeys to meaningfulness were related to career challenges. RP7 recalled:

[A]fter graduating from university as an engineer... I went with the mindset “Well, I’m going to work very hard, I’m going to be very successful by going up the ladder and being honest, and I will have children and a wife. That would be a satisfying life, you know, that would be a satisfying life purpose (Id. 7:26).

Unfortunately, setbacks and thereby disillusionment set in when he was accused of wrongdoing in return for his diligent and honest contributions. He revealed:

I worked very hard... They came with one whole stack of money, you know [to bribe me], but I refused because I’m doing the work... They still wanted to cheat, you see? Like, instead of using three quarts of paint, they wanted to use one. And so I asked them to scrape all the things off. It was not an easy job. So they wanted to defame me... people know that I cannot be bribed, you see? And yet, I thought that with all these things I could be considered doing well, and then people would appreciate it. But it was the opposite... you will be isolated; you will always be a loner because the rest are in it. If you’re not in it, then you’re not part of them in that sense (Id. 7:53).

He fell into depression, to the point of contemplating suicide (Id. 7:35; 53), before returning to the church (Id. 7:35) and getting involved in reading the Bible and attending seminars, thereby marking a gradual transition into his present-day purpose and meaningfulness. According to him:

I recognise that all those things are futile. Just like running after, pursuing those things that would not give you any peace. So that was the time when God gave me such hunger for the word of God, so I came back to the church (Id. 7:30).

... then I began to grow... I continue, and slowly, as I understand and discover this life purpose, you know? That is to glorify God... You know, that was basically when I discovered my life purpose (Id. 7:31).

I recognise... God created me with a purpose, and I am made by him and for him. If I am made for him, that means I am going to do things according to his purpose. And I discovered that...our main chief purpose is to glorify him. So in all that we do, you see, whatever we eat or drink, or whatever we do, we do it to the glory of God (Id. 7:23).

Yeah, the ultimate purpose is to glorify God. So I would say that anytime God wants to take me home, I'm ready (7:48).

RP7 felt that his newfound purpose of life enables him to see life, activities and people from a better perspective. He explained:

God would look at the thing I am doing, or what does the Bible say about that? If it is clear, then I should do it. And the other guiding factor is not just what the Bible says – there are many things that are not said in the Bible, but the question I ask is always, “Will it glorify God?” (Id. 7:43).

I realised that it is when you come close to God, you know, having that personal relationship, that you then begin to develop and transform, so that your relationship with your family becomes better (Id. 7:10).

The data show that he expresses his purpose of life by actively helping people to discover God's purpose in their own lives (Id. 7:37), which he achieves by, among other things, spreading the word through evangelism and preaching. Although a retired businessperson, he maintains a property investment business to keep contact with the community (Id. 7:47). Interestingly, RP7 maintained that his earlier activities were important and purposeful. He noted:

We are living in this world, and so we have to provide for our family and do well for their sake, and of course for our own sake. And for our family, I managed to get a place to help them. So, anyway, these are things that actually I was involved in, but having realised now very clearly that, you know, the relationship with God is the most important, and from then I woke up (Id. 7:12)... Right now I feel that whatever I do has significance (Id. 7:15).

However, he is now a much happier person compared to the past. He elaborated:

I thank God for revealing to me this purpose. And I really find that in the things that I do, since I know that these are going to have eternal value, I really enjoy doing them. Put it this way: there is no pressure... I know that [the purpose] is to mobilise God's people to advance his people and to transform them. Well, I think this is what God wants me to do now, and that at the end of life you want to see, if you can hear the words, “Well done, good and faithful servant.” That would be wonderful, wouldn't it? (Id. 7:70).

The final RP who felt his life was meaningless in retrospect was RP5. Unlike the experiences of RP1 and RP7, though, the interview data for RP5 are interesting, in that the question on the meaningfulness of life did not exist in his mind prior to discovering the purpose of life. He explained:

Actually, at that point in time, this idea of whether life was meaningful or whatever didn't cross my mind. It [life] is like a beggar. What you need is food. So you don't talk about anything else, [it was all about] food and shelter (Id. 5:22).

His primary concerns were to 'get a good job and save money and have a good family and get a house and get married' (Id. 5:20). The transition to present-day meaningfulness began with his conversion to Christianity in his early 30s, which initiated a strong desire to serve God (Id.5:25) as a pastor or as a missionary (Id. 5:28, 36). However, due to his financial obligation to his family, he decided to work as a financial investment agent as a means to serving God (Id. 5:24). Now that he has achieved financial freedom, the most satisfying purpose in his life now is 'to be a blessing to others' (Id. 5:16) through his financing of the church and the needy (Id.5:17). This has brought meaningfulness.

Although RP5 has been struggling with physical illness, he maintained that he is very satisfied with his life. He explained:

I am very satisfied with the state of my life. Number one, I would say, is achieving financial freedom, as many people are still struggling and I have already made a breakthrough and am able to have more than enough to bless other people. That is my greatest satisfaction – to have more than enough and to bless other people. Of course, health-wise, I will leave it to God to heal me (Id.5:13).

The old purpose is basically just bread and butter... That's it. Well... at least you feel good when you get your bread and butter, but now you have a new meaning, you have more than enough to be a blessing. You find, well, that's what your life is all about. To be a blessing, not just for yourself. So, in the past, it was just for myself, okay? Now, it is more for God's kingdom (Id. 5:30).

Interestingly, although RP5 considered himself to have found his own *raison d'être*, he feels his activities were only part of his ultimate purpose of life. He explained:

Blessing people... is, I would say, 50%, the other 50%, I would say, I have to be frank, I stay closer to God (Id. 5:33). I want to be able to spend more time with God and be able to do what he wants me to do, to be able to hear him (Id. 5:35).

RP5 could not run away from the initial desire to serve God in the mission field (Id. 5:37), noting 'There is still something missing there. Still haven't given the best to God... still haven't given my best to God' (Id. 5:38). This led to his decision to spend time with God in the hope of receiving clear direction (Id. 5:40).

Whilst RP1, RP5 and RP7 considered their purposes in life were not experientially meaningful, albeit only in retrospect, RP11 insisted he was already unhappy with his life. RP11 struggled with a lack of money to the point of having to search all his drawers to look for ten or twenty cents in case there was some left over (Id. 11:8), and he often tried his luck at the casino. He shared his agony:

I tell you very frankly, many-a-time I have to pay rent. Four hundred dollars. I only have three hundred dollars in my pocket. How? How to pay? Go to Genting [casino]... and I lose the three hundred dollars, and then I'm driving down, many times, and I feel like ramping the car and letting the car fall down into the valley... I have lost the three hundred dollars – how am I going to pay the rent!? So, where is the meaning? There's no meaning in life... (Id. 11:21).

Considering this and the next statement, his purposes in life were to gain financial freedom and people's respect for his parents. He explained:

All the while I have... I have told God what I want to be... because... you know, during my younger years, I was looked down upon, and my parents were, too. I...you know? I do cry to God, you know, that I'm the only son in the family. I got two sisters, one is in Canada, one is in US; they married there, so I've got to take care of my parents, you know? And I told God, I don't want people to step on my parents, to look down on them. And... I will work very hard (Id. 11:14).

RP11 subsequently gained financial freedom after he found success in his business ventures. He now considers himself a very happy person in the absence of financial struggle (Id. 11:7-8). Despite a clear link to financial stability, RP11 attributed his present state of life as a blessing brought about by God for relying on Him in his business

decisions. He sees his purpose of life as being to ‘glorify God’ through sharing his life experiences in the ‘marketplace ministry’ (Id. 11:10) and to testify God’s goodness in a greater capacity (Id.11:24). He explained:

I... feel that at this age, and the bitter and sour experience that I have gone through, I think God wants me to use it for the best; then, when you’re the best, when you share your experience, you know? So I don’t know what purpose God has for me five years down the road, but this is what I think, you know? God has brought me this far, from zero. So, I believe God will take me from zero to hero, for Him. So my life testimony will be able to glorify his Kingdom, will be able to touch a lot of people’s lives... that’s what I feel. I don’t know whether that is God’s purpose or not, I don’t know (Id. 11:12).

The second group of RPs, namely RP2, RP3 and RP8, indicated that they had already experienced meaningfulness before arriving at their present purpose, and changing to the present purpose of life had enabled them to find meaning and experience a superior sense of meaningfulness. Table 12 (Twelve) displays their comments on what they felt about their earlier purposes in life.

TABLE 12: RPs ON MEANINGFULNESS AND PURPOSE IN LIFE

RPs	Comments
RP2	I think definitely not meaningful. No meaning [no clear direction]! (Id.2:35) ⁷⁶³
RP3	Well, in the beginning it was very meaningful (Id.3:42).
RP8	I mean... meaningful... I wasn’t unhappy with life (Id. 8:51).

RP2 was already an active contributor in the community (Id 2:51) and led a relatively harmonious family life. These were his ‘meanings of life’.⁷⁶⁴ His primary pursuit was therefore personal success, so that he could give his mother a better quality of life. In his words:

I have been very successful in my working life (Id. 2:19). I think the driving factor was that I wanted to be successful in my career (Id. 2:20).

⁷⁶³ RP2 experienced meaningfulness from his purpose in life. However, the lack of a clear direction for his life had caused him to feel that it was meaningless.

⁷⁶⁴ This report will take this phrase as referring to his earlier purposes in life.

So I am very focused on one thing: I work, work, work, work, work [very hard] and, like what I said earlier, when my mother passed away 10 years ago, I felt very, very bad because I wanted to be successful and give her a better life. I told you my father passed away [previously], so my mother was very... it was very difficult for her to bring us up. So I wanted to be successful, to give her a better life, better living [conditions] and all that (Id. 2:21).

Nonetheless, RP2 felt the lack of an overall direction. He revealed:

My meaning of [in] life would be just to live a good life. But [it was] very vague. Just living a life but with no direction. Just, you know, I had to live my life well but [it had] no direction (Id 2:52).

But before I had my religion, I was a bit like a leaf on the river. People do, I do. People go to karaoke, I go. People bring the girls back, I bring the girl back. To me this was, perhaps, the life of a businessman (Id. 2:43).

His eventual financial freedom and a business mentoring programme motivated him to reflect on the matter of spirituality (Id. 2:23), leading to his conversion to Catholicism (Id. 2:46). This was followed by his baptism, an event he considered a major turning point in his life (Id. 2:63). Religion helped and directed him to a reason for existing and an overarching purpose for life. He confessed, 'I think my religion changed me' (Id. 2:42), and 'ever since I became a Christian, I know what is behind the meaning of life. I know who I should be and what I should do' (Id. 2:45). RP2 explained more about his newfound purpose:

So I think my purpose of life is that I will do my best to maintain my family harmony, lovingly between each other, and I will follow my religion to live my life (Id. 2:30)... so that, number one, at least I will not do harmful things to the community. Secondly, I hope I will still be able to contribute more to the community (Id. 2:32).

RP2 is a happier person now:

Let us talk about my latest meaning in life... I am happier... I am more contented and simpler. I am happier because I am less emotional... I thank God for bringing me back to my religion (Id. 2:62).

The interview data show that RP2 equates his meaning of life to maintaining a harmonious family, obeying the Ten Commandments (Id. 2:47) and therefore avoiding sin (Id. 2:48). Nevertheless, he admitted that his ultimate purpose was to be involved fully with his religion, such as giving himself wholly to the community. He noted:

Then I can be wholeheartedly into my religion. I think that will be my ultimate purpose of life (2:65). Yes, I believe that I cannot take care of my family; how can I take care of the community? At this moment, I need to... I have to be a good father – to take care of my family and my kids... I think that, ultimately, it is the community. Because we are only part and parcel of the community... ultimately, it would be my religion (Id.2:66).

Similar to RP2, RP3 considered her life was already meaningful (Id. 3:42) prior to her present purpose. Her focus was to ‘make more and more money’ (Id. 3:17). She revealed:

Make money. Make money, all my 5 C’s [5 C’s stands for car, cash, condominium, credit card and country club membership]. For me it was chasing after my 5 C’s. Of course I thought money was important at that time, you know, then family (Id. 3:36).

Last time [it] was making more and more money, chasing after money, thinking of what deals to make, how to make money (Id. 3:80).

Although she had achieved financial stability and found that life then was indeed meaningful, in 1999 she reflected seriously on the question of the meaning of life. She admitted:

Well, in the beginning it was very meaningful – you want to accumulate property, accumulate things. Ah, but it was very strange in 1999, and I really put very serious thought into my life, you know, because I said, “Eh, 2000 is a new millennium,” you know? (Id. 3:42).

Then I said, “Am I going to be happy?” (Id. 3:45).

This crisis of meaning led to a slow transition from the pursuit of money to maintaining a balanced life (Id. 3:26) in line with seven priorities, namely the “7Fs”: faith (God), family, finance, fitness, friends, fun and fruits (a balanced diet).⁷⁶⁵ Living her life in accordance with these priorities enabled her to experience contentedness and happiness (Id. 3:29) and a passion for serving the poor and needy. She believed that it was God’s purpose for her to help the poor (Id. 3:84). She said:

It’s very important to know the purpose of my life, so now I know that my purpose, that God has given me, the purpose of my life is to serve his poor, needy and marginalised children (Id.3:27).

⁷⁶⁵ Peggy C. Wong, *Living A Balanced Life* (Damansara Utama, P.J.: Living Hope Resources, 2012), 1-72.

RP3 is now heading a non-profit organisation, known as *Living Hope*, which focuses on meeting the needs of the marginalised. Although the work has not been easy, it has brought about meaningfulness. She explained:

Although I go out and visit the children, yeah, it is a journey to the village and all that compared to the new village. But what is happening, you find it so meaningful because, through the little bit of action that I do, it benefits a few hundred children... I find that it is meaningful when you see the smiles on the faces of the children and then realise that it is not about me. It is about God, and I believe that God is using me to channel his love and to care for these children (Id. 3:82).

As for RP8, his earlier purpose in life revolved around the pursuit of happiness which, according to him, was a reaction to hardship and poverty during his childhood. The importance of happiness was expressed nine times in the interview. His common expressions were:

I say the rest of my life I will live according to what I have set out to do... live a happy life, as far as I can (Id. 8:8).

I want to live a happy life and to seek the thing that makes me happy (Id.8:16).

The [my] original philosophy, which is [to] live a happy life as far as possible (Id. 8:8).

Securing a happy life was the guiding principle behind his decision-making for the first 20 years of his life, until he embraced Christianity in his early twenties. This event marked a clear turning point from the pursuit of happiness to living for Jesus Christ, which is now his purpose (Id. 8:13) and the meaning of life (Id. 8:44). The relationship between religion and purpose of life was expressed 11 times in various parts of the interview. The most common expressions were:

So, after I was converted... my purpose of life was to live for God (Id. 8:48).

But once I discovered God, the purpose in life no longer served me but served God. So that was the turning point (Id. 8:54).

So, when I found Christ, I found the purpose of my life (Id. 8:12).

Interview data show that the change in purpose, to 'living for God', did not alter the theme of happiness drastically, albeit the focus changed from self to God. RP8 explained:

[The earlier happiness] was very self-centred (8:214).

Happiness is just happy for me (8:179).

Whereas, after knowing Christ, happiness for me is not good enough. There is happiness for God (Id. 8:181).

The desire to live for God led to the search for specific things he should do in life. In his words:

[I asked myself] how do I translate that [the purpose of life] into my life? (Id. 8:16).

Perhaps with my calling that God wants me to contribute to something (Id. 8:82).

I need to know whether or not God wants me to be a missionary (Id. 8:109).

The data show that his desire to “live for God” led to his involvement on a part-time basis in the church in his early twenties, before diverting into the business world in his forties. Now that he has been living for God through his business for 20 years, he is now looking for a new thing to do for the next 20 years of his life. He insisted that would not be a change of direction but in the specific thing he would do for God, thereby maintaining living for God as the overarching purpose of his life.

4.2.1.2 How does the Purpose of Life offer Meaning to Painful Experiences?

Almost every RP had had painful experiences, before and after they arrived at their present purposes of life. The data also show that they coped with these painful experiences differently, for instance by crying (RP2, RP3), feeling a sense of defeat (RP1, RP8), complaining, contemplating suicide (RP3) and trying to stay on top of the situation (RP2, RP3, RP5 and RP7). While the emotional pain, disappointment and fear were present before and after the discovery of their present purposes of life, the data indicate the participants coped better as a result of their purpose of life, which also enabled them to be more ready to face an unexpected death. Table 13 (Thirteen) details painful events at the time before and after their transition to the purpose of life.

TABLE 13: PAINFUL EVENTS BEFORE AND AFTER TRANSITIONING TO THE PURPOSE OF LIFE

RP's	Purpose In Life	Purpose Of life
RP1	Lost money (twice) Tussled with a company shareholder	Tussled with a company shareholder
RP2	Death (parents)	None
RP3	Business failure Eye disease	Eye disease
RP5	Death (sister and parents)	Terminal illness
RP7	Accused of wrongdoing	Business failure Stung by bees
RP8	Poverty (childhood)	Death (business partner)
RP11	Poverty	Death (father)

The interview data show that the ability to see meaning from these experiences is an important factor in coping successfully. The responses from the RPs also show two different ways through which they drew meaning from their painful experiences. The first was drawing lessons from their experiences. This was seen before and after the present purposes of life.

RP1 commented on the pain and lessons learned from his failed investment:

So, one of them was in... [deep in thought] I think in '03 [2003]. I invested quite a lot of money in properties... it got stuck, all of them got stuck... I struggled, you know? You pay the money but you don't have the house, and that got me stuck. Really got me stuck and will make you really humble, your future is not actually in your hands (Id. 1:53). The second time was in '07 [2007] when, out of greed, I lost cash – about 1.1 million on the stock market. So I used to make money every year from investing but then I crossed the line in '07, when investing became gambling. So that brought me to my knees (Id.1:54).

As a result of this experience, RP1 had accepted his inability to predict the future (Id. 1:55) and he learnt that he 'can't gamble' and 'cannot be greedy' (Id. 1:56). In another event, RP1's bitter tussle with a business partner taught him to be 'cautious, [on] how to

deal with shareholders, because human hearts are different' (Id. 1:59), and to 'give time for it [issue] to settle, and don't rush into things... wait upon the Lord for the right time to share and speak with them' (Id. 1:64).

Similarly, RP2 drew lessons from his painful experience. He revealed:

I felt the pain being a kid without a father. So my shoulders always bore the responsibility that I can't die now, I don't want to die now. I have to be physically strong, healthy, so that I can live until 70-80. At least until my kids are adults. Then I can walk peacefully, because I will have gone through [completed] the process (Id 2:14).

Because I went through that painful experience, I went through those times where I didn't have a father, the challenges that we faced. I think that caused me to be alert always of myself, in that you don't simply drink a lot wine, smoke and eat unhealthy food (Id 2:16).

A similar pattern was also observed in the data on RP3. She recalled an incident and the lesson she learned from it:

At that time I was very young and, in a worldly sense, very successful. There was a lot of pride in me and I thought I was invincible. So I set up a joint venture with a foreign company and we did something. Within, I think, almost a year the thing collapsed (Id. 4:66)... So, I was just left with a dead baby, a dying baby and I was very upset and said that it was not fair (Id. 3:67)... From that time I remembered that and I used to cry over it and wonder why I was carrying this dying baby... (Id.3:68).

Now it is different. If I [have another bad] experience, which could happen any time, I will just say, "God, give me the strength to do it and go through it." I will not ask God why. ... So all I know is, I can hang on to my father. I will hang on to my Papa, whatever it is I will hang on there, whether going to the Valley of Death or whatever, I will still hang on (Id. 3:73, 74).

It is noted too that they found meaning by giving reasons for painful experiences, and even for experiences that occurred prior to discovering the present purpose of life. Table 14 (Fourteen) summarises the reasons for these painful experiences.

TABLE 14: RPs' REASONS FOR PAINFUL EXPERIENCES

RPs	Purpose in Life	Purpose of Life
RP1	Occurred to mature us. Occurred to make us wiser	Occurred to mature us. Occurred to make us wiser
RP2	It is God's arrangement so that I become stronger	It is God's arrangement so that I become stronger
RP3	Occurred to lead me back to God	Occurred to help me rely on God
RP5	It was part of life	God wants me to rest for working too hard
RP7	Occurred to help me understand what life is all about	Occurred to help me learn obedience (to God)
RP8	God is Sovereign. He gives and He takes away	God is Sovereign. We must do our best in life, whenever possible
RP11	Occurred to help him succeed in life	It is God's will

The reasons attributed to both periods are noted to be virtually the same, because they viewed their experiences in light of their present purpose of life. In other words, the reasons given for the painful experiences prior to their present purpose of life were retrospective and underpinned by their view thereof. For instance, in the case of RP1 again:

Of course, at that time, when we face it, it's like an unfortunate event, but I mean, now, as we look back, we thank God for incidents like that, because it made us more mature and made us... learn big lessons, and then we become wiser (Id. 1:52)... So I took the lesson from the past, [and] there is no point getting, even though whatever that I get, eventually you have to leave them behind (Id. 1:68).

A similar pattern is seen in RP2's response:

Those are God's arrangements. My father passed away so that I would become stronger. If my father... my father [had been] around I may have been spoiled. I may have been a spoiled child. If I didn't come here, I may not have the chance to... to know my religion. So yeah, I think those are... those are God's purposes to arrange... (2:75).

Last time I blamed my father, “Why [did] you die so early?” I blamed him! Until I was thirty-five years old... but I blamed him because I didn’t know all of this was God’s arrangement (Id. 2:78).

RP5 similarly expressed that his earlier struggle with life and his current battle with cancer were ways of drawing him nearer to God (Id.5:43; 46).

4.2.1.3 How does the Purpose of Life offer Meaning in Relation to Work, Family and Personal Life?

The RPs expressed that their present purpose of life gave meaning, and hence meaningfulness, to their work. All the RPs enjoyed their work more, in that they recognised that their current activities were consistent with their purpose of life and also met the needs of others. For instance, the account of RP1 shows a transition away from a life that was primarily self-serving to a life primarily focusing on serving others, thus changing the way he saw his work and employees. He stated:

I take a non-operational role but major in the pastoral care of the staff, so they can see me on many other things, like their personal lives (Id. 1:1).

You used staff and focused on getting what you wanted. So, you would pay the least and get the most profits, in terms of remuneration. If you cannot pay, don’t pay. So that is very self-serving (Id. 1:41).

He also added to company policy, which included, among others, setting aside a huge portion of the profit in relation to employee welfare.⁷⁶⁶ At the time of the interview, RP1 affirmed that he was enjoying his work very much (Id. 1:10).

Similar responses are also evident in RP2, RP3, RP5, RP7, RP8 and RP11. For instance, RP11 believes he is fulfilling God’s purpose by engaging in business, a platform from which he can share his ‘bitter and sour’ experience and success, in order to encourage others (Id. 11:12). A similar perspective was seen in RP3:

Although I go out and visit the children, yeah, it is a journey to the village and all that compared to the new village. But what is happening, you find it so meaningful because the little bit of what I do benefits a few hundred children... I find that is meaningful, when you see the smiles on the faces of the children and also make them realise that it is not about me. It is about God, and I believe that God is using me to channel his love and care to these children (Id. 3:82).

⁷⁶⁶ Secondary documentary sources corroborate RP1’s effort to transform the industry into an environmentally friendly and corruption-free business, showing consistency with his religious belief.

The present purpose of life also brought about meaningfulness and harmony in family life. RP1's purpose of life significantly shaped his personal and family life, as it gave him new priorities such as spending more time with his wife and children, mostly in the context of mealtimes together (Id.1:3-4). Even when this became increasingly difficult, as his children has grown up, RP1 would visit them frequently (Id. 1:68). The attention given to his family is in stark contrast to the time when they were never his priority (Id. 1:37-39). Accounts from other RPs show how their purposes of life have contributed to their parenting approaches (RP2, RP5, RP7 and RP8). For instance, RP2 believes that he had been too controlling (Id. 2:6) in the past and had failed to be a good father to his daughter. His purpose, to abide by the teaching of his religion, changed his parenting approach and family life. He explained:

But the biggest change was when I became [a] Christian. We come from [the point of] love and we always ask God to forgive us (Id. 2:7).

Well, I am also human. I will be emotional when bad things happen, but I am now able to control my temper more. I try not to react so vigorously during a problem. I think that is a change. (Id. 2:8) Religion really gave a set of guidelines on how to live life in harmony, within or even away from the family. So, I think that is the biggest change in my life, in terms of teaching and bringing up my kids (Id. 2:9).

I... every morning I pray, I ask God to forgive my sins, then why cannot... I cannot forgive my kids?! So I will forgive the next day, though sometimes it may take me two or three days, but I forgive easier. That is a change (Id. 2:82).

Others, such as RP3, stated that her purpose of life had shaped her order of priorities (Id. 3:4, 6, 8). Furthermore, family had become more important than money, although there were still challenges and struggles in her family life. She noted:

I learned to be a better wife, to be submissive. Learning is not in my character. I am very much independent. I am always a 50-50 person, an equal partner with my husband, so now, in the end, submissive ... that he is the head of the family (Id. 3:88).

There is also evidence showing the positive effect of the purposes of life in relation to the RPs' emotional stability, most evidently in RP2, RP3, RP7, RP8 and RP11. For

instance, the answers from RP3 show her purpose of life improved her emotional wellbeing, particularly with the issues of worry and sleep. In her words:

Every time before that I would, before becoming a Christian, everything also I must solve it – there must be a plan A, a plan B. (Now), no more plans already. I say God, your plan. Even what I plan doesn't always work. So [it's] your plan. So I learn to surrender now, I think it's going to be 13 years as a Christian. I say God, you take care. So it is very unusual for me, because I have been trained to be a planner, I am trained to have everything ready, A, B, C, D (Id. 3:13).

Now there is no more plan. So I say to God that I now live one day at a time. Last time I always planned; we were trained to have a five-year plan, a 10-year flex, a 15-year plan, but now there are no more plans (Id. 3:14).

But what I love most about this part of my life is that there is so much contentment and I really can sleep (Id. 4:19). Last time I had a problem I could not sleep because I was so worried. So because I worried I would always plan what should be next, what the worst case scenario would be (Id. 3:21).

I had never really experienced perfect sleep before I was a Christian (Id. 3:22).

Data on the effect of the purpose of life in relation to work, family and personal life indicate that the former has brought new perspectives and purpose to their work, thereby encouraging personal development, a reprioritisation of their roles and responsibilities and thus bringing about a more balanced life and an emotionally healthier person. Table 15 (Fifteen) summarises the effect of the present purpose in life in relation to the RPs' work, family and personal life.

TABLE 15: THE EFFECT OF THE PURPOSE OF LIFE ON WORK, FAMILY AND PERSONAL LIFE (CASE ONE)

RPs	Work	Family	Personal Growth
RP1	Found meaning and enjoying it better	More time with family and managing it well	A better leader at home and in the workplace; more balance in life and emotionally healthier
RP2	Clearer direction, more accommodating to changes	More time with the family, becoming a better father and seeing a clearer direction for the family	More balanced life, less anger and a stronger sense of determination
RP3	Found meaning, enjoying and satisfying	Becoming a better mother (less dominating) and spouse (more submissive)	A more balanced life, less argumentative
RP5	Found fulfilment and enjoying life better	More time with the family	More thankful with life, emotionally stronger
RP7	More purposeful and satisfying, giving lots of joy	Enjoying family life, a better father	A more balanced life, stronger emotionally, a more loving person
RP8	A clearer focus and purpose	A better spouse and father to live with, more time with the family	A more balanced life, no longer afraid of death, stronger emotionally
RP11	More purposeful and satisfying	Much closer to the family, spending more time with them	A more careful person, emotionally stronger

4.2.1.4 Experiential difference between Meaning in and the Meaning of Life.

The data show that every RP experienced a qualitatively superior form of meaningfulness in line with their present purpose of life. They expressed a clearer sense of direction and, as a result, a more balanced, satisfying, fulfilling, contented and happy life permeating through to work, family and personal life. It is evident from the data that there are experiential differences between meanings in life and the meaning of life, in that the latter is more satisfying, fulfilling, enjoyable and meaningful. Table 16 (Sixteen) shows what the RPs meant in this respect.

TABLE 16: DESCRIPTIONS OF MEANINGFULNESS ASSOCIATED WITH THE PURPOSE OF LIFE

RPs	Description on Meaningfulness
RP1	Very fulfilling, satisfying, meaningful
RP2	Enjoying, satisfying, balanced life, contented, meaningful
RP3	Very happy, contented, sleep well, balanced life
RP5	Satisfaction, peace of mind, freedom to help
RP7	Satisfying, peaceful, meaningful
RP8	Happiness, satisfaction, contentment
RP11	Happiness, satisfaction, peace of mind

4.2.1.5 Common Themes and Patterns in Case One

The accounts of the RPs show the change from a purpose in life to the purpose of life as the primary factor contributing to qualitatively superior meaningfulness in the spheres of their work, family and personal life. The data indicate that this change is essentially a change from purpose that is characteristically “inward-looking” or “self-serving” to one that is characteristically “other-centred.” The change is undergirded by the RPs’ desire to be consistent with their religious convictions, and their actions are considered as pleasing to God. They view such as an expression of living in accordance with their reason for existing.

Interestingly, the data on Case One reveal two patterns of approaches when it comes to meeting the purpose of life. The first is total involvement, characterised by giving oneself wholly to the cause of other-centeredness. This is seen clearly in RP1, RP3 and RP7. The second is partial involvement, characterised by giving oneself to the cause of other-centeredness in addition to existing routines. This is seen clearly in RP2, RP5, RP8 and RP11. Comparing the data from both types of involvement, it is noteworthy that those who have given their focus to the cause of “other-centeredness” have found their ultimate purpose of life. On the contrary, the RPs representing the second type of involvement

have expressed their desire to do so (total involvement) as their ultimate purpose of life. This may indicate that whilst the RPs representing the second type of involvement are already experiencing meaningfulness of life, they believe that with their total involvement in relation to the command of God and the cause of “other-centeredness”, their life would be more consistent with the purpose of their existence and bring about a more superior quality of meaningfulness.

The newfound purpose of life was also found to be crucial to finding meaning in painful experiences. Responses from RP1, RP2, RP5, RP8 and RP11 revealed that painful experiences in their early years shaped their purposes in life. For instance, RP8 and RP11’s pursuit of material wealth and success was driven by the desire to escape the pain of poverty. In the cases of RP1, RP2 and RP5, although they did not consider poverty as a painful experience, the correlation between difficulties in the early parts of their lives and their purposes in life suggest the link is present. For instance, RP2’s pursuit was driven by the desire to give his mother a good life, after having raised him and his siblings in a challenging environment. Similarly, RP5’s purpose in working towards financial stability was motivated by the need to make ends meet. The relationship between painful experiences and the formation of life purposes is therefore significant, and this study shows that there is a tendency for people to adjust their views on life, in order to arrive at a place of stability.⁷⁶⁷ Nevertheless, the purposes in life could not offer significant resolve and meaning to painful experiences in the later stages of their lives, and so the meanings of these painful events were drawn primarily from lessons learned.

In contrast, the data show the correlation between the present purpose of life and the meaning of painful experiences. In particular, their purposes have enabled them to see meaning and thus cope successfully with painful events. All RPs associated meaning with the purpose of life and expressed confidence in coping successfully with future unexpected events. Consider excerpts from RP5 and RP7, respectively. On his illness and the purpose of pleasing God, RP5 stated:

I have to come to realise that I have been working too hard and God needs me to rest, to spend time with Him and to fulfill my last run (Id.5:47).

⁷⁶⁷ For instance, Thompson and Janigian “Life Schemes,” 260-280.

And for RP7, on painful experiences and his desire to please God:

Then, when I look back, you know? Yeah, sometimes I didn't consult the Lord, and those are the... What God gives and clearly tells me, it's always really good, I must say (Id. 7:56).

The data on RP2 further sustain the correlation between the purpose of life and finding meaning in painful experiences:

That is the major difference between being religious or not religious. Before [this] I felt... I didn't... I cannot, I cannot. Before [this] I feel [felt] like... I cannot die, because my kids are so young! But now I don't think like that. Now I think that God might have his purpose, [a reason] why I have to die now. Because he may have to want my... because he sees my daughter – my kids are too spoiled already. You have to die now so that they become better. Maybe that is his purpose. So I will not blame... I will not... I will not... no... I'm happy, me and my wife now. Because we understand that is all God's purpose – God's arrangement. So although I still don't want to die, I will just take it (Id.2:80).

Data from RP1, for instance, offer a unique case for comparison, as he had similar painful experiences before and after discovering the purpose of life. Both cases are related to tussles with company shareholders. The first, a battle with a brother-in-law within the company, left him with a strained relationship with the in-law side of the family (Id. 1:57). In dealing with a similar case, he considered letting go his right to the company shares for the sake of reconciling the affected parties. He noted:

Now is a repeat of what I went through before, with my brother-in-law. Now I play the peacemaker role between the two parties. And it has been quite difficult, because of human nature: "I want more, I don't want to give in," things like that. And problems with mistrust... I see in, you know... even though we have 25% there, we will concede, and that is what you think is the better deal. I will to play a role where we can settle it amicably instead of bringing it to court... I mean... by the grace of God. So... but it is difficult, it is a very challenging one, and it is still ongoing now, in the negotiation part, because they don't see each other anymore. I have to go to both sides, and at times they have actually accused me of siding with one or the other. I always bring them back to the centre. I say, "Look, my settlement part is the smallest. And you guys know why I am here." So I took the lesson from the past, as there is no point getting, even though whatever that I get, eventually you have to leave them behind. So... if I get the smallest part, it doesn't matter – as long as the two of you are happy (Id. 1:78).

In addition, the purpose of life has also enabled the RPs to be ready and prepared for future painful experiences. For instance, RP2's purpose to obey God is helping him to yield such possibility to God. This engenders his belief that there is a reason and hence meaning to such event:

Now it is different. If I get through another bad experience, which could happen at any time, I will just say, "God, give me the strength to do it and go through it" (Id. 2:72).

If I am so unfortunate to experience another upsetting event in the future, I think I will cope with it better. Emotionally I am more peaceful. I know we have done what is within our strength to do... we have done what we have to do. If God has to arrange this for me, we just take it. And who knows, after this so-called "unfortunate event" it's not something better! (Id. 2:78).

The RPs are ready to face unexpected death, in the belief that they are already living a purposeful and meaningful life. Consider the statements made by RP2, RP3 and RP5, respectively:

If I had to pass away now, I think I would be happy. Because I have been meaningful in my life, I have been meaningful to others in my life, and I have already done my best in everything I want (Id.2:86).

I was really frightened of death. I [was] really scared of dying, but now I say, "God, if it is time to go, I have to go..." (Id. 3:75, 78).

Death is something all of us have to accept as a matter of time; some go off earlier, some go off later, and to me, if it comes, it comes. It is just that I hope when it comes I don't have to suffer too much. And at the end of the day I have been a blessing [to others] (Id. 5:49).

Whilst the RPs' readiness to face death remained in the future, the data indicated that they recognise the timing of death as God's prerogative and as being consistent with the course of nature, and thus they expressed an acceptance that that day would eventually arrive. They believed they were living their life meaningfully in relation to the purpose of their existence as well as their responsibilities to the things or people close to them. Interestingly, the data gave no indication of the RPs seeking material gains or blessings

of any form in return for living out their purpose of life, except for hoping for a non-painful death when the day arrived.

The data show a common pattern in which the meaningfulness of life is a by-product of living consistently with the worthwhile purpose of life through which one experiences the sense of coherence and significance of living consistently with the purpose of existence.

4.2.1.6 Summary

The data on Case One found every RP had experienced meaningfulness as a result of living with a purpose of life consistent with their purpose of existence and the commands of God. The purpose of life is unanimously characterised by other-centeredness, amounting to the principle of the Golden Rule. The purpose of life has enabled them to find a sense of coherence in their work, family and personal life, resulting in qualitatively superior meaningfulness. The data also found the purpose of life has given them a point of reference by which they have found meaning and the ability to cope with painful experiences.

4.2.2 CASE TWO: BUDDHIST RPs WITH A HIGH MLQ SCORE ON THE PRESENCE OF MEANING IN LIFE

4.2.2.1 How did the Research Participants arrive at Meaningfulness of Life?

Case Two is represented by two RPs, namely RP4 and RP9, adhering to Buddhism. Both of them expressed that they had found the purpose of life and were experiencing meaningfulness. The data show they were already experiencing meaningfulness before arriving at their present purpose, and changing these purposes had enabled them to experience a superior sense thereof. Consider the journey of RP4, who started by finding happiness for himself, his family and the people around him. He said:

Oh, I can't remember. But I think when we were younger we had our own idealism that kept on changing. Over the years... like in my school days, I wanted to be an accountant, but eventually I became an engineer, and eventually I also went into business... (Id. 4:16).

Of course, that time I did have an aspiration that I would like to buy a bungalow, I would like to give a good life to my family, to my children and also to be a good role model to my people... the people under me... that all of them also could do well in their sales, have lots of money, live a good life... those were the days before I entered into business (Id. 4:17).

Those days I think I was very much more working towards happiness for myself, my staff and my family (Id. 4:25).

His exposure to the teaching of Buddhism led to a gradual process of embracing a view of life consistent with its doctrine. This brought about purposefulness and a superior experience of meaningfulness. In his explanation:

So, if we understand all these things and live a life... what you call... in the order of nature, then we will be able to live a happier life, a more meaningful life (4:11).

The purpose of life... in this case is, as I mentioned, that it's basically to live in accordance with the law of nature, so we can achieve or attain eventually the highest [level of] happiness (Id. 4:13).

I started to learn about the meaning of life, the purpose of life and how to live a happy, meaningful and purposeful life in this world that is full of *dukha*, D-U-K-H-A, or unsatisfactory-ness; yet, we are able to live a happy and meaningful and purposeful life. (Id. 4:20).

His purpose in life progressed to emphasising living consistently with the principles of *dharma* in Buddhism. Consider the excerpts below:

D-H-A-R-M-A [is] basically... how [things] arise and pass away is very much influenced by this law. So we understand, for example, the law of *Karma* that when you do something you receive back certain effects. So, if we know how to live a life in accordance with all the laws, then we will not move in a direction that brings us suffering and laws of unwholesomeness; instead, we can live a more wholesome and happier life (Id. 4:12).

This philosophy had helped him to redefine what it means to live a meaningful life. He explained:

What is the meaning of life? Actually, the question in itself is sometimes, maybe, very subjective (Id. 4:48). I will rather say the meaning of existence. That is I, like, to say, basically, we are all of part of nature... very transient, we

consist of the mind and the body which rise and then pass away and are influenced by certain natural laws we call the law of *dharma*, so we must understand when we live our life in accordance with *dharma*. That is the meaning of life. I would rather say the meaning of our existence. So the purpose, basically, is to live a happy, meaningful and purposeful life in accordance with the law of nature and the law of *dharma* (Id.4:49).

Although there was a progression in his life purpose, there were no significant changes in daily activities apart from a significant increase in the scope of his charitable work and ensuring the happiness of his workers. According to him:

Well, last time I had aspirations to... work towards a happy life to myself, for my family and for my staff... It was for the people under me or about me. Today, I have the opportunity to contribute to the benefit and happiness of many more people. So, to me, it is a good change (Id. 4:22).

Today, I am able to contribute in one way or another, maybe in small ways or maybe in bigger ways, to the happiness of many more people (Id. 4:25).

In spite of the fact that RP4 had found meaningfulness, he was still working towards a more meaningful and purposeful life by giving his all to the cause of meeting the precepts of *Dharma* and Buddhism (Id.4:27 - 28).

Interview data for RP9 reveal a similar pattern. As a student of the teaching of Buddha, RP9 attributed his present happiness in life to having achieved his earlier goals in life, having a sense of purpose and living consistently with the teaching of Buddha. He explained:

I must say that I am happy because most of my dreams, hopes and goals have been fulfilled. I think that is essential to state. A lot of people are unhappy because their goals and dreams have not been fulfilled (Id. 9:14).

I think what is happiness to me is that I have a sense of purpose. I know what I want, and I know what will lead me to happiness... The Buddha talks about "right livelihoods." I am in a business [which] I don't think is a wrong livelihood. I help people to grow and develop... I thought there is lot of satisfaction in helping people. So the job that I do, of course, I get paid for listening to people's problems. But at the same time it is rewarding, because you know you are helping another human being. To get out from darkness, whichever darkness they are in, to light... So I am in this business. In terms of the right livelihood, I am in the right livelihood (Id. 9:17, 57).

And from my religious belief perspective, I don't harm people; I enrich people's lives... and I add value to their life. I think, yes. So, to me, happiness means finding a purpose. And my purpose is very clear (Id. 9:18).

His ultimate purpose of life was achieving Buddhist Enlightenment and, secondly, having a life purpose that went beyond the self (Id. 9:56), and so adding value to people's lives was the purpose of his life. He revealed:

The ultimate purpose [of life] as a Buddhist is enlightenment. Again, this is a very abstract definition. So that's the ultimate (Id. 9:40). But if I want to dilute it slightly, my ultimate purpose in life is, like I said, is about adding value to people's lives on top of my own... Any person who lives in this world who is not adding value in his life, they are not creating happiness for himself or for [other] people. That is my definition (Id. 9:41).

His responses revealed a transition from a life that was primarily about meeting personal needs to an emphasis on meeting the needs of others (Id. 9: 35), which in turn led to the greater intensity and quality of happiness (Id 9:29). Although this was the case, RP9 looked for a sustained state of (ultimate) happiness (Id. 9:21, 24) which he hoped he would achieve after he was more settled with worldly responsibilities (Id. 9:21). He explained:

Despite my success, there is still a little greed here and there. Despite my success, occasionally there is a little hatred here and there. That comes in the form of anger and things which I need to help myself a lot more to be a better a person... Those are the things that, ultimately, as a Buddhist, we know that we need to discard, but it takes a different path to do it. So those are ultimately happiness, and when I walk the path and I practice, I see improvement in myself (Id. 9:21).

4.2.2.2 How has the Purpose of Life offered Meaning to Painful Experiences?

Both RPs had experienced multiple and painful experiences, before and after they arrived at their present purposes of life. The data recorded the presence of emotional pain, disappointment and fear, but the ability to see meaning in these experiences was an important reason for coping successfully. The data show they sought meaning by drawing lessons from their experiences. More effectively, however, the newfound purpose for life enabled them to interpret their painful experiences, thereby enabling them to cope better.

For instance, the excerpts from RP4:

I have lost almost everything that I had financially. Like, for example, in 1987... I think... when I lost almost all of my money in the share market. I bought a house, which I had to abandon, and I lost my job. I was retrenched. So that was among one of the lowest points in my life (4:31-33).

A similar experience after the discovery of his present purpose of life enabled him to cope better and successfully. He recounted:

The second time that I lost a lot of the money, actually... also on the share market. And I was also hit business-wise, because of the currency situation and because of bad debts (Id. 4:34)... So it was also very tough for me in 1998. But '98, I think, was easier for me to go through because at least I'd already got some foundations [for coping] (Id. 4:35).

I think it is much easier for me to encounter future challenges. I mean [that] with these past experiences I have a better understanding of what life is all about. Challenges always come every day; it is just a matter of how we look at things. If we look at things in a more positive manner, think in a more wholesome manner... when you mind being more wholesome and less indulgent in all this unhappiness, unwholesomeness and negativity. Then good things will come your way. It is the law of *karma*, you know? (Id.4:40)

It is noted, too, that they found meaning through giving reasons for painful experiences that occurred prior to and after discovering the present purpose of life. For instance, RP4 noted:

Buddhist philosophy did help teach me that in life everything is transient. Nothing can last forever, so... all these things, all this Buddhist philosophy, in a way also helped me go through this. Everything rises and passes away. More important is... is not that we cannot fall, but when we fall we don't just lie down. Get up and move ahead again. Rising and falling are part and parcel of life. But make sure that for every fall, you rise higher (Id. 4:39).

A similar pattern is observed in RP9. He had experienced 'ups and downs' in life but he believed one ought to stop blaming and instead look at things from a different perspective. In his words:

I am not sure whether we can consider [painful events] as unfortunate. I guess life has never been perfect. It is just that sometimes these are challenges you face in your life. So, again, this is a mind-set thing. I don't look at life as

being unfortunate. I look at life as being challenging. You can always say this is a matter of words. But I think, mentally, it has a different meaning. People who think that life has been unfortunate will tend to blame... I don't look at it that way. I think these are challenges in life. No doubt it didn't happen the way you wanted. But I always say that these are life challenges (Id. 9:42).

The following excerpts about the loss of his child clarify this point further:

My eldest is not really my eldest. My wife, actually, after our marriage, she conceived. When I had my first child before this first child, my wife was pregnant for 26 weeks. And on the 26th week the child was gone. It was kind of a still birth. We went through a very tough time, as that was the first pregnancy – that was the first child. We lost the first child as a foetus aged 26 weeks. So again... I... it was a difficult time, it was emotionally challenging (Id. 9:46).

RP9 believes that there was a reason for it happening that way. He explained:

Of course, from the Buddhist point of view, we look to the law of *Karma*, that there are reasons why certain things happen that way... I don't look at it as unfortunate. In fact, the day when we discovered that the baby didn't kick at all, we had gone to the Buddhist altar [over] there, and we had our quiet moment of prayer. We sat down and we said our prayers. In our prayers, it was very simple – if the baby is ours, it is ours. If the baby is not ours, it is not ours (Id. 9:47).

Of course it was sad, as we are all humans and we all go through... I am not a robot. There are disappointments and there are moments of sadness, but soon you learn how to overcome that very quickly. You don't see that as an unfortunate event, because, I mean, when you look back philosophically, your prayer is answered. Had the baby been born with a deformed brain or whatever it is, I would have lived my whole life having to take care of it. It would not have been easy. Maybe my life path will change. So you never know what will happen. So, in a so-called “unfortunate” event like that, having the right mind-set and understanding of things helps, because you don't see it as unfortunate. You don't blame anybody. I don't blame my wife. I don't blame anybody (Id. 9:48).

4.2.2.3 How does the Purpose of Life offer Meaning in Relation to Work, Family and Personal Life?

The newfound purpose of life had also brought about meaning to work, family and personal life. The data is summarised in Table 17 (Seventeen) below. For instance, the

data on RP4 indicated coherence between the work and the purpose of life. Consider the excerpts below:

Well, I mean, understanding that everything is transient; everything is affected by certain natural laws... It is important for us to live a happy, meaningful life and a purposeful life, and so it is important therefore that people that are with me also live a happy, meaningful and purposeful life (Id. 4:44).

And it is for us to create conditions in the office, in the company, that make them feel comfortable, make them feel happy, and also for them to be successful in the things that they do. I think, overall, especially my sales people, they are happy with what they are doing over here. The conditions that we have created make their jobs easier and they can now earn better money – it’s what we call a more comfortable life (Id.4:45).

This was also found in the account of RP9, who reasoned:

The Buddha talks about the right livelihood. I am in a business [which] I don’t think is a wrong livelihood. I help people to grow and develop, and when you coach people... you facilitate that discovery and people, “wow” they rediscovered themselves. I think there’s a lot of satisfaction in helping people... In terms of the right livelihood, I am in the right livelihood (Id. 9:57).

I stopped working because of money... So, my philosophy in life, my values in life, have taught me that I shouldn’t work because of money. I am very clear now that most of time I work because I add value to people’s lives (Id. 9:54).

In addition to the above, RP9’s desire to live consistently in line with Buddhism has enabled him to see the importance of imparting good values to his children. He revealed:

So, it is my role to make sure that in this short “connection” that we have, for a short while 30-40-50 years, whatever the time frame... we add value to each other. You come in and you walk away eventually from my life as a better person. So that has away been my... so along the way this is where my role as a parent has to come in. To instil the right values to them... For me, the right values are very simple. Whatever you do, it must be good for yourself, it must be good for people, it must be good for everybody. That is good... It must be good for everybody. If you can do that, everybody is adding value to each other’s life. The family will be a lot more in harmony (Id. 9:55).

Similarly, RP4’s purpose, namely to adhere to the teaching of *Dharma*, had brought balance to his life. He shared his thoughts on this point:

This is also something that I have learned in Buddhism, actually – when I learned about the importance of dividing my time between my family, for my employees, for my friends, for my brother-sister, for my relatives in *SigalovadaSutta* (Id. 4:6).

Before that I lived a more unbalanced life ...I spent more time, even most of my time in business, as well as we've our Subang Jaya Buddhist Association, where I was the president and I am still the president to this day, but I spent little time with my own family. But since about 1997, I began to live a more balanced life, began to understand that there was no point in me being successful in business or my community services if I failed in my family commitments (Id. 4:2-3).

Understanding my role as a father especially... the responsibility and duty of the father, in that sense, I have to forge a better relationship between me and my children (Id. 4:46)... and also understand the importance of my children maturing with good values in their life... so when they grow up they become better people and also... for them themselves to understand the meaning of life and the purpose of life (Id. 4:47).

TABLE 17: THE EFFECT OF THE PURPOSE OF LIFE ON WORK, FAMILY AND PERSONAL LIFE (CASE TWO)

RPs	Work	Family	Personal Growth
RP4	A better perspective, happier and found meaning	Understand the role as a father better, more consistent family time	A more balanced life and stronger emotionally
RP9	More purposeful and satisfying, adding values to people's lives	More consistent and intentional time with the family, a more harmonious family life	A more balanced life, stronger emotionally and determined

4.2.2.4 Experiential difference between a Meaning and the Meaning of Life.

The data show that the RPs experienced a qualitatively superior form of meaningfulness in line with their present purpose in life by experiencing a clearer sense of direction and, as a result, a more balanced, satisfying, fulfilling, contented and happy life permeating through to work, family and personal life. The comments from RP4 and RP9,

respectively, below confirm the effect of the purpose of life on the quality of meaningfulness:

So, if we understand all these things and live a life... what you call... in the order of nature, then we will be able to live a happier life, a more meaningful life (4:11).

So if you ask me was I happy then? I think I was. But the happiness that I had experienced then and the happiness that I am experiencing today, I think the intensity is very much different. The quality is very much different. So if you talk about intensity and quality it is very different (Id. 9:32).

4.2.2.5 Common Themes and Patterns in Case Two

The accounts of the RPs show the change from a purpose in life to the purpose of life as the primary factor contributing to qualitatively superior meaningfulness whereby the sense of meaning and meaningfulness is experienced in the spheres of their work, family and personal life. The data indicate that this change is essentially a change from a purpose that is characteristically “inward-looking” or “self-serving” to one that is characteristically “other-centred,” i.e. it brings happiness to others. The change is undergirded by the RPs’ desire to be consistent with their religious conviction, through which their actions are consistent with the teachings of Buddhism. According to their understanding, living consistently with the philosophy of Buddhism and its propounded purpose of existence, and the law of nature expressed, is the reason for the sense of meaningfulness of life.

Interestingly, the data in Case Two reveal that the RPs consider their lives are still preoccupied by worldly responsibilities, and they look forward to the day when they can give their whole life to total involvement in teaching Buddhism. For instance, RP9 noted that he is looking for a sustained state of (the ultimate) happiness (Id. 9:21, 24) which he hopes he will achieve after he has become more settled with worldly responsibilities (Id. 9:21). This may indicate that whilst they are experiencing meaningfulness of life at this moment, they believe that with their total involvement with the precepts of Buddhism and the principles of *Dharma* will enable them to be more consistent with the purpose of their existence and will bring about a more superior quality of meaningfulness.

The data also reveal that whilst the RPs secured meaning through drawing lessons from painful experiences, it was found that the purpose of life had enabled them to give meaning to these experiences and thus helped them cope better. The purpose of life also enabled them to see the reason for their experiences in light of the principle of *Dharma*, thereby showing the relevance of the present purpose of life and the meaning of painful experiences. Thus, there is also a common pattern in which the meaningfulness of life is a by-product of living consistently with the worthwhile purpose of life through which one experiences the sense of coherence and significance for living consistently with the purpose of existence.

4.2.2.6 Summary

The data in Case Two found that the two RPs had experienced meaningfulness as a result of living a purpose of life consistent their purpose of existence – as prescribed in the law of *Dharma*. The purpose of life is unanimously characterised by bringing happiness to others, which is consistent with the principle of the Golden Rule. The purpose of life had enabled them to find a sense of coherence in their work, family and personal life, resulting in a qualitatively superior meaningfulness. The data also found the purpose of life had given them a point of reference by which they found meaning and coped with painful experiences.

4.2.3 CASE THREE: NON-RELIGIOUS RPs WITH A HIGH MLQ SCORE ON THE PRESENCE OF MEANING IN LIFE

4.2.3.1 How did the RPs arrive at Meaningfulness of Life?

Case Three is represented by two RPs, i.e. RP6 and RP10 who were non-religious but had two distinctly different journeys to meaningfulness of life. For RP6, she considered her life was already meaningful prior to her present purpose of life, as she was a successful corporate leader and a fulfilled mother at home. It was after spending considerable time in the corporate arena that she decided to move from being successful to being significant in life. She stated:

I guess on the family front I have also been very lucky, very, very fortunate, because both my children have become professionals – one as an architect and the other as a doctor. So I really felt that I had been very, very successful in my life and I wanted it to be very meaningful, move from success to significant. I decided I wanted to move from success to significance (Id. 6:3).

At this point in the interview, she expressed no fewer than four times that the purpose of her life was to help the less fortunate. For instance:

I felt the next 50% had to be using my skills, my knowledge, my experiences and my network to help the community (Id. 6:7).

My life now is about helping the less fortunate (Id. 6:51)... it's the ultimate purpose [of my life] (Id. 6:52).

This is in contrast to her earlier purpose in life, which was primarily about delivering key performance indicators (KPIs), being rewarded financially and being recognised as a successful person. That, according to her, came naturally in the light of her upbringing. She noted:

I guess it's always the way you've been brought up. We've been conditioned since we were children. You've got to study hard, go to university, get a degree – and the degree has to be relevant, you can't do arts or history, because you won't be able to earn a living. So we've been conditioned as children to go through the career progress, to go to university... So it's that conditioning that gave me my purpose in life, you know? (Id. 6:38).

RP6 decided to “give back” to the community after her visit to an orphanage with her husband (Id. 6:31). However, she shelved her intentions temporarily following the sudden death of her husband and, as a result, the need to sustain her family. It did not take too long before she found again the need to live a more significant life. She revealed:

So I was given more countries [to manage] and for the last eight years [in my company], but in my fifth year I felt I didn't want to be part of this anymore, because I felt there was no more meaning. It was just delivering my results and being recognised financially and in terms of status, and I felt there should be more meaning to life. I thought “What if I drop dead tomorrow?” What would be my legacy? (Id. 6:2).

I felt that... hey, okay, the numbers are all there, you've delivered your numbers, and then the bosses ask... “Okay, we want more, how much more can you deliver?” I knew I could do it, but where was the meaning in that?

There was no meaning in life. Meaning in the sense that... it's all about the self. It's all self-driven. Am I helping anybody else? The answer is no. It's all self-driven. It's all about my... my own... it's me, me, me, my self-advancement, me and my career, my family, you know, my financial nest and all that. So, I guess no meaning in a sense that I was not helping mankind, I was not helping anybody else, you know? (Id. 6:34).

She resigned from her corporate duties when her daughter completed her studies at university. She said:

You know, and I really have to give back. And I felt that I had to do it now. There's no... you know, evaluation and, you know, evaluate it and say should I do it or... what are the consequences and all that? I said no, I just have to do it. So I actually resigned the day my daughter became a doctor, I handed in my resignation and said, "It's now" (Id. 6:32).

Meeting the needs of the less fortunate is 'her life' (Id. 6:51) now, and this has brought about meaningfulness (Id. 6:67) which in turn has led to the decision to incorporate a company in which 100% of the dividend goes to charity. Although she has resumed a role in nature similar to what she had done before, albeit on a smaller scale, RP6 sees the differences between the two. She explained:

The first part, 50 per cent of my life, was personal. It enhanced my own life, my own self-advancement, my personal life. Now [it] is actually enhancing the lives of the less fortunate, the disadvantaged, helping them. So that is the key difference that it is no longer about myself but about them. [It is] about how I help them now (Id.6:44).

Contrary to the experience of RP6, RP10 considered his life was meaningless prior to his present purpose of life. The early part of his life was filled with challenges in his workplace for about nine years (Id. 10:12). Although extremely unhappy with the working environment, RP10 could not leave the company due to financial constraints and hence deemed the nine years as a very unhappy period (Id. 10:21). His purpose in life was "to make ends meet... to make enough to pay for all the commitments" (Id. 10:18). On the meaningfulness of his experience, RP10 explained:

It was meaningful, but it wasn't a happy period... meaningful means I have a target, I have an objective, meaning because I didn't get enough. That means I didn't earn enough, so I had to find ways to make sure I could live above the water (Id. 10:20, 22).

RP10 finally decided to resign and start a new business dealing with kitchen utensils. Although it was a difficult start, he finally experienced a breakthrough in 2003 and felt for the first time the sense of meeting his objective, as well as being able to afford the children's school fees and to clear debts (Id. 10:17). With this newfound freedom, RP10 felt that he could focus on helping people, including ensuring his clients' success in business. RP10 believed that there is causation in all actions and thus the need to live an ethical life expressed through helping others. He shared his thoughts:

The purpose of life is to be able to help others, to be able to help yourself, to be able to help your family, okay? Of course, that is not in order of importance, but it's just to be able to help people (Id. 10:15).

Meaning my objective of life is seeing... like my objective with a customer [seeing what my client sees]. My objective that which is explicitly given to the customer is your good. I want to make sure that you succeed. (Id. 10:47).

Although the old purpose gave RP10 a sense of purpose, he saw a major difference with the new purpose. He explained:

[The] difference in [is with the] perception. Before... I wasn't very sure of what was going to happen to me down the line, because that time I was just trying, trying, trying... But right now, I'm more certain that this is the way that I should go, and this is the business that I should run. So this is also the difference (Id. 10:27).

RP10 is a much happier person now. He traced this to having the freedom to make decisions for his business, family and self. He noted:

[I am happy] mainly because I can make decisions... Unlike my experience last time, I wasn't happy, but I couldn't leave. Now, I can say, "Alright, I don't want to do business with you, because you're not a good boss. I want to do other business". So I have a choice, so basically, more freedom in a broad sense (Id. 10:14).

Although RP10 had gained much freedom, he still felt his hands were tied by responsibilities. As a result, RP10 stated that his ultimate purpose of life was to be truly free. He revealed:

I'm not really totally happy yet, meaning there's something else that I want to do which I have not achieved yet, which I'm still waiting for the opportunity, which is freedom from work (Id. 10:31).

The ultimate purpose of meaning is, I should be free... freedom. That means I must be a free person. I can go anywhere I want. I can do anything that I want. That is my ultimate purpose, mainly to do what I enjoy most. (Id. 10:33).

4.2.3.2 How does the Purpose of Life offer Meaning to Painful Experiences?

Both RPs had experienced painful events, before and after they arrived at their present purposes of life. The data recorded the presence of emotional pain, disappointment and frustration. The data also found the RPs' ability to find meaning in these experiences was an important reason for coping successfully, that is, they sought meaning by drawing lessons from their experiences. It was also found that the newfound purpose for life enabled them to interpret their painful experiences, thereby helping them cope more effectively. For instance, RP6 had a devastating accident which disfigured her face, requiring multiple plastic surgery procedures over a period of several months. This turned her into a withdrawn person. She recalled:

I actually smashed the whole car, the car was written off. And my face was all cut up, and I had to go under plastic surgery for... I think six operations. The first one I had, like... over two hundred cuts on my face... To a young girl that is really a big misfortune, and you ask yourself, "Why me?" you know? (Id. 6:58).

Nevertheless, she walked out of the situation with the conviction that beauty is more than physical appearance. She explained:

[A]ctually, it's all external beauty, it really is. In the end you still have yourself, your inner self. And I thought... you know, there must be more to life than just your physical beauty. You should actually develop your inner personality, because that is what is important... (Id. 6:59).

My personality shouldn't change. It's just my face, and that's external, and if I can learn to overcome that, then I should be able to carry on, you know? And then you learn to realise that actually it's not important to put so much emphasis on the physical aspect of your... your own person (Id. 6:60).

Furthermore, as noted in the data, the present purpose of life had enabled her to give reasons for painful experiences that occurred prior to discovering her present purposes of life. For instance, in an excerpt from RP6 regarding her car accident:

[Laughs] No, I actually...I really believe that throughout my whole journey in life, and now I look back, I believe that it all happened to teach me and to give meaning to my life and to teach me an aspect of life. Unfortunately I had to learn it the hard way, in that I had to have a very bad accident to come out of it. Perhaps there's an easier way without such drastic learning, but in the end, you come through and you're a better person, you're more enriched and you appreciate, "Hey, it's not important" (Id. 6:63).

As for RP10, he went through three painful experiences. The first was when he was evicted from his rented house. He revealed:

We were chased by the landlord to move out of the house, to go and rent another place. At that time I was young, so that kind of experience is still very fresh in my mind (Id. 10:25).

He traced the second painful experience to the time when he worked for another person. The situation lasted for about nine years. He shared his thoughts:

I suffered for a period of, say... suffer in a sense, emotionally in the working environment for about nine years. That was when I was employed. When I was employed, that was the period where I just got married, and my wife was working and I was working. But initially, for the first three years, things were okay. I'm talking about working, yeah? Things were okay. But slowly, I got very... a situation where I became very unhappy with what had happened in the company, and I couldn't do anything... (Id. 10:12).

The suffering was compounded by the death of his father, followed by his mother in less than a year. RP10 went through a very difficult time and had to be treated with antidepressant medication for about a year (Id. 10: 37, 38).

Yeah, suffering, painful... that was when... when both my parents passed away in a very short period of time, an interval of a... less than a year, you see? So my dad passed away seventy plus, my mom sixty plus (Id. 10:36).

An outcome of the painful experience had been RP10's readiness to face any eventuality, to accept the reality of life (Id. 10:39). He shared this notion:

Because I feel that, previously, I never thought of that. I never sat down, put time aside and thought about life, you know? Life and death, you know? That anyone would die

someday, you know? Not necessary that he should be seventy plus. Forty also can go. Fifty also can go! See? People will die! You see? After that incident, I sat down and think [thought] it over, and then, as I get older, I see more things happened. See? So it becomes a fact to me, that this is natural. This is the nature of life... (Id. 10:37)

I will handle it with acceptance. With acceptance, with the readiness to accept what has happened. (Id. 10:40)

RP10's acceptance of the reality of life caused him to accept the eventuality of death, although death will not alter what he has been doing today (Id. 10:41).

4.2.3.3 How does the Purpose of Life offer Meaning in relation to Work, Family and Personal Life?

The newfound purpose of life also brought about meaning to work, family and personal life. For instance, the data on RP4 indicate coherence between the work and this purpose. Data from RP6 reveal that her present purpose of life had brought about meaning to her work. Furthermore, she was satisfied, because she could apply her knowledge and skills to helping the less fortunate, thereby being consistent with her purpose of life, which also expressed her values and desires. She explained:

"Are you satisfied?" I guess... yes, I am, because I am able to use all my skills, my knowledge. You know, it's like thirty years at the fun half, where you are able to use all those experiences and knowledge you gained to help the less fortunate in your second half. To me, that is very meaningful... I am now in a position where I am able to give back all those things I have learned to help the less fortunate, so it's very meaningful (Id. 6:29).

Now, so really... I'm very happy doing what I'm doing. I actually don't even get the sort of financial rewards I used to get... But I'm very happy doing the work I'm doing, touching the lives of the less fortunate. And I hope that I will always have the physical and the mental ability to carry on doing what I'm doing (Id. 6:53).

The present purpose of life had also brought about positive changes in her personality. RP6 said:

Actually, my... both my children say I'm a much nicer person now than when I was in corporate life... in corporate life, I was very... maybe more selfish, you know? Selfish in the sense that it is about... what do I get out of it if I do it? What do I get out of it? Now, it's not what I get out of it, because I don't get anything anyway. So it's different. And my kids also say that I'm a much... have a much softer personality than then (Id. 6:68).

But now, you're dealing with the charities, and you have to understand their plight, understand their situation, and you... by seeing what they have to go through, it actually brings out your softer skills and you become a more wholesome person, less self-driven (Id. 6:69).

It also reprioritised RP6's values in life. She explained:

I still go shopping, but it's no longer that great urgency, "Oh I must buy all these things," you know? I don't... so what's the meaning of buying more? You know, it is not material anymore (Id. 6:51).

What is important is what you have done in your life. And I guess I'm at that stage where I say, "Okay, what have I done to make it meaningful?" It's not so much about, you know... (Id. 6:50).

A similar pattern is observed in RP10, whose purpose of life had brought about satisfaction in his work, although he wished he could really be free from it. He maintained that he was waiting for his children to take over the business so that he would be free to travel as he wished. The data do indicate the present purpose of life engendering more peace in his family relationships and emotional stability (Id. 10:44). IN this respect regarding his personal and family life, RP10 noted:

It's good, I have more patience now. I'm more relaxed, so I have more patience. And I'm... I'm cooler now, as compared to last time. Like I'm in... Not only family! In relationships with friends, business partners, like suppliers all that. I'm cooler, because it's a... it has come to a stage where I accept things as they are (Id. 10:44).

As to his personal life, RP10 found emotional support by keeping a balance life and staying positive all the time. He said:

Having a balanced life, at the same time recognising that I'm not a perfect man. I tend to make mistakes. You see, I have made mistakes before, and maybe in the future I'll make mistakes again... (Id. 10:5).

4.2.3.4 Experiential difference between Meaning and The Meaning of Life.

The data on RP6 and RP10 reveal that they have experienced qualitatively more superior meaningfulness as a result of their present purpose of life. Consider the excerpts from RP6 and RP10, respectively:

“Are you satisfied?” I guess... yes, I am, because I am able to use all my skills, my knowledge... I have learned to help the less fortunate, so it’s very meaningful (Id. 6:29).

[I am happy] mainly because I can make decisions... Unlike my experience last time, where I wasn’t happy... (Id. 10:14).

The RPs had experienced a sense of fulfilment and satisfaction in life characterised by a more balanced life for themselves and their family.

4.2.3.5 Common Themes and Patterns from Case Three

The accounts of the two RPs show the change from a purpose in life to the purpose of life as the primary factor contributing to qualitatively superior meaningfulness whereby the sense of meaning and meaningfulness is noted in the sphere of their work, family and personal life. The reasons for the change differed. RP6’s change was motivated by her need to move from success to significance, whilst RP10’s transition was motivated by his newfound financial freedom. The reasons for these changes were not motivated by any religious belief. However, the data do register that the changes were undergirded by certain unspoken belief systems. RP6’s decision was confirmed by her belief that since she had received so much from society, she must give back, whilst RP10 believed that there were consequences to every action. Thus, whilst both of them did not adhere to any religious conviction, they did adhere to a certain belief system consistent with the law of nature, similar to the “action with built-in consequences” phenomenon expressed in the book of Ecclesiastes. The change is also essentially a change from purposes that are characteristically “inward-looking” or “self-serving” to ones that are characteristically “other-centred,” i.e. helping the less privileged and ensuring the success of customers, respectively. Interestingly, the data on Case Three reveal that the correlation between the purpose of life and meaningfulness is stronger in the case of RP6. Her total dedication to the cause of helping the less privileged led to her conviction that she was living an ultimate purpose of life. On the contrary, RP10’s purpose to ensure his clients became successful was additional to his business routine. In fact, the data continue to reveal that RP10’s ultimate purpose is to be totally free. This may indicate that the freedom factor, as well as the purpose of ensuring success for his clients, played a crucial part in his sense of meaningfulness.

The data also revealed that whilst the RPs secured meaning through drawing lessons from their painful experiences, the purpose of life had enabled them to give meaning to these experiences and thus helped them cope better. RP6 felt that painful experiences were necessary in order for her to be more effective in helping the less privileged, whilst RP10 saw them as a motivation to do the right thing, such as helping his clients become successful. Thus, the purpose of life also enabled them to see the reason for their experiences, thereby showing the correlation between the present purpose of life and the meaning of painful events.

4.2.3.6 Summary

The data in Case Three found the two RPs had experienced meaningfulness as a result the purpose of life. Whilst the change in their life purpose was motivated by different reasons, it was nevertheless built upon a belief system consistent with the “action with built-in consequences” phenomenon. The purpose of life is unanimously characterised by bringing happiness to others, which is consistent with the principle of the Golden Rule. The purpose of life enabled them to find a sense of coherence in their work, family and personal life, resulting in qualitatively superior meaningfulness. The data also found the purpose of life had given them a point of reference by which they found meaning and coped with their painful experiences.

4.2.4 CASE FOUR: RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS WITH A LOW MLQ SCORE ON THE PRESENCE OF MEANING IN LIFE

4.2.4.1 How did the RPs arrive at Meaningfulness of Life?

RP12 (N) is an owner of a medium-sized car workshop and father to a newly born child. He adhered to Buddhism as a religion for his family. His purpose in life was to give his best and ensure success in business. The present life purpose registered a slight difference in relation to his earlier purpose. He explained:

For me, I like to explore new things. So, if you ask me about my purpose of life, I would say to try our best to achieve something. I would say this is my purpose of life (Id. 12:16).

My previous purpose was to get good results. My previous purpose while studying in school was clear... I didn't only look for great results, I... looked for experience actually. I looked for how much knowledge I could gain from the Professor. So that was my purpose during study time. For business right now, I look at the business that can give me the best rewards. So, you talk about purpose, but I am not sure whether there is a real [difference of] purpose compared to the last time (Id.12:28).

Although there is not much a difference between the two purposes, RP12 (N) acknowledged he was shouldering more activities and responsibilities with his current purpose in life, such as the new addition to his family (Id. 12:33). He found his current purpose in life as being worthwhile, because this prevented regret in later years for not doing what ought to have been done (Id.12:36). For this reason, RP12 (N) considered his current purpose was the ultimate purpose for his life, although he hinted that this may change over time. Nonetheless, he was still in the process of searching for more rewarding activities. He noted:

I would say yes at the moment. But as I get older I am not sure whether the answer is the same or not. Currently, if you ask me, I am still searching for a more enjoyable activity that can reward me and then keep me... wise to do things in my life. But maybe when I get older, I am not sure whether the purpose will be the same or not. But currently, I still have the same thinking that I want to look for a better opportunity (Id.12:34-35).

RP12 (N) stated his real ultimate purpose as having “a very big company” and “a happy family” (Id. 12:37). According to him, a “big company” means a “well-known” company that can generate “big rewards” materially (Id. 12:37). His purpose was to achieve, something and the process of getting more increased his sense of meaningfulness of life, compared to when he was still at college. In addition, RP12 (N) had a new-born child and thus life was more meaningful to him. He explained:

[It is] more meaningful [now]. Right now I have more things, so it should be more meaningful than last time, because now I have my family with me, I have a wife already also. Of course, life is more fulfilled than last time. Now, I have at least more things, so it should be more meaningful (Id. 12:32).

The data show that even in the midst of experiencing meaningfulness, RP12 (N) remained dissatisfied with the size or success of his business (Id. 12:13). In addition, he was still searching for the relationship between work and passion in life (Id. 12:51), with the hope of aiding his effort to achieve more.

The second RP was RP13 (N), a widow and a saloon owner. She was also a Christian of more than 10 years. She had a difficult and challenging life, having to raise her children in the absence of her husband and limited financial resources. She recalled:

I think after my husband passed away... the first 10 years... were the most difficult times... Like, when it comes to finance, you have to put in a lot. And then the growing up times in their teenage years, they were difficult in their behaviours and all that. I am sure all parents have gone through that, but being a single parent it is even harder. You don't know where to go to (Id. 13:4).

That is the main thing. I am a single mum. I mean, it is not that my husband left something for me. Mostly, I had to struggle. And I don't think at that time you had any purpose at all. You just had to go on (Id. 13: 50).

Her predicament and the sense of meaninglessness gradually changed after her financial burden was lifted. The transition began when she paid off her first son's university education fees, and the process was completed when she finished with her financial obligation for her second child. She explained the reason for the sense of meaningfulness:

Meaning that I don't need to struggle any more financially, because, you know, how much I earn a day here and I got to support them to study, it is not easy at all. So, now it is all over I just earn quite happily. I would say the time that I paid my second son's last fees, I was like lifting off. No more burden. So light and my life changed from there (Id. 13:6).

RP13 (N) was more satisfied because of the freedom she enjoyed away from struggling. She did not need to work as hard as before (Id. 13:3) and had started to enjoy her work (Id. 13:8). In addition, lifting her financial burden enabled her to offer discounts for her services. Nevertheless, at the time of the interview, RP13 (N) expressed that she had not found a worthwhile purpose of life, although raising her children was still a "basic purpose in life" (Id. 13:15). She admitted that she was still searching for a specific thing to do, although she felt she was perhaps too old to talk about an ultimate purpose of life. As a result, her focus was simply to live a happy life and remain healthy. She noted:

I have already touched 60. I would just like to live happily and healthily. Of course, seeing my children growing up is the most joyful thing (RP13:21).

For the future life purpose, she was contemplating between “helping people” and “reading more about God’s word” as her primary purpose. She explained:

Maybe I will have to do something to help people. I used to think that when I finish with the children I may want to go and study Christianity more. Maybe read more about God’s word and all that. I think now, this is also becoming one of my purposes, [i.e.] that I would like to read more about God (Id. 13:34).

It is interesting to note that although RP13 (N) was experiencing a happier life, it was not due to any clear transition in the meaning in life to the purpose of life. There was nevertheless a slight change in her purpose, from raising children and meeting financial obligations to staying healthy. Her sense of happiness was a result of a sense of freedom from financial obligation which allowed her to be more settled whilst enjoying her work.

4.2.4.2 How does the Purpose of Life offer Meaning to Painful Experiences?

Both RPs experienced painful events, and the data recorded the presence of emotional pain, disappointment and stress. It was found that the RPs’ ability to draw meaning from these experiences was an important reason for coping successfully. The data show that both RPs did not have a purpose of life consistent with their purpose of existence or a view of life enabling them to interpret their experiences in light of the whole. In the case of RP12 (N), he did not have vivid painful experience. He did cite the death of his grandmother as a natural outcome of old age, but a possible event which can be considered as painful would be the closing down of one of his business outlets. Although it was a stressful and difficult event, RP12 (N) felt that it was a good learning experience (Id. 12:38). He coped with the stressful event by staying and thinking positively. This included determining the reason for the failure, thereby gaining a lesson from the experience (Id. 12:39). RP12 (N) noted that he would engage a similar approach to gain meaning, should he encounter another painful event (Id. 12:43). In addition, the purpose

to achieve more things contributed to coping with stressful events, because these experiences would enable him to do better in the future. According to RP12 (N):

I will always try to go strong on myself. I won't say I will be prepared for it unless I know what is going on. I can see the thing is going to happen soon. But if I don't see it happening, I won't say I will prepare for it. But if it happens I will try to stay positive. That is always what I am doing for myself (Id. 12:43).

The data show that death may alter RP12's (N) purpose in life. He admitted:

If I found out I have 3 months left, of course, in terms of the business side, there would not be enough time for me to achieve what I wanted. Then I would spend the remaining time, maybe more time, with the loved ones maybe, and maybe try to do whatever things that I can finish in 3 months' time. Of course, I would have revised the purpose of life already during that time (Id. 12:44).

Yes, definitely it would change, because for my side the purpose is to keep building a successful business, but if left 3 months it is not enough time. Then, of course, I cannot achieve already. So, of course, there is nothing much we can do. I already found that is the answer for me. I try to stay positive, that's all (Id. 12:55).

As for RP13's (N) painful event in life, she recalled the death of her husband as the most significant. She lamented:

Usually, for women, the husband is the one we can depend on, but without him it was harder because I had no one to discuss anything with. To use a common description, you have no shoulder to lean on.

Life to her, then, involved facing all the challenges in life, raising her children and learning to overcome one hurdle at a time. In retrospect, she felt that it was God who had helped her. She explained:

Without God it is a lot harder. It is impossible to walk. Because knowing Him, He is behind you... I have understood it after a long time that he (husband) is in a better place. And I think, without God, I don't think I can move this far at all.

RP13 (N) recognised that the difficult journey had made her a stronger person. She shared the following:

It makes me a more and more stronger person. And if a problem comes, you won't be fearful of it. You will stand up and look at it, let me sort it out. And

also, very often, I have learned not to rush into things. Maybe sit down and pray about it. A lot of time for yourself to think, no need to rush into it (Id. 13:39).

I feel I can go back to my experience in the past; in fact, I have learned a lot. And as I have learned a lot, I can even share with my friends and they find that it is with purpose and meaningful. So, it is not a waste, because a lot of time I share with my customers, like bringing up children. I had a lot of hard times bringing up children, and so when I share with them my experience they can laugh about it. It is just like a book. So it won't be a waste (Id. 13:44).

However, she did not know the purpose of those experiences except for believing that they happened for a reason. She explained:

I am sure that when God allows something like that to happen there is a purpose for me. So, I will just have to look at it that way. There is a purpose (Id. 13:40).

I don't really know [what is the purpose] (Id. 13:41).

4.2.4.3 How does the Purpose of Life offer Meaning in relation to Work, Family and Personal Life?

Data on both RPs show that they had experienced a better quality of meaningfulness, although the reasons were not related to their purpose in life. RP12's (N) sense of meaningfulness was contributed by the new responsibility he shouldered in his business and also the fact that he was a father to a new-born child. In addition, the sense of purposefulness in relation to his business had given him meaningfulness. He noted:

I believe you need to work hard to get something. This is what I believe in (Id. 12:26)... In my mind I will always have to keep learning and keep exploring, keep my mind open (Id. 12:47).

The data show he had improved himself through reading and learning from a business mentor and coach. He also tried to balance his ambition with time for his family. He explained:

For the wife side, there's nothing much I focus on, but sometimes I make sure I spend some time with her for dinner, this and that, spend some quality time (Id. 12:4).

Of course, if you want to pursue one thing, we try and balance it. But, of course, it is not easy to balance. If you talk about timewise, I still spend a lot of time on the business side. So, because of the stronger purpose on the business side, we have to lose a little bit of time with the family (Id. 12:48).

But if you asked me to spend the whole day with my family, I would feel bored. I would feel something hadn't been achieved, because I am still very focused on the business side. I am exploring new ideas (Id. 12:52).

The data show that RP12 (N) associates meaningfulness with activities to achieving excellence in his life. Nevertheless, he has not arrived at a point where he can truly enjoy his life. He argued:

For me, enjoyment means you don't have to do so many things. You are relaxing, not many things to worry about. That would mean enjoy. Enjoy means like travelling, it is more enjoying. But right now I am not enjoying this type of life (Id. 12:29).

I would say I will enjoy it when I get a bigger reward. If I keep doing the thing but it is not rewarding, I won't actually be enjoying it (Id 12:30)... it is the reward (Id. 12:31).

As for RP13 (N), her sense of meaningfulness was related to her sense of freedom from the need to pay for her children's education. After years of financial obligation following her husband's demise, the freedom from financial obligation for her children's education brought about some form of meaningfulness that positively affected her attitude towards her work. She started to enjoy her work to the point of offering discount to her clients. She also saw some positive changes to her parenting role, although the struggle remained evident. She explained:

With the children I learned how to be tolerant, love them more, don't calculate. You have to sacrifice a lot (Id. 13:83)

I can say the relationship with the children, because it is not easy. They have grown up without their father, so it is harder... I will just learn to put myself in their situation instead. It could be something they are not happy with, or something that has happened to them. They don't want to let me know, never mind. They will come out. It is just to shape them (Id. 13:85)

The most drastic change was to her temperament. She explained:

People can tell me how horrible I have been, even my customers, bad mood and all that. They can tell how a person has changed (Id. 13:6).

She has also learned to look at things more positively:

You are able to put things aside, like I said we don't want to live on it. We want something better, straighter, happier, but we don't keep on looking at the sad thing (Id. 13:50).

You see, my job can be quite stressful and sometimes time-consuming. When you see so many customers waiting for you, it becomes like panic. That you start to, like, it puts you in a bad mood and all that. But my Christian friends told me that you should thank God you don't have to look for them. They come and look for you. This is where I should be thankful – and it is quite true. (Id. 13:55)

The above data reveal that a purpose in life is able to offer a sense of meaningfulness, although in this case it was insufficient to enable the RPs to see coherence and meaningfulness in all spheres.

4.2.4.4 Experiential difference between Meaning and the Meaning of Life.

For RP12 (N), there was no significant difference between meaningfulness from the old and new purposes. For instance, RP12 (N) stressed that he would not be satisfied with his present state of life until his purpose of achieving something excellent became a reality. He stressed:

Keep going, because if you ask if I'm satisfied then I will be in a comfort level. I may not be doing anything, I will be quite relaxed. That's why I won't say that I am very satisfied in my current life (Id. 12:17).

RP12's (N) concept of meaningfulness is anchored in the sense of purpose in life and that the added responsibility has added a sense of meaningfulness. It is clear that RP12's (N) concepts of purpose and meaningfulness are not related to the question of existence. Hence, although there is a slight difference between the old and the new purposes, the data could not register a qualitative difference in meaningfulness between the old and the new purposes.

The data show that there is a relative increase in RP13's (N) sense of meaningfulness as a result of the lifting of financial obligation and continuous encouragement from her friends. Furthermore, there is no direct correlation between her meaningfulness to any change of purpose. Accordingly, the data could not register a qualitative difference in meaningfulness associated with the question of existence.

4.2.4.5 Common Themes and Patterns in Case Four

The accounts of the two RPs show that a slight change in their purpose in life has brought about an improved sense of meaningfulness, characterised by a sense of purposefulness, for RP12 (N), and enjoyment, for RP13 (N). The data show factors such as a stronger sense of purposefulness and freedom are crucial factors for their meaningfulness. Unlike the cases reported earlier, the RPs' life purpose remained "inward-looking" or "self-serving," such as "achieving more for [him]self" (RP12 (N)) and "raising the family" (RP13 (N)), respectively. Although both RPs adhered to a religious belief, there is no indication that their purpose in life is motivated by either their religious influence or belief systems.

The meaning in life was a contributory factor enabling them to cope and secure meaning through lessons for painful experiences. Although RP13 (N) revealed that her faith had enabled her to stay strong, it wasn't enough to help her find reasons for those experiences. This may indicate that the freedom factor, as well as the purpose of ensuring success for her client, played a crucial role in her sense of meaningfulness. The data could not register any correlation between any purpose of life and meaning for painful experiences.

4.2.4.5 Summary

The data for Case Four found the two RPs had experienced meaningfulness as a result of a slight change in their purpose in life. This change was motivated by a change in circumstances or the states of their lives. There is no indication that these were built upon a belief system consistent with their religious belief or the "action with built-in consequences" phenomenon. The purpose in life is consistently inward-looking and has yet to enable them to find a sense of coherence in their work, family, personal life or painful experiences.

4.3 COMMON THEMES FROM THE CROSS-CASES COMPARISON

Despite the complexity and distinctiveness of the individual cases, they all exhibited common themes leading to meaningfulness of life. The following subsections present four themes common to every RP.

4.3.1 SENSE OF FREEDOM AND MEANINGFULNESS

Data from the RPs show that whilst there is a strong correlation between meaningfulness and purpose of life, it is also noteworthy that all of them had achieved financial independence and no longer needed to work to make ends meet. This is in addition to data indicating that financial constraints were important barriers to meaningfulness for several RPs in the earlier stages of their lives. For instance, the accounts of RP11 (Case One), RP10 (Case Three) and RP13 (N) (Case Four) showed that lack of money was a primary contributory factor in unhappiness, and hence meaninglessness. The correlation between having the freedom to pursue desired activities and meaningfulness is consistent with studies that have found that the sense of independence or autonomy is an important factor in meaningfulness.⁷⁶⁸ In relation to this investigation, RP4 and RP9 (Case Three) linked their meaningfulness to the sense of freedom as a result of financial independence which has enabled them to focus on activities related to their purposes of life. Perhaps the importance of freedom is expressed the clearest in the account of RP10. Consider the series of excerpts from below:

[I am happy] mainly because I can make decisions... Unlike my experience last time, I wasn't happy, but I couldn't leave. Now, I can say, "Alright, I don't want to do your business, because you're not a good boss. I want to do other business" (Id. 10:14).

I'm not really totally happy yet. Meaning there's something else that I want to do which I have not achieved yet, which I'm still waiting for the opportunity to do, which is freedom from work... The ultimate purpose of meaning is that I should be free... freedom. That means I must be a free person... (Id. 10:31, 33).

Nevertheless, the data show there is limit to the freedom factor when the RPs moved from meanings from financial freedom to the meaning of serving or helping others.

⁷⁶⁸ For instance, Ryff, "Happiness Is Everything?" 1069-1081.

Several RPs (Case One) had a crisis of meaning after they had gained financial freedom, an issue that will be discussed in the next section. Two more RPs (Case Two) actually expressed the need to pursue a higher form of happiness after achieving financial freedom, whereas data in Case Three and Case Four indicate that the freedom factor functions as a contributory rather than the main factor to meaningfulness of life. This suggests that the freedom factor associated with financial freedom can only offer a certain kind of meaningfulness, which does not amount to meaningfulness of life.

4.3.2 THE PURPOSE OF LIFE AND THE MEANINGFULNESS OF LIFE

The accounts of the cases comprising RPs with high MLQ scores on the presence of meaning in life show the change from a purpose in life to the purpose of life as the primary factor contributing to qualitatively superior meaningfulness. The data indicate that this change is essentially a change from purposes that are characteristically “inward-looking” or “self-serving” to ones that are characteristically “other-centered.” On the contrary, data from Case Four (RPs with low scores in the presence of meaning in life) did not register a similar change. As a result, although they had experienced improvement in meaningfulness, they were unable to see themselves as having found a more satisfying meaning for their life.

The effect of purposefulness in relation to meaningfulness is consistent with existing studies investigating the correlation between the purpose in life and meaningfulness⁷⁶⁹ which, among others, have confirmed that the types of purposes in life are important indicators regarding the quality of meaningfulness.⁷⁷⁰ People who have adopted self-transcending purposes are more likely to experience a superior quality of life meaningfulness.⁷⁷¹ The interview data show that the RPs’ inward-looking purposes are associated with the pursuit of material wealth and its related benefits, albeit for their own

⁷⁶⁹ Crumbaugh and Maholick, “An Experimental Study on Existentialism,” 200-201; Karoly, “Goal Systems,” 514-526.

⁷⁷⁰ Karoly, “Goal Systems,” 514-526.

⁷⁷¹ For instance, Robert A. Emmons, “Striving for the Sacred: Personal Goals, Life Meaning, and Religion,” *Journal of Social Issues* Vol. 61, No. 4, (2005) 731-745; also, Robert A. Emmons, Chi Cheung and Keivan Tehrani, “Assessing Spirituality,” 391-442.

ends. Possible exceptions are RP8 (Case One) and RP9 (Case Two), who maintained that achieving happiness was their central pursuit. Even so, their data indicate that they associated financial wealth with happiness. RP8 revealed:

Live a happy life... I want happiness. I mean... I am not saying that I look for money or look for love or look for whatever, but probably all of these things to make me happy... to satisfy myself... (Id. 8:45).

Consider also the comment by RP9 below:

Like any ordinary human being, we all believe that if we can do well in our career, you will climb the corporate ladder, you will be very happy. Those are very mundane, too mundane kinds of purposes... I went all the way... my last job was a senior GM (General Manager) of the company... (Id 9:21).

Table 18 (Eighteen) shows the RPs and their purposes in life and of life.

Table 18: THE RPs' PURPOSES IN LIFE AND PURPOSES OF LIFE⁷⁷²

Case	RPs	Purpose in Life	Purpose of life
One	RP1	I wanted to make as much money as possible (Id. 1:28).	Living for others, that's it. You don't live for yourself (Id. 1:27).
	RP2	I wanted to be successful in my career (Id. 2:20).	My purpose of life is that I will do my best to maintain family harmony, lovingly between each other, and I will follow my religion to live my life (Id. 2:30).
	RP3	Make money. Make money... then family (Id. 3:36).	The purpose of my life is to serve His poor, needy and marginalised children (Id.3:27).
	RP5	What you need is food. So don't talk about anything else, [it was all about] food and shelter (Id. 5:22).	To be a blessing, not just for oneself... Now, it is more for God's kingdom (Id. 5:30).
	RP7	I'm going to work very hard, I'm going to be very successful by going up the ladder and doing it honestly, and I will have children and a wife (Id. 7:26).	Our main chief purpose is to glorify Him. So in all that we do, you see, whatever we eat or drink, or whatever we do, we do it to the glory of God (Id. 7:23).
	RP8	Live a happy life. I want happiness (Id 8:45).	My purpose of life is to live for God (Id. 8:48)
	RP11	I don't want people to step on my parents, to look down on them. And... I will work very hard (Id. 11:14).	The purpose of my life... get a good family, [be] a very good husband... a very good father... a very good son... have a chance to share my belief (Id.11:10).

⁷⁷² Subsection 4.3.2.2 will show that the purpose of life stated in this table was the RPs' specific purpose of life. The subsection will explain how the specific purpose of life is the expression of the general purpose of life subsumed by a specific view thereof, from which I shall present the RPs' more encompassing purpose of life.

Table 18: THE RPs' PURPOSES IN LIFE AND PURPOSES OF LIFE (Cont.)

Case	RPs	Purpose in Life	Purpose of life
Two	RP4	Work towards a happy life for myself, for my family and for my staff... (Id. 4:22).	The purpose of life... to live in accordance with the law of nature so we can achieve or attain eventually the highest happiness (Id. 4:13).
	RP9	Do well in your career, you climb the corporate ladder, you will be very happy (Id.9:29).	I enrich people's lives... And I add value to their life... So, to me, happiness means finding a purpose. And my purpose is very clear (Id. 9:18).
Three	RP6	It really was about delivering my KPIs, meeting all my obligations and all that, and being rewarded with the financial recognition and knowing that I was successful (Id. 6:33).	My life now is about helping the less fortunate (Id. 6:51).
	RP10	To make ends meet. To make enough to make enough to pay for all the commitments (Id.10:18).	The purpose of life is to be able to help others, to be able to help yourself, to be able to help your family... not in order of importance, but it's just to be able to help people (Id. 10:15).
Four	RP12 (N)	1. To try my best to achieve something. I would say this is my purpose of life (Id. 12:16). 2. To try to achieve greater things (Id. 12:37)	-
	RP13 (N)	1. Raise the children and meet financial commitment (Id.13:8) 2. Raise the children and enjoy work (Id. 13:14)	-

The data show that although pursuing financial independence engendered purposefulness and meaningfulness, the RPs' decision to move from securing meaning from financial freedom to meeting the needs of others shows the limits of financial freedom as the

source of meaning. In certain cases, several RPs experienced a crisis of meaning after having achieved their goals in life. By “crisis of meaning in life”, it means ‘a violation of one’s sense of coherence and continuity’.⁷⁷³ This actually spurred the search for and the transition to the purpose of life. For instance, RP3 from Case One noted, ‘I had everything that I wanted to achieve as a secular person, but there wasn’t much meaning in my life’ (Id. 3:94). The crisis of meaning therefore contributed to her decision to look beyond herself by serving the community. Similarly, data for Case Two’s RP9 also show that the change from the purpose that was characteristically self-focusing to other-focusing contributed to a greater sense of meaningfulness (Id. 9:31). He disclosed:

So, if you ask me if I was happy then? I think I was. But the happiness that I experienced then and the happiness that I am experiencing today, I think the intensity is very much different. The quality is very much different. So, if you talk about intensity and quality, it is very different (Id.9:32)... I think it is [more meaningful now] (Id 9:39).

The representative excerpts from the RPs above show a clear relationship between the purpose of life and a superior quality of meaningfulness, clearly surpassing that which is associated with a purpose in life.

4.3.2.1 The Purpose of Life and the Golden Rule

The data indicate that purposes that are characteristically “other-centred” are activities consistent with the principle of the Golden Rule. Data from Cases One, Two and Three indicate two approaches when it comes to expressing the purpose of life. The first group of RPs, such as RP1, RP3, RP7 (Case One) and RP6 (Case Three), gave themselves wholly to the cause of other-centeredness. For this reason, their current purpose of life is also their ultimate purpose of life. The second group of RPs, such as RP2, RP5, RP8 and RP11 (Case One), RP4 and RP9 (Case Two) and RP10 (Case Three), expressed their purpose of life in addition to their existing routine. Each of them expressed that their ultimate purpose of life is to give themselves wholly to the cause consistent with their view of life and “other-centeredness”. Hence, whilst the second group found

⁷⁷³ Tatjana Schnell, “The Sources of Meaning and Meaning in Life Questionnaire (SoMe): Relations to Demographics and Well-being,” *The Journal of Positive Psychology: Dedicated to furthering Research and Promoting Good Practice* 4:6 (2009) 483-499.

meaningfulness, their response indicates a conviction that by giving themselves wholly to the cause, they will experience a better quality of meaningfulness. Table 19 (Nineteen) below shows the RPs' purpose and the ultimate purpose of life according to the grouping mentioned above.

TABLE 19: GROUPING OF RPs BY TYPE OF INVOLVEMENT IN THE PRINCIPLE OF THE GOLDEN RULE

Group	RP	Case	Specific Purpose of life (Summarised)	Ultimate Purpose of life (Summarised)
One (Total Involvement)	RP1	One	Serve people	Serve people
	RP3	One	Serving the marginalised and poor children	Speaking on the world stage for the suffering children (serving the marginalised)
	RP7	One	Glorify God in every activity	Glorify God in every activity
	RP6	Three	Serving the community	Serving the community
Two (Sharing Resources)	RP2	One	Maintain family harmony, love others and follow the religion	Wholeheartedly into religion
	RP4	Two	Live consistently in line with <i>dharma</i> in order to achieve greatest happiness	Live consistently in line with <i>dharma</i> in order to achieve greatest happiness and enlightenment
	RP5	One	To be able to bless others	To stay closer to God
	RP9	Two	Adding values to people's lives and experiencing happiness	Enlightenment
	RP8	One	Serve God in the church, serve God through business	Live for God
	RP10	Three	To help others	Freedom to travel
	RP11	One	Be good in every aspect, e.g. give his best in business.	Share success story with everyone

4.3.2.2 The Purpose of Life and the View of Life

Data for Cases One, Two and Three indicate that the worthwhile purpose of life consists of the general and the specific purpose of life, although they usually overlap, hence the reason for using a single phrase, namely “purpose of life.” Nevertheless, the data recorded that a transition from purposes in life to purposes of life involves a transition in the view of life as well as the most important things to do. The phrase “view of life” represents what is most important about life, undergirded by a certain worldview about life and existence. For RPs adhering to Christianity and Buddhism from Case One and Case Two, respectively, it is what they saw as their reason for existing (cosmic sense), which is summarised and expressed as the general purpose of life (i.e. to glorify God or follow *Dharma*) and is eventually applied to a specific purpose (i.e. serving the poor or adding value to people’s lives). In this case, the specific purpose of life has the quality of fulfilling the purpose of existing and yet is practical in respect to day-to-day living. The accounts of all the RPs showed that the change in the view of life, i.e. the general purpose of life, motivates the transition to the specific things to do. In several cases, the RPs (RP5 and RP8) noted several changes in specific things to do while maintaining consistency with the general purpose of life, a notion supported by data indicating several RPs’ ultimate purposes of life essentially involved activities they wanted to do (ultimately) in relation to the general purpose of life. Table 20 (Twenty) on the next page shows the relationship between the general purpose of life and the RPs’ specific purpose of life and the ultimate purpose of life.

All RPs in Cases One and Two expressed that religious teaching was the primary formative factor in relation to their views and hence the general and specific purpose of life essential to meaningfulness. This was most evident in RP2 and RP8, both of whom associated meaningfulness with their conversion to Christianity. In both cases, the change in their views underpinned the present general and specific purpose of life. The necessity of the change is further supported by data on RP1, RP3, RP5, RP7 and RP11 (Case One) as well as RP4 and RP9 (Case Two), as their experiences of meaningfulness transpired long after their conversion to their respective religions. More importantly, data from Case Four confirm that adhering to a religion without a change a view consistent with the religion could not bring about meaningfulness of life.

TABLE 20: THE GENERAL AND THE SPECIFIC PURPOSE OF LIFE

Case	RPs	General Purpose of Life (Summarised)	Specific Purpose of life (Summarised)	Ultimate Purpose of life (Summarised)
One	RP1	Follow Jesus	Serve people	Serve people
	RP2	Obey God	Maintain family harmony, love others and follow the religion	Wholeheartedly into religion
	RP3	Serve God	Serving the marginalised and poor children	Speaking on the world stage for the suffering children
	RP5	Serve God	To be able to bless others	To stay closer to God
	RP7	Glorify God	Glorify God in every activity	Glorify God in every activity
	RP8	Glorify God and live for God	Serve God in the church, serve God through business	Live for God
	RP11	Glorify God	Be good in every aspect, e.g. give his best in business.	Share success story with everyone
Two	RP4	Follow <i>dharma</i>	Live consistently in line with <i>dharma</i> in order to achieve greatest happiness	Live consistently in line with <i>dharma</i> in order to achieve greatest happiness
	RP9	Follow <i>dharma</i>	Adding values to people's lives and experiencing happiness	Enlightenment
Three	RP6	Need to give back to society	Serving the community	Serving the community
	RP10	Live an ethical life	To help others	Freedom to travel
Four	RP12 (N)	-	-	-
	RP13 (N)	-	-	-

It seems that having knowledge or professing to believe about a certain general purpose of life propounded by a certain form of religious teaching, as well as conversion to a particular religion, are insufficient reasons for meaningfulness of life. In fact, their responses show that a religious view of life, as promulgated by religions, may not have

an immediate effect on life's meaning and meaningfulness, as long as there is inconsistency between a specific life purpose and the professed general purpose. That is, as long as the general purpose of life remains a professed purpose rather than a practiced purpose, even though inconsistency should not exist, it is not possible to have really adopted a particular purpose of life without putting it in practice. In other words, meaningfulness was only felt when the RPs embraced the specific purpose of life consistent with their professed general purpose of life. In such conditions, they experienced a superior quality of meaningfulness.⁷⁷⁴ More interestingly, data on several RPs in Case One and all RPs in Case two indicated that whilst they were already experiencing meaningfulness, they looked forward to the day when they could give themselves wholly to the cause advocated by their respective religion. Such a notion indicated that living a life consistent with what they truly believe will lead to a superior quality of meaningfulness. This is consistent with several studies which have identified the purpose of adhering to religious demands as a 'vertical self-transcendence' purpose, whilst working in the service of others is a 'horizontal self-transcendence' purpose.⁷⁷⁵ Whilst both of these notions have been found to be important sources of meaningfulness, vertical self-transcendence has been shown to be a better predictor of the experience of meaningfulness in life.⁷⁷⁶

The accounts from Case Three, i.e. from RP6 and RP10, also indicated a similar pattern, although these respondents did not subscribe to any religious belief. For instance, RP6 proposed that helping the marginalised was a result of her decision to move away from experiencing success to significance in life through giving back all the good things she received to the society. Consider two of her responses below:

Because, when you are so blessed, you are so blessed to have a successful career, a beautiful family, and even when there was an unfortunate incident, you are able to traverse it and come out of it, and your children have done well... really, it is a blessing. You know, and I really have to give back. And I felt that I had to do it now (Id.6:32).

⁷⁷⁴ Emmons, Cheung and Tehrani, "Assessing Spirituality," 393.

⁷⁷⁵ Schnell, "The Sources of Meaning," 483-499.

⁷⁷⁶ Ibid., 483-499;

As for RP10, although there has been no drastic change in his purpose of life, his repeated emphasis and conviction that there were consequences for bad decisions may be an indication of a certain change of view which in turn may be a key factor leading to his decision to live an ethical life through helping people.

Considering the overlapping relationship between the general and the specific purpose of life, in that the latter is the expression of the earlier, Table 21 (Twenty One) below shows that the RPs' purpose can be rephrased as follows:

TABLE 21: THE PURPOSE OF LIFE

Case	RPs	General Purpose of Life (Summarised)	Specific Purpose of life (Summarised)	The Purpose of Life (Rephrased)
One	RP1	Follow Jesus	Serve people	Follow Jesus by serving others
	RP2	Obey God	Maintain family harmony, love others and follow the religion	Obey God by maintaining family harmony, love others and follow the religion
	RP3	Serve God	Serving the marginalised and poor children	Serve God by serving the marginalised and poor children
	RP5	Serve God	To be able to bless others	Serve God by being a blessing to others
	RP7	Glorify God	Glorify God in every activity	Glorify God in every activity
	RP8	Glorify God and live for God	Serve God in the church, serve God through business	Serve and live for God by serving Him in the church and through business
	RP11	Glorify God	Be good in every aspect, e.g. give his best in business.	Glorify God by being good in every aspect, e.g. giving the best in business
Two	RP4	Follow <i>dharma</i>	Live consistently in line with <i>dharma</i> in order to achieve greatest happiness	Follow <i>Dharma</i> by living consistently in line with it, in order to achieve greatest happiness
	RP9	Follow <i>dharma</i>	Adding values to people's lives and experiencing happiness	Follow <i>Dharma</i> by adding value to people's lives and experiencing happiness
Three	RP6	Need to give back to society	Serving the community	Giving back to the community by serving it
	RP10	Live an ethical life	To help others	Live an ethical life through helping others
Four	RP12 (N)	-	-	-
	RP13 (N)	-	-	-

4.3.2.3 The Purpose of Life and Painful Experiences

The data for all cases show that the RPs attached meaning to their painful events by taking lessons from their experiences. Such an approach was found to be an effective way of coping.⁷⁷⁷ Researchers have identified the approach of securing meaning for painful events as the ‘life review’⁷⁷⁸ process. In this case, these are attempts to “redeem” the negative experiences in life,⁷⁷⁹ and individuals who have been successful in finding significance in painful experiences are likely to see meaning in them and gain wisdom therefrom.⁷⁸⁰

Nevertheless, the RPs’ general purpose of life, subsuming a certain view of life, has enabled them to see meaning and cope successfully with painful events. This is evident in Cases One and Two, which show the general purpose of life subsumed in religious beliefs has enabled them to find meaning and cope better. Data for Case Three show the general purpose of life is built upon the “action with built-in consequences” phenomenon and has also enabled them to find meaning and cope better. The data indicate that when the RPs were also able to give reasons for painful experiences from a more complete viewpoint, which was assumed in the general purpose of life, it enabled them to see the relevance of and the reasons behind the experience in the light of the whole, thereby giving a sense of coherence, which has been shown to be a crucial and effective way of coping. More interestingly, the data also show a connection between specific purposes and meaning in relation to painful events, in the way that the specific purpose in life motivated the RPs to remain focused on their present-day purpose, thus giving them a

⁷⁷⁷ Thao N. Le & Kendra M. Doukas, “Making Meaning of Turning Points in Life Review: Values, Wisdom, and Life Satisfaction,” *Journal of Religion, Spirituality & Aging* 25:4 (2013) 358-375, DOI: 10.1080/15528030.2013.765367.

⁷⁷⁸ R. Butler, “The Life Review,” *Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry* 35(1), (2002) 7–10. Also, Le and Doukas, “Making Meaning,” 7-10.

⁷⁷⁹ D. P. McAdams, J. Reynolds, M. Lewis, A. H. Patten, & P. J. Bowman, “When Bad Things Turn Good and Good Things Turn Bad: Sequences of Redemption and Contamination in Life Narrative and Their Relation to Psychosocial Adaptation in Midlife Adults and in Students,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 27(4), (2001) 474–485.

⁷⁸⁰ Le and Doukas, “Making Meaning,” 38-375. Also M. Ardel, “Wisdom and life satisfaction in old age,” *The Journal of Gerontology and Psychological Sciences* 52(1), (1997) 15–27.

sense of purposefulness, and hence meaning, in the midst of the anomaly. The vitality and complementary roles of both the general and specific purpose of life validate the causative relationship that the RPs' purpose of life has with meaning and coherence.

The important role of the purpose of life for meaning in painful experiences could not be found in Case Four. Whilst both RPs adhere to Buddhism and Christianity, they have yet to arrive at a framework and view of life that will enable them to see meaning in their painful experiences. As a result, they were not able to see the relevance of their experience in the light of the holistic view thereof. Table 22 (Twenty Two) shows the relationship between the general purpose of life and meaning in relation to a painful experience.

TABLE 22: THE PURPOSE OF LIFE AND MEANING FOR PAINFUL EXPERIENCES

Case	RPs	The Purpose of Life	Meaning for The Painful Experiences
One	RP1	Follow Jesus by serving others	To rely and wait upon the Lord. For the right timing, and also His wisdom how to tackle the matter instead of running with your own thoughts and ways to solve the problem (Id. 1:62).
	RP2	Obey God by maintaining family harmony, love others and follow the religion	It's God's purpose. Those (sufferings) are God's arrangement (Id.2:75).
	RP3	Serve God by serving the marginalised and poor children	[It was the] eyes [problem] that led me to Christianity... the second effect was really a wakeup call. Because God gave me the first wake up call, I don't want to listen (Id. 3:93).
	RP5	Serve God by being a blessing to others	God needs me to rest, to spend time with Him and to fulfil my last run. And I see that as a privilege (Id. 5:47).
	RP7	Glorify God in every activity	Reasons to follow God's words... These are really God's blueprint for our lives. And it's only to our benefit that we obey them, you see; otherwise, we are on our own (Id.7:59).
	RP8	Serve and live for God by serving Him in the church and through business	The Lord gives and the Lord takes. Whatever times He gives to us... we do our best while we have our lives on earth (Id. 8:160).
	RP11	Glorify God by being good in every aspect, e.g. giving the best in business	It is God's will

TABLE 22: THE PURPOSE OF LIFE AND MEANING FOR PAINFUL EXPERIENCES (Cont.)

Case	RPs	The Purpose of Life	Meaning for The Painful Experiences
Two	RP4	Follow <i>Dharma</i> by living consistently in line with it, in order to achieve greatest happiness	Everything arises and passes away... Rising and falling, is part and parcel of life. But make sure that for every fall, you rise higher (Id. 4:39).
	RP9	Follow <i>Dharma</i> by adding values to people's lives and experiencing happiness	Life has never been smooth, and it is always ups and downs, but how you get out of that and move on is very crucial in deciding your own happiness (Id.9:49).
Three	RP6	Giving back to the community by serving it	I always believe that it happened to teach me and to give meaning to my life and teach me an aspect of life (Id. 6:63).
	RP10	Live an ethical life through helping others	Don't go against nature... There are causations... That means there is always a reason for something to happen. There's a reason for it (Id. 10:39).
Four	RP12 (N)	-	-
	RP13 (N)	-	-

4.3.2.4 The Purpose of Life and Purposes in Life

There is also an interesting relationship between the purpose of life (general and specific) and the RPs' purpose in life. Data for Cases One, Two and Three indicate the RPs' newfound purpose of life has not completely dismissed the importance of acquiring wealth, albeit the reason for wealth is more for financing activities related to their specific purpose. It was found that the pursuit of material wealth has become less important in the order of importance to life and in the light of their newfound purpose. Consider an example from RP3 (Case One):

The five Cs make one F only, and it is still important because it is one of my “Fs”. If you have no money, no security, you still need money, right? (Id. 3:62).

So, I am very real. For me these are not the most important things, one of the third most important things. My God, my family and I need money, because without money, my family also cannot survive. Money is good, because without money you cannot do ministry. Let’s be practical (Id. 3:63).

Similarly, RP9 (Case Two) said:

I stopped working because of money... So, my philosophy in life, my values in life, have taught me that I shouldn’t work because of money. I am very clear now that most of time I work because I add value to people’s lives (Id. 9:54).

And RP6:

Now, so really... I’m very happy doing what I’m doing. I actually don’t even get the sort of financial rewards I used to get... But I’m very happy doing the work I’m doing, touching the lives of the less fortunate. And I hope that I will always have the physical and the mental ability to carry on doing what I’m doing (Id. 6:53).

The examples of the responses show that the RPs’ pursuit of material wealth remains an important part of their purposes in life, albeit it is placed in the correct order of priority and is consistent with the general purpose of life. Table 23 (Twenty Three) shows the relationship between the purpose in life and the view of life.

TABLE 23: THE PURPOSE OF LIFE EFFECT ON PURPOSE IN LIFE

Case	RPs	The Purpose of Life	Purpose in Life
One	RP1	Follow Jesus by serving others	The selfishness... yes, to a certain extent. But there is still a little bit of, I mean, self-serving, salary, but otherwise by and large it is for others... I mean, the rest, the wants, the materialism, they are almost gone (Id.1:50).
	RP2	Obey God by maintaining family harmony, love others and follow the religion	I believe that if I cannot take care of my family, how can I take care of the community? (Id.2:66).
	RP3	Serve God by serving the marginalised and poor children	The five Cs make one F only, and it is still important because it is one of my Fs. If you have no money, no security, you still need money, right? (Id.3:62).
	RP5	Serve God by being a blessing to others	Now I don't have to chase the money ... I have a passive income, the money just comes in (Id.5:62).
	RP7	Glorify God in every activity	During my free time, because my company is in property investment, I'm still looking at buildings (Id. 7:47).
	RP8	Serve and live for God by serving Him in the church and through business	Whereas, after knowing Christ, happiness for me alone is not good enough. There is happiness for God. God must be pleased (Id. 8:179).
	RP11	Glorify God by being good in every aspect, e.g. giving the best in business	But I think as a Christian businessman, you have to pursue money and you have to pursue fame. If not, you can have no good... All Christians are not good businessmen (Id. 11:35).
Two	RP4	Follow <i>Dharma</i> by living consistently in line with it, in order to achieve greatest happiness	We are living a real life... As we need to live, it is important for us to work hard, to earn money... actually contribute to the happiness of many people (Id.4:29).
	RP9	Follow <i>Dharma</i> by adding value to people's lives and experiencing happiness	The first 30 years, you basically care more about yourself. It is not wrong. You need to make sure that you have a good financial foundation... you need to make sure you have a good career to support your day-to-day livelihood... but the next 30 years of your life, which is the second phase of my life, it is about giving. It is not about receiving. So, basically, you move on to a different phase in your life (Id. 9:35).

TABLE 23: THE PURPOSE OF LIFE EFFECT ON PURPOSE IN LIFE (Cont.)

Case	RPs	The Purpose of Life	Purpose in Life
Three	RP6	Giving back to the community by serving the community	All those [earlier pursuits]... unimportant already. My life now is about helping the less fortunate (Id. 6:51).
	RP10	Live an ethical life through helping others	I've discarded already all the previous negative thinking and uncertainty (Id.10:29).
Four	RP12 (N)	-	1. To try his best to achieve something. I would say this is my purpose of life (Id. 12:16). 2. To try to achieve greater things (Id. 12:37)
	RP13 (N)	-	1. Raise the children and meet financial commitments (Id. 13:8) 2. Raise the children and enjoy work (Id. 13:14)

4.3.2.5 The Purpose of Life and Coherence in Life

The data have shown that the worthwhile purpose of life correlates with the quality of meaningfulness. A closer observation shows that the purpose of life, when it is understood as representing a view about life, explains what is important in this respect. The decision to live by it shows evidence of consistency in beliefs and practices and permeates into work, family and personal life. Furthermore, data on the worthwhile purpose of life and painful experiences show the purpose of life also gives meaning to childhood to present day painful experiences, to the effect of readiness to face future painful events including the certainty of death. This may indicate clearly that the purpose of life has brought about meaning and purposefulness of life, which in turn has also brought about the ability to see coherence in all aspects of life, which is crucial for experiencing meaningfulness. Even when happiness is not possible, as evident from the data on painful experiences, the ability to see the reason for the events in the light of life as a whole evidently contributes to the sense of coherence and thus meaning to life. Table 21 shows the indication of coherence in the RPs permeating all aspects of life and experiences.

TABLE 24: THE PURPOSE OF LIFE AND INDICATIONS OF COHERENCE THEREIN

Case	RP	Specific Purpose of Life	On Purpose in Life	On Painful Experiences	On Work	On Family	On Personal Life
One	RP1	Serve people	Material wealth is meant for others	Taught him how to rely and wait upon the Lord	A place to serve others	More time for family	A better leader
	RP2	Family harmony, love others and follow the religion	Taking care of family was necessary	It's God's purpose and arrangement	Religion gives a clearer direction	More time with the family	More balanced life
	RP3	Serving the marginalised and poor children	Money is one of the seven "F"	Wake up from God to know and serve Him	A way to help the less fortunate	Becoming a better mother	A more balanced life
	RP4	Live consistently in line with dharma	Money can contribute to happiness of others	It is part of life.	Work that does not harm others	More time for family	A more balanced life
	RP5	To be able to bless others	The passive income helps others	God wanted him to rest	As a way of serving	More time for family	Emotionally stronger
	RP6	Serving the community	Earlier experience enables one to help the less fortunate	It happened to teach and give meaning to my life	A way to help the less fortunate	A better mother	Learnt humility
	RP7	Glorify God in every activity	Maintaining business to help others	God's blueprint to teach obedience	A platform to help others	A better father	A more loving person
Two	RP8	Serve God	Happiness is now added with God factor	God's way to teach about life and serve whilst one still can	As a way of serving	A better spouse and father	A more balanced life
	RP9	Adding value to people's lives	Needed to build foundation	A way teach lesson about life	An avenue to add values to people's life	More time for the family	A more balanced life

TABLE 24: THE PURPOSE OF LIFE AND INDICATIONS OF COHERENCE THEREIN (Cont.)

Case	RP	Specific Purpose of Life	On Purpose in Life	On Painful Experiences	On Work	On Family	On Personal Life
Three	RP10	To help others	To feed the family	Teaching about life	A platform to help customers	More time for family	A more balanced life
	RP11	Be good in every aspect	Gaining wealth and fame is important to serving God	It is God's will	An avenue to testify God	More time with family	A more careful life
Four	RP12 (N)	-	1. To try his best to achieve something. I would say this is my purpose of life (Id. 12:16). 2. To try to achieve greater things (Id. 12:37)	To be better in dealing with future similar situations	To learn as much as possible	Unclear	Unclear
	RP13 (N)	-	1. Raise the children and meet financial commitments (Id. 13:8) 2. Raise the children and enjoy work (Id.13:14)-	To be stronger in life	Unclear	Unclear	Unclear

4.3.3 Summary

Data from the cases of RPs with different circumstances and religious orientation with a high MLQ score on the presence of meaning in life share three common factors leading to meaningfulness of life. These are the sense of freedom to pursue their desired activities, a change in the view of life, i.e. the general purpose of life such as their purpose of existence, and a change in their specific purpose of life from inward to other-centeredness purposes. The data noted that these specific purposes are consistent with the principle of the Golden Rule. Among the three factors, the change in the general purpose of life, followed by specific activities characterised by the Golden Rule is a reliable indicator of meaningfulness.

Data from Case Four, namely for RPs with a low MLQ score on the presence of meaning in life, found meaningfulness in the slight change in their purpose in life due to the change of their present state. Although their purpose in life remained “self-focused” it brought about a new sense of purposefulness and freedom. Nevertheless, the change is not able to bring about a high score on the presence of meaning in life.

4.4 A COMMON PATTERN FROM REPEATED THEMES

My report on the essential themes common to meaningfulness has revealed that the three themes, as mentioned above, have a common thread. Meaningfulness is preceded by a change in the view of life and a change in activities (purposes in life to purposes of life). In addition, the RPs shared common characteristics when it comes to experiencing meaningfulness, such as satisfaction, contentment and happiness, and these elements are solely the outcome of living consistently with the view and purpose of life.

4.4.1 MEANINGFULNESS AS AN OUTCOME OF LIVING CONSISTENTLY WITH THE PURPOSE OF LIFE

The data show that when the RPs made reference to qualitatively superior meaningfulness, it meant experiencing a stronger sense on the purpose of existence, and of direction, and, as a result, a more balanced, satisfying, fulfilling, contented and happy life, even though challenges as well as painful experiences can still occur. This sense of

meaningfulness is an outcome of living consistently with their view and purpose of life. Consider the excerpt from RP1 in Case One:

I mean, if we want to live for ourselves, it has become self-centred, selfish, you want more and more... But... when I started to do that [serving others]... I found that it was very fulfilling, very satisfied [satisfying] (Id. 1:18-22).

I mean, it's a pleasure. Pleasure is an enjoyment for me, doing what I'm called to do (Id. 1:15).

I find it really, really satisfying. So, to me, it is living for others. Living for others, that's it. You don't live for yourself, because you cannot find a real kind of satisfaction (Id. 1:25).

I chose what I wanted to do, that is to look after others, and I enjoy it very much (Id. 1:47).

A similar relationship is observed in RP2 (Case One), as he recognises that a key factor contributing to his own sense of meaningfulness is the direction brought about by the new purpose in life. He stated:

This is what I wanted. When I have achieved that, my life will be meaningful because I will have achieved what I want. But those were the days, I don't have a target, I don't have my expectations. I just live – like a leaf on the river. I just follow. If I can be better, I will do better. If I cannot, never mind. I have done my best, but I don't have a destination (Id. 2:54).

This is in contrast to his earlier purpose. He explained:

I would say no [not meaningful]. This is because when you do not know what you want, then you do not know when you have achieved it or not. Then you will not find it meaningful. Yeah, I still do my business and feed my family and all that. But I just do it for the sake of doing it (3:52).

RP2 believes it is the sense of direction that gives meaningfulness of life (Id. 2:55 and 2:57). He is a happier person (Id. 2:62), enjoying balance and contentment. He noted:

So, I think I am at the moment very balanced. (2:25) So, I think at the moment I am balanced. (2:26) Not successful but I have a stable business. (2:27) Spiritually I am contented and at the same time I have some personal time for my personal development like exercise, like reading books and all that. I think, yeah, that is because a balanced life, a balanced life is really important (2:28).

Data from RP3 (Case One) show similar characteristics. In her words:

Last time, no. I wanted more and more. So, my priority was to work out how to make more money, to buy more houses (Id. 3:61).

There was something missing. What was missing, as I look back now, [were] contentment, peace and joy. Simple things which I never appreciated because, to me, as I said, you get one new car, you want another (Id.3:49).

Her purpose of living a balanced life and serving the marginalised brought meaningfulness. In her words:

I am so blessed that I have finally learnt contentment. I believe this is a blessing from God. I have a lot of peace and a lot of contentment... (Id. 3:16-17).

Data from RPs who adhered to a different religious view of life (Case Two) also registered meaningfulness, although the contrast was not as obvious. For instance, RP4 noted:

So, if we understand all these things and live a life... in the order of nature, then, we would be able to live a happier life, a more meaningful life (4:11).

The purpose of life... in this case it is, as I mentioned, it's basically living in accordance of the law of nature so that we can achieve or attain eventually greatest happiness (Id. 4:13).

Data from two RPs who did not adhere to any particular religion (Case Three) show similar characteristics. For instance, the data for RP6 indicate that although she experienced meaningfulness prior to her current purpose of life, the present provided a more satisfying and meaningful existence. She explained:

Uh... the sense of satisfaction. I guess it's different. The first part is personal satisfaction from... you are able to make your life comfortable, you are able to see your children do well and all that. Now, the satisfaction is that you are able to touch the lives of others and make a difference there... you are able to make the second half of your life meaningful (Id. 6:45).

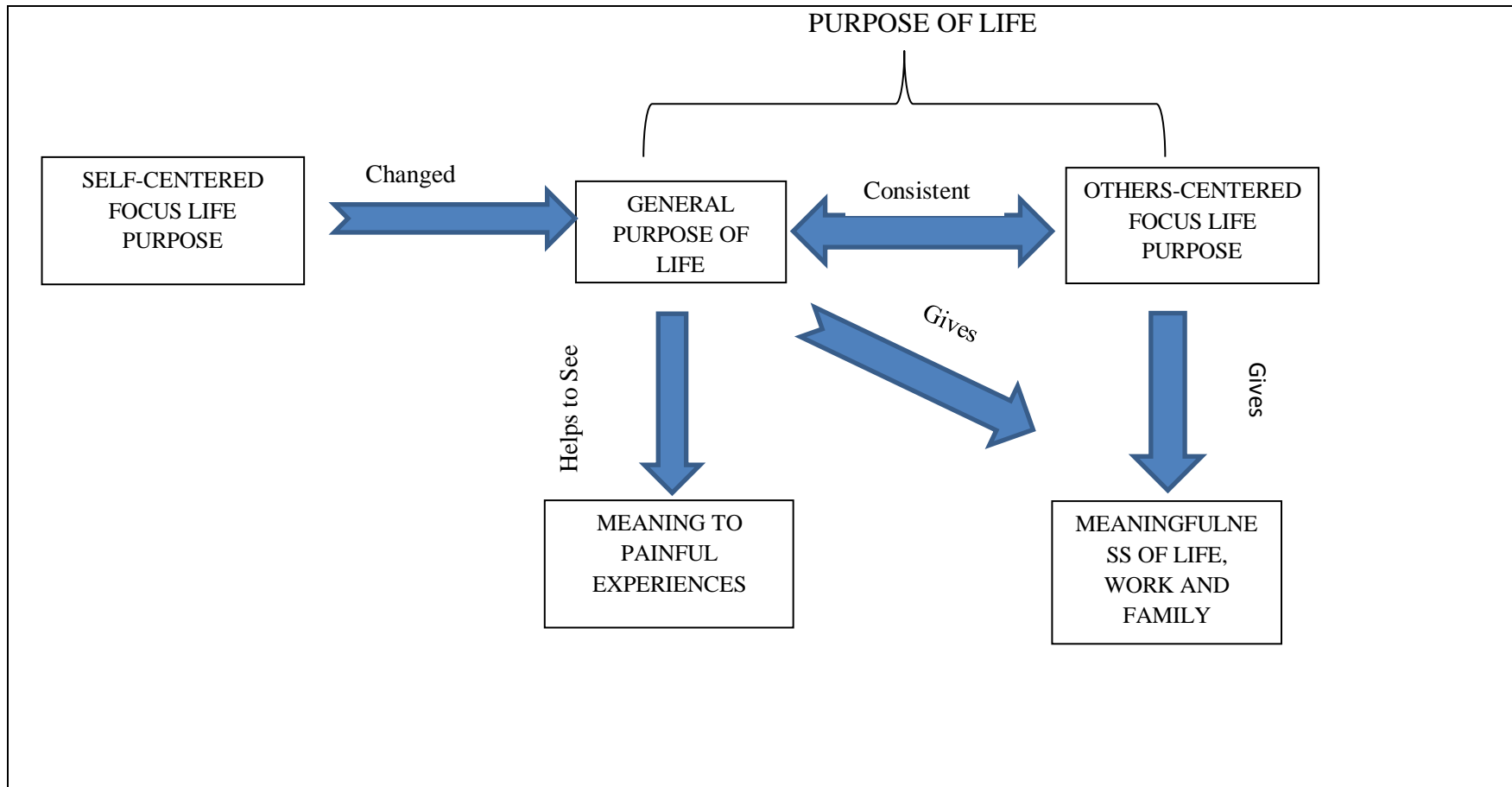
I think it's also more meaningful because it is no longer about enhancing your personal life. Your personal life...I mean, at the end of the day... how much, once you have a roof over your head, right? How much more do you need? You don't need a lot more, quite honestly... so you might as well use your life... [Make it] more meaningful and enrich other people's lives... (Id. 6:47).

The data selected and represented above affirm that meaningfulness of life is associated with happiness, satisfaction and contentment. The data also show that pleasure is enjoyable when it satisfies. In this case, meaningfulness is qualitatively superior to the present purposes of life, which correlates strongly with their altruistic purposes, both in the form of vertical and horizontal self-transcendence life purposes. Accordingly, their responses show that meaningfulness of life came about as a by-product of living consistently with the purpose of life.

4.4.2 PATTERN EXPRESSING THE JOURNEY TO MEANINGFULNESS

The RPs' journeys to meaningfulness were evidently associated with a change from a purpose in life to the purpose of life. In this case, there was a clear change from a primarily self-centred approach to an other-centred outlook consistent to the Golden Rules. This change was preceded by the decision to embrace and live consistently with the new purpose of life (general and specific) that eventually brought about an experientially superior quality of meaningfulness. The purpose of life also brought about meaningfulness related to painful experiences. This common pattern is illustrated by the graphic below.

GRAPHIC 1: A COMMON PATTERN FROM REPEATED THEMES



4.5 SUMMARY

This chapter has highlighted the data from 13 RPs according to the four interdependent research questions, in order to assess the reliability and viability of expressing the theology of the meaning of life based on the teaching of Ecclesiastes. The research questions are:

1. How did the research participants arrive at meaningfulness of life?
2. How does the purposes of life offer meaning to painful experiences in life?
3. How does the purposes of life offer meaning in work, family and personal life?
4. Is there an experiential difference between meaning in life and the meaning of life?

The data show that the RPs found meaningfulness when there was a change from a purpose in life to the purpose of life. It was also a change from a self-focused to an others-focused approach, which itself is consistent with the principle of the Golden Rule. Meaningfulness and a new sense of purposefulness are also felt in their working, family and personal life. The data also reveal that the purpose of life, undergirded by the general purpose of life, is defined by a certain worldview about life and existence, and hence what is important. This general purpose of life is the crucial factor contributing to meaningfulness in working, family and personal life, and it is the main factor in identifying meaning in painful experiences. Living consistently with the general purpose of life, expressed by engaging in a specific life purpose consistent with the general purpose of life, brings about meaningfulness, thereby providing evidence that there is an experiential difference between meaning in life and the meaning of life, in that the latter is more satisfying, fulfilling, enjoyable and meaningful.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE EMPIRICALLY CORROBORATED BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF THE MEANING OF LIFE

5.1 INTRODUCTION

This research seeks to build an empirically corroborated biblical theology of the meaning of life based on the teaching of Ecclesiastes, built on a rigorous analysis of both biblical and empirical data and the cogency of which is verified by theological rationality and empirical validity. Accordingly, I analysed the teaching of Ecclesiastes and reconstructed the framework along with the hypotheses that express the book's message in this respect. Key aspects in this framework include the distinctive concepts of the worthwhile purpose of life and coherence in life, while living consistently within this reconstructed framework enables one to experience the meaningfulness of life.

In order to account for empirical factors in the theological aspects of this subject, I looked to unearth, through an empirical investigation, the relevance of the reconstructed theology in relation to the experiences of people claiming to have found the meaning of life. This independent and separate investigation, with careful attention given to its rigor and reliability, tested and verified the validity and relevance of the reconstructed theology. The findings from the empirical enquiry have enriched my understanding on the subject, but more intriguingly the experiences of the research participants have shown considerable similarities to the point of substantiating the validity and relevance of the reconstructed framework of the theology of the meaning of life.

This final chapter will corroborate the reconstructed theology with empirical findings, by showing the extent of people's actual experiences and how these correspond to the biblical theology of the meaning of life based on Ecclesiastes. This corroboration will consider the similarities and differences between key aspects in the framework, with particular attention given to the distinctive concepts of the worthwhile purpose of life and coherence in life, as well as the claim that living consistently within this reconstructed framework enables one to experience meaningfulness. This chapter will conclude with salient points that express an exegetically and empirically substantiated biblical theology of the meaning of life.

5.2 BIBLICAL AND EMPIRICAL CORROBORATION

5.2.1. THE MEANING OF LIFE

My attempt to analyse and reconstruct the theology of the meaning of life from the teaching of Ecclesiastes is built upon two crucial components and concerns inherent in this particular subject, namely when someone asks, 'What is the meaning of life?' the person wants to know what purpose is served by living this life in relation to the reason for one's existence. It is the search for this purpose, expressed in the pursuit of the most worthwhile purpose of life, which is distinct from questions pertaining to 'a meaning in life', and hence 'a purpose in life', in that the search for 'the meaning of life' is the quest for an answer to existence. Secondly, the person wants to know how daily activities, as repetitive and mundane as they may be, and events such as suffering in one's life give meaning over a period of time, and how these events cohere in the light of one's entire life.

Ecclesiastes teaches that the purpose of one's life is to fear God and keep His commandments (12:13b), which in turn expresses the meaning of life. To live by the worthwhile purpose *of* life is to live according to the reason for existence, which thus marks its conceptual distinction with a purpose *in* life, as it answers the question of existence and of the concerns for the overall purpose of life, which is crucial to the significance of existing and the reason for living. Furthermore, one's life will eventually

be evaluated (12:14) in accordance with how well one lived in harmony with the purpose of life, which reinforces that to fear God and keep His commandments is indeed the *worthwhile* purpose. The call to fear God requires one to embrace a realistic view of life which recognises the certainty of death and the uncertainties of living, as well as recognising the presence of God's sovereign control over all human affairs through the 'action with built-in consequences' principle. These realities are reasons for the fleetingness of life and hence the eventual absence of any net profit from human toil, which Ecclesiastes emphatically declared as being ultimately הבל. Furthermore, when the uncertainties of life and the certainty of death are taken into consideration alongside the reality of the 'action with built-in consequences' phenomenon, undeserved suffering can become a possible reality, even for the righteous. The reason for these realities, as noted in 3:14c, is so that humans will fear God, which is further reinforced when Ecclesiastes teaches that the sensible way to live is to enjoy life – a privilege from the hand of God which is extended only to those who fear Him. Considering the dynamic relationship between the themes above, therefore, to 'fear God and keep His commandment' is the point of reference from which one interprets realities, and all experiences in life should be integrated into a meaningful whole by connecting the various pieces of his experience within this point of reference. Accordingly, the worthwhile purpose of life and the coherence thereof cannot be found in the human pursuit of temporal things, although these things have their value and meaning with respect to temporal life.

Interestingly, the empirical data show that the RPs' changed view of life and their new purpose involve the primary factors leading to their current qualitatively superior sense of meaningfulness. This phenomenon is observed across cases and represents different circumstances in life, with the exception of Case Four, which comprises RPs with low scores on the presence of meaning in life. These are in addition to other factors, such as the role of philosophical reflection as one advances in years and the sense of freedom brought about by financial freedom. The RPs' demographic information may suggest that a qualitatively superior sense of meaningfulness in the latter stages of the RPs' life can be a natural phenomenon for those who have gained more experience and wisdom. Existing empirical studies do reveal that as one advances in years, it spurs reflection or encourages

philosophical reflection that leads to increasing wisdom and more focus on certain priorities,⁷⁸¹ thereby contributing to a better sense of meaningfulness. In addition, the empirical data also show that all RPs have arrived at financial stability, as they experience their present state of meaningfulness. This phenomenon is substantiated by existing studies showing that a sense of autonomy correlates with meaningfulness.⁷⁸² Therefore, the role of these factors cannot be discounted, more so when they find support from other findings showing that adults with better subjective health, a higher income, less loneliness, a higher educational level and stronger hope experience continuous growth and overall wellbeing.⁷⁸³ While the importance of these factors should be noted, their limitations have to be taken into consideration. After all, the empirical data show evidence of RPs across cases suffering from some form of crisis in relation to meaning after they have achieved financial freedom and advanced in years, thus casting doubt on the sufficiency of the above factors to offer superior meaningfulness. Conversely, the data show a stronger correlation between the purposefulness and meaningfulness of life, and that goals and meaningfulness have been sustained by existing studies, more so when the type of goals correlates positively with the level of happiness and satisfaction.⁷⁸⁴ In particular, as my enquiry has shown, the presence of the worthwhile purpose of life undergirded by a certain view of life is a stronger and an affirmative factor. Therefore, as far as meaningfulness is concerned, financial freedom and age function as contributing rather than determining factors.

My investigation shows that the pivotal contribution of the view of life and the worthwhile purpose of life give the RPs the reason and worth for existing, whereby the

⁷⁸¹ Nardi Steverink, Gerben J. Westerhof, Christina Bode, and Freya Dittmann-Kohli, "The Personal Experience of Aging, Individual Resources, and Subjective Well-Being," *Journal of Psychological Sciences* Vol. 56B, No. 6, (2001) 364–373.

⁷⁸² For instance, on the role of the sense of autonomy, see Ryff, "Happiness Is Everything?" 1069-1081. Also, Crumbaugh and Maholick, "An Experimental Study on Existentialism," 200-201.

⁷⁸³ Ibid. 371.

⁷⁸⁴ Harlow and Newcomb, "Towards A General Hierarchical Model of Meaning and Satisfaction in Life," 387-405.

goals and purposes behind work, family and personal growth are integrated and unified under an overarching cause. In fact, further scrutiny on the RPs' view of life reveals that there is a single point of reference, taken as the general purpose of life from which every activity finds its place and relevance. This claim is sustained by the contrast observed in the RPs prior to the transition to their present purpose of life. Although several of the RPs in all cases (except Case Four) had had meaningfulness through their purpose in life, the transition to the present view of life and the worthwhile purpose thereof had brought about a much superior quality of meaningfulness. Furthermore, as the data in Case Four demonstrate, whilst there was a change in their purpose in life, it involved a change in neither their view of life nor the worthwhile purpose. Hence, although their data registered a slight degree of improvement in meaningfulness, their score on the presence of meaning in life remained low compared to RPs from other cases. Hence, this investigation shows the importance of such a transition and its superiority compared to remaining having a purpose in life and a meaning in life.

Among the RPs subscribing to the view of life offered by Christianity in Case One, for instance, this involves glorying (and its related terms) God or Jesus Christ in work, family and personal life, whilst those inclining toward Buddhism in Case Two follow the principles of Dharma and its teaching. Noticeably, the single point of reference represents a religious framework that offers reasons for existing and living,⁷⁸⁵ through which the RPs view life, which in turn encourages the decision to please God or to follow the principle of Dharma by living consistently in line with their respective teachings. Even RPs in Case Three who do not adhere to any specific religious persuasion seek to do what is right and proper, which implies observing the 'action with built-in consequences' principle, which is to varying degrees foundational, integrated and assumed in any religious framework.⁷⁸⁶ Nonetheless, it must be stressed that whilst these frameworks

⁷⁸⁵ For a philosophical discussion on the pivotal role of a religious view of life and meaningfulness, please see Runzo and Martin, *The Meaning of Life in the World Religions*, 53-71.

⁷⁸⁶ In fact, recognising the existence of the 'action with built-in consequences' principle reveals the presence of a worldview or framework about life. Based on this notion, as noted by Nelson, "if religion is defined as a worldview, it is possible to speak of everyone as being religious since everyone has a

may offer comprehensive explanations – and hence perspectives or lenses through which the nature of this world, the function and the role of humans and daily events in life are interpreted – meaningfulness is only possible when one truly subscribes to and decides to live consistently with it. As the data in Case Four highlight, although RP12 (N) and RP13 (N) adhere to Buddhism and Christianity, respectively, the presence of religion did not correlate with meaningfulness of life with the exception, of course, when one truly subscribes to and lives consistently with it on a day-to-day basis.

The association between the worthwhile purpose of life subsumed by religious framework and its implications for meaningfulness has found support from studies correlating meaningfulness and religiosity,⁷⁸⁷ with one study claiming the God factor and spirituality offer the most satisfying and coherent answers to life's meaning.⁷⁸⁸ This is in addition to existing studies confirming that religiosity contributes to one's subjective wellbeing, thus affirming the findings from this investigation. Nevertheless, as much as the studies do indeed lend support to my enquiry, their concept of religion is broadly defined, and religiosity is measured by activities associated with religion, such as church attendance and frequency of prayer. The needs for a 'broad definition' are understandable in the light of the contextual reasons underpinning these studies. The point is, whilst religion and religiosity have been found to be positively associated with one's sense of purpose, general happiness and coping with painful events, the dynamic relationship between these factors has not been sufficiently explained apart from confirming their correlation. In addition, and more importantly, positive wellbeing cannot be

worldview." See James M. Nelson, "Psychology, Religion, and Spirituality (New York: Springer Science & Business Media, 2009), 7.

⁷⁸⁷ Emmons, Cheung & Tehrani, "Assessing Spirituality," 100-107. There are, of course, studies suggesting the weak link between religiosity and spirituality with meaningfulness. For instance, Klinger, in a study with 138 students, found 'religion and vocation' were among the weakest sources of meaning. Whilst the finding from his research should not be undermined, it must also be noted that the study examined the 'current' state of college students, in which no comparison on the change of purposes or views of life were made. By far, the finding affirms my empirical evidence describing the condition of the RPs prior to finding the meaning of life. See Klinger, *Meaning and Void: Inner Experience and The Incentives in People's Lives*, 5-9.

⁷⁸⁸ Wong, "Spirituality, Meaning and Successful Ageing," 359-394.

presumptuously equated to experiencing the meaning of life. Subjective wellbeing refers to psychological and physical health,⁷⁸⁹ through which people experience quality of life, personal growth⁷⁹⁰ and long-term levels of happiness and satisfaction,⁷⁹¹ whereas the meaning of life concerns the question of existence and its implications for one's wellbeing. Hence, although the experiences of one who enjoys healthy and subjective wellbeing can be similar to one who has found the meaning of life, it is also possible that one can still experience a long-term level of happiness and satisfaction without having found the meaning of life, a claim that is evident in the empirical data. Quite a number of them were already happy and satisfied with their lives, a state qualified as having positive and subjective wellbeing, even though they had not arrived at superior meaningfulness.

My empirical investigation moves beyond the measures of religious activities to show the specific factor, i.e. the worthwhile purpose of life, within the context of one's view of life that leads to meaningfulness. In other words, just as the view of life offers a comprehensive explanation of the nature of this world and its implications for human existence and function, the worthwhile purpose provides the goal and direction which bring about a positive effect on one's subjective wellbeing, even enabling one to know and experience the meaning of life. The dynamic relationship between the view and the worthwhile purpose of life is sustained by the data, which reveals that two of the RPs in Case One and all RPs in Case Two have only found the meaning of life and experienced superior meaningfulness long after their conversion to a particular religion, with its professed worldview, or involvement in religious activities. One of them, namely RP11 (Case One), although being religious has yet to experience meaningfulness. As far as the empirical evidence is concerned, the transition begins and correlates with their decision to live consistently with a solid purpose undergirded by a specific view of life. Perhaps

⁷⁸⁹ Emmons, Cheung and Tehrani, "Assessing Spirituality," 391–422.

⁷⁹⁰ See also Emmons, "Wellspring of positive life," 108. Also, William Pavot and Diener, "Review of the Satisfaction with Life Scale," 164–172.

⁷⁹¹ Emmons, Cheung and Tehrani, "Assessing Spirituality," 391. Albert Kozma, Susan Stone, M.J Stone, T.E. Hannah and Kevin McNeil, "Long –And Short –Term Affective States in Happiness," 119–138; Ryff, "Happiness Is Everything?" 1069–1081.

such a transition is what some researchers have raised and explained as indicating one's movement away from an extrinsic to an intrinsic orientation in relation to religious belief.⁷⁹² To put it differently, it is the outcome for one who has moved away from a superficial understanding of religious precepts (which is enough to cause a positive effect on subjective wellbeing) to embracing them to the point of allowing them to master one's life.⁷⁹³ When this happens, the worthwhile purpose becomes the overall purpose, followed by having every purpose and activity integrated with it, leading to the ability to see and experience coherence, resulting in a superior and comprehensive sense of enjoyment and satisfaction. The data show this in relation to the view of those RPs who have yet to give their all to what they perceive as the demands of their religion. These RPs considered that being committed fully and wholly to their religion and its requirements was the ultimate purpose of their lives, believing that in doing so it would bring about a much more superior quality of meaningfulness.

The empirical finding is strikingly similar to the point substantiating the validity of the reconstructed framework that expresses the theology of the meaning of life in Ecclesiastes. In particular, the pivotal role of the worthwhile purpose of life might explain the reason for existing and enable one to see coherence. That is, although *a* purpose *in* life can bring about meaningfulness, *the* purpose *of* life brings about qualitatively superior meaningfulness. Hence, consistent with the teaching of Ecclesiastes, the empirical data demonstrate that the worthwhile purpose cannot be found in the pursuit of temporal things, in that the limitations of these temporal things and their benefits are exposed through crises in relation to meaning in the life of the research participants. Perhaps this is an expression of הבל, since the research participants realised the ultimate profitlessness of pursuing temporal materials.

⁷⁹² Golden W. Allport & Michael J. Ross, "Personal Religious Orientation and Prejudice," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 5 (1967) 432-443, quoted in Larry W. Ventis, "The Relationships between Religion and Mental Health," *Journal of Social Issues* Vol. 51. No. 2, (1995) 33-48.

⁷⁹³ Ibid., 35-37.

Evidently, the worthwhile purpose presupposes a view of life that gives the reason and purpose of existence. Those who live harmoniously and consistently to these will experience enjoyment that is comprehensive and permeating to every sphere of life. Underlying this is the quality of the purpose factor, a case made clear in the biblical data considering the distinction between other pursuits and the call to fear God and keep His commandments. Hence, it is not any other mundane purpose (in life) but the purpose of life functioning as an overarching purpose that are relevant to and affecting all aspect of life. More intriguingly, just as the worthwhile purpose of life in Ecclesiastes presupposes a certain view through which one interprets life and existence, the empirical data reveal that meaningfulness is felt when there is a real change in the view of life. In other words, mere intellectual acceptance of the worthwhile purpose (and hence religious precepts) cannot create meaningfulness unless there is a transition from a mere profession thereof to actually believing in it and thus living it out. The need for such a transition is assumed in Ecclesiastes – my earlier analysis showed that the call to enjoyment is also a call to embrace a view of life consistent with that presupposed in the call in 12:13b-14 to fear God and keep His commandments.

Therefore, when the RPs said that they had found the meaning of life, they meant that they had found and were living consistently with their worthwhile purpose of life that expresses the purpose for existing. Just as their worthwhile purpose of life is consistent with their reason for existence, so are their goals and activities. This offers wholesome purposefulness and associated coherence, resulting in a visibly superior sense of fulfillment and satisfaction in work, family and personal life, and even enabling them to come to terms with and give meaning to unexpected suffering or painful experiences. To put it differently, they see and embrace life, and even anomalies therein, within the framework of their views and worthwhile purpose.

5.2.2 THE WORTHWHILE PURPOSE OF LIFE

Ecclesiastes teaches specifically that the worthwhile purpose of life is to fear God and keep His commandments (12:13b-14). This overarching purpose presupposes a realistic view that shows the purpose of one's existence against the backdrop of the reality of the certainty of death and uncertainties in life, and how enjoyment that is comprehensive and permeates every sphere is possible only for those who live harmoniously and consistently in line with these notions. In this case, living harmoniously with these concepts is expressed through an appropriate attitude of recognising the sovereignty of God over human affairs, in which caution, respect and restraint must be properly demonstrated in every aspect of life, including religious activities. This involves doing what is right and not what is wrong when no one, except God, is watching or holding one accountable (4:17-5:6 [5:1-7]; 5:9-16 [5:10-17]).⁷⁹⁴ Further, as explained in 2.7 of Chapter Two, whilst 12:13b-14 has its specific reference, meaning and application to the specific audience, it has a general reference applicable to all humanity. Just as the injunction is undergirded by theological assumptions shared by his audience, the ability to fear God or an Ultimate Being or ultimate reality is assumed to be available to everyone from the start. Expressions of such fear or respect are manifested by doing good things to others, being kind and caring and being fair and avoiding doing what is prohibited. These activities are consistent with the principle of the Golden Rule, namely 'loving your fellow as yourself' or "Whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them" (Matthew 7:12). Inherent in these activities is the concept of reciprocity, whereby the act of meeting the Golden Rule expresses an appropriate response to the fear of who God is and what He has done and/or to avoid going against the principles of nature, such as the "action with built-in consequences" phenomenon, by doing what is good to fellow humans. These undergirding attitudes are expressed through conscientious behaviour and conduct, covering the ethical and moral dimensions found in all facets of life. The idea that God will hold one's decisions in life to account explains the link between the call to 'keep his commandments' and the threat of judgment in 12:13-14. Considering this point,

⁷⁹⁴ Leong, *Our Reason for Being*, 42-43, 45-47.

the worthwhile purpose of life presented in Ecclesiastes factors in the presence of these realities, which certainly includes recognising the reality of the ‘action with built-in consequences’ principle, thus making it a focal point from which circumstances and experiences are interpreted.

The empirical data indicate there are differences in and similarities to RPs’ worthwhile purpose when compared to the reconstructed theology based on the book of Ecclesiastes. A key difference between the empirical data and the reconstructed theology is in the specific religious conviction and purpose giving the meaning to life, as in the case comprising RPs adhering to Buddhism. In addition, unlike Ecclesiastes, none of the RPs (in all Cases) uses the phrase “fearing God and keeping His Commandments,” thus implying a gap amounting to a conflict of views from these frameworks, where, from a cursory point of view, this is an undoubtedly reasonable deduction. Perhaps the issue is less complicated in the case of the RP adhering to Christianity, especially considering that his activities found his axis in God. For instance, consider the responses from RP1, the devout Christian:

I think the purpose for us to be around is to serve others in the same way as our Shepherd has done (Id. 1:71)... [There is] no meaning [to life] if there is no purpose in life [that aims] to help others, to serve others (Id.1:73).

Noticeably, RP1 saw the purpose of his existence as serving others, which he considered as being consistent with walking in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. The complication is more obvious with RPs (Case Two) adhering to a different religious framework and finding meaningfulness through living consistently with the teaching and principles of Dharma. The data in Case Two revealed their purpose of life are twofold, with the ultimate being liberated from the cycle of living and dying to the state of Nirvana, whilst the secondary objective is to adhere to the teaching of Dharma. These differences are similarly noted in the case of RPs who do not adhere to any religion. For instance, RP6 noted:

My life now is about helping the less fortunate (Id. 6:51)... it’s the ultimate purpose [of my life] ... (Id. 6:52).

Her purpose – to help the less fortunate – is driven by the need for significance, and such motivation is not influenced by any religious persuasion. This is again dissimilar from 12:13b-14 with respect to the purpose of existence and the object of belief.

However, whilst there is a distinction in the RPs' exact expression of the worthwhile purpose of life with 12:13b-14, it is consistent with the characteristic presupposed in 12:13b-14, in that their worthwhile purpose of life is built upon the belief that it is associated with the purpose of one's existence and such existence is associated with one believing in God, an Ultimate Being or an ultimate reality. This is seen most clearly in RPs whose purpose is built upon the belief that it is of God and is paramount for life. Their decision to see all areas of their lives being consistent with the worthwhile purpose has led to transformations in business approaches, family life and personal life. These in turn have led to the sense of coherence permeating all spheres of life.

Even for RPs whose purpose of life is not built upon the belief that God or an Ultimate Being exists, it is certainly built upon the existence of an ultimate reality comparable to the "action with built-in consequences" phenomenon. For this reason, although having a different point of view to 12:13b-14 in respect to the existence of God or an Ultimate Being, their worthwhile purpose undergirded by a respect for reality is a good (albeit incomplete) comparison with the concept of "fear," as understood from the teaching of Ecclesiastes, more so when the desire to do good and avoid bad consequences (here and after) is consistent with respect for the reality of the 'action with built-in consequences' phenomenon. Similar consistency is also observed for RPs who do not subscribe to any religion. In the case of RP6, her purpose was motivated by a desire to move from being successful to being significant through helping the less fortunate. The decision was spurred by the desire to "give back" to the community, and this is linked to her decision, albeit loosely, as a way of reciprocating the good life which she had received. More evidently, it is motivated by fear of not being able to put her experience and life to good use, failing to leave behind a good legacy and missing experiencing significance in life. Her purpose has an element of reciprocating the good things she received as well as the fear of not being able to "give back", showing a firm belief in the reality of the action with built-in consequences phenomenon.

More interestingly, for RPs across cases (except Case Four), the worthwhile purpose of life is characteristically “other-centred,” which is consistent with the principle of the Golden Rule. Table 25 (Twenty Five), shows the RPs’ worthwhile purpose of life and its relationship with the principle of the Golden Rule.

TABLE 25: THE WORTHWHILE PURPOSE OF LIFE AND THE PRINCIPLE OF
THE GOLDEN RULE

Case	RPs	Purpose of life	The Golden Rule
One	RP1	Living for others, that’s it. You don’t live for yourself (Id. 1:27).	Consistent
	RP2	My purpose of life is that I will do my best to maintain family harmony, lovingly between each other, and I will follow my religion (through serving the community) to live my life (Id. 2:30).	Consistent
	RP3	The purpose of my life is to serve His poor, needy and marginalised children (Id.3:27).	Consistent
	RP5	To be a blessing, not just for oneself... Now, it is more for God’s kingdom (Id. 5:30).	Consistent
	RP7	Our main chief purpose is to glorify Him. So, in all that we do, you see, whatever we eat or drink, or whatever we do, we do it to the glory of God (Id. 7:23).	Consistent
	RP8	My purpose of life is to live for God (Id. 8:48)	Consistent
	RP11	The purpose of my life... get a good family, (be) a very good husband... a very good father... a very good son... have a chance to share my belief (Id.11:10).	Consistent
Two	RP4	The purpose of life... to live in accordance with the law of nature so we can eventually achieve or attain the highest happiness (Id. 4:13).	Consistent
	RP9	I enrich people’s lives... And I add value... so, to me, happiness means finding a purpose. And my purpose is very clear (Id. 9:18).	Consistent
Three	RP6	My life now is about helping the less fortunate (Id. 6:51).	Consistent
	RP10	The purpose of life is to be able to help others, to be able to help yourself, to be able to help your family... not in order of importance, but it’s just to be able to help people (Id. 10:15).	Consistent

The injunction to fear God and keep his commandments (12:13b-14) is consistent with the commandments to love God and one’s neighbour, from which all the laws and the

prophets found their axes. Inherent in the commandment to love God and one's neighbour is the concept of reciprocity, whereby life purpose expresses an appropriate response to who God is, what He has and what He can do. Crucial information from the data above is an emphasis on the fear of God or an Ultimate Being or ultimate reality through one's respect for the "action with built-in consequences" phenomenon and its relevance to the practice of the Golden Rule, although there is some degree of variation among them regarding the theological understanding of God. Their purpose of life is certainly driven by respect for the reality of the 'action with built-in consequences' phenomenon, a concept subsumed in 12:13b-14, and it underscores an awareness and respect for what they believe to be an existing order for living. For instance, RP6 and RP10's purposes of life were driven by the belief that they need to do good, such as by giving back the good things they received (RP6) or ensuring that clients become successful (RP10). Although lacking in a religious framework and a systematic view, the need to reciprocate through the practice of the Golden Rule is still comparable to the phrase "fear God and keep His commandments," moreover when such an expression is undergirded by an existing order comparable to the "action with built-in consequences" phenomenon.

This is also seen clearly in RP9 (Case Two). His purpose, namely being a moral agent focusing on adding value to people's lives, is driven by the desire to avoid bad consequences (here and after). In other words, when the RP9 set his purpose to "add value to people's lives," this undertaking was underpinned by respect (or fear) for the laws of nature as understood in Dharma. Considering that his decision will have a significant bearing on his present and in the afterlife, it becomes clear that respect for the law of Dharma and the practice of the Golden Rule provides a good comparison to fearing God and keeping His commandments. Therefore, whilst there are differences concerning specific religious convictions, underpinning RP9's convictions is that the law of nature will call everyone and their action to account. Therefore, whilst the phrase 'fear God and keep His commandments' is glaringly absent in RP9's purpose of life, it is nevertheless not too hard to see that the idea and concept are present.

5.2.2.1 The Validity and Substantiality of 12:13-14 as the Worthwhile Purpose of Life

The finding above is crucial, as it verifies the legitimacy and pivotal role of 12:13b-14 as the worthwhile purpose of life in the entire framework that expresses the theology of the meaning of life in Ecclesiastes. It shows the validity and reliability of the premise that the worthwhile purpose of life is to fear God and keep His commandments, and it enables one to explain reality and live coherently with uncertainties and anomalies. Adhering to it brings about meaningfulness that permeates to every sphere, resulting in a sense of coherence in every aspect and event in life. The correlation between the worthwhile purpose of life and meaningfulness is stronger and more reliable than a purpose in life.

The relevance of 12:13b-14 not only holds true to Qoheleth and his audience, and those who share a similar culture and adhere to a similar religious conviction, but it is also shown to be case for humanity as a whole, even for those in the absence of any belief in God or knowledge of His commands. This investigation did not ignore nor downplay the significance of the variant found in the theology and worldviews of other religious frameworks and cultures. Yet, if 12:13b-14, expressed through the Golden Rule, has brought about meaningfulness of life, and this is observable in those adhering to a different religious stance, it actually confirms the practicality, reliability and relevance of the teaching of Ecclesiastes to all.

5.2.3 UNFORTUNATE EVENTS AND UNDESERVED SUFFERING

The problems of undeserved suffering and unexpected death are noted realities in Ecclesiastes, with several passages indicating the sense of perplexity and frustration, even to the point of reflecting on the sense of meaninglessness when such an anomaly applies to the righteous. It is thus not surprising for several biblical scholars to conclude that Qoheleth abandoned the elders' conviction concerning righteous, if not his faith in God. Although the presence of undeserved suffering can be explained in light of the 'action with built-in consequences' phenomenon against the backdrop of the reality of uncertainties, the presence of undeserved suffering for those who are righteous challenges one's sense of meaning and views about life. In fact, several studies show that traumatic

events in a person's life change one's views in this respect.⁷⁹⁵ These "moments of change"⁷⁹⁶ challenge and may paralyse one's beliefs or philosophy, or in the words of Thompson and Janigian, "challenge parts of the life scheme, disrupting one's sense of order and/or purpose."⁷⁹⁷ It seems that when the reliability of a framework expressing views on life is unsettled, one may seek to find stability through a process of improving or discarding part of the framework, so that control, order and purpose can be restored. Interestingly, this process took place in the RPs when painful experiences (e.g. RP6) and crises of meaning (e.g. RP1) spurred their search for a worthwhile purpose. Furthermore, as shown in the empirical findings report, it led to discarding or improving the framework, which reflected an attempt to improve the quality or the ability of the framework to explain and interpret experiences in life, in order to see and experience coherence. This may indicate, as several existing studies have argued, an attempt to learn a lesson by way of attaching meaning to an event in order to remove negative experiences, facilitate successful coping⁷⁹⁸ and to improve an existing framework for life. Considering the potency of a traumatic event in altering one's life framework, empirical data on the RPs suggest that through their painful experiences they had arrived at and found a viewpoint and a worthwhile purpose that had enabled them to see the reasons behind and explain their painful experiences. Building on the analysis associating their worthwhile purpose of life with the injunction to 'fear God and keep His commandments' indicates that the quality of the worthwhile purpose of life, as advocated by Ecclesiastes, provides order, direction and a sense of coherence, even in the face of anomalies. When one is able to explain and derive reason from the experience in the light of one's life as a whole, and

⁷⁹⁵ Maddi, "The Existential Neurosis," 311-325; Debats, "Experiences of Meaning in Life," 395; "Sources of Meaning," 30-57; "Measurement of Personal Meaning: The Psychometric Properties of the Life Regard Index," 237-259.

⁷⁹⁶ Debats, "Experiences of Meaning in Life," 371-372. Also, Kobasa, Maddi and Kahn, "Hardiness and health," 168-177.

⁷⁹⁷ Thompson and Janigian "Life Schemes," 260-280.

⁷⁹⁸ Le & Doukas, "Making Meaning of Turning Points in Life Review: Values, Wisdom, and Life Satisfaction," 358-375. See also, Butler, "The life review" 7-10; Also, McAdams, "When Bad Things Turn Good and Good Things Turn Bad," 474-485.

see it as being consistent with the purpose of existence, it brings about a more wholesome meaning and, eventually, a way of coping effectively.

Intriguingly, and considering that painful experiences (RP6, RP9) and crises of meaning (RP1 and RP11) actually encouraged the RPs to search for a worthwhile purpose, this notion corroborates Ecclesiastes' teaching, which stressed that God works, even through undeserved suffering, so that people will fear Him (3:14c), since the search results in living out the Golden Rule. Even with the RPs experiencing undeserving suffering in the midst of living out the Golden Rule, such painful occurrences strengthened their resolution and prompted their insistence on seeking God or holding on to the teaching of Dharma, which eventually enabled them to continue to practice the Golden Rule. More fascinatingly, further analysis on the relationship between the worthwhile purpose of life and confidence in coping successfully with a future painful event – and even the possibility of death – revealed that a primary factor for such confidence lies in the fact that the RPs live their life to the full and with no regret and expect nothing more in return. Consequently, this provides further evidence that in addition to seeing anomalies in life as a time to fear God and keep His commandments without expecting anything in return, one who actually does this lives life to the full and is more likely not to expect anything in return. Perhaps this is the reason for confidence and a sense of coherence in life, even when one's internal and external environments are unpredictable, and when one has no control over events in life or, put bluntly, when everything can be הבל in the immediate sense.

The ability to maintain a sense of purpose and to see how the current situation may cohere with the worthwhile purpose of life has proven to be the requisite factor that enables one to see the meaning of life. Especially in the case of undeserved suffering, the ability to make sense of such events – and thus to see coherence – is glaringly needed even more. What we have seen is that the RPs felt that a purpose in life has enabled them to give reasons for past and present painful experiences, while it has also helped them to cope with future unexpected events, such as a readiness to face death. This view of life and the worthwhile purpose thereof, which is essentially consistent with the injunction to

‘fear God and keep His commandments’, is the determining factor leading to the ability to see coherence in life and to experience a comprehensive sense of enjoyment and satisfaction.

5.2.4 MEANINGFULNESS AND THE CONCEPT OF ENJOYMENT

Empirical data on the nature of meaningfulness are consistent for all RPs, in that the superior quality of meaningfulness is associated with a clearer sense of direction and priorities, and as a result experiencing a more balanced, satisfying, fulfilling, happy and contented life, which is similar to the enjoyment exhorted in Ecclesiastes. The description fits existing studies where meaningfulness is associated with fulfillment,⁷⁹⁹ satisfaction,⁸⁰⁰ self-actualisation,⁸⁰¹ the non-alienation of human relationships⁸⁰² and happiness.⁸⁰³ My investigation went on to show there are experiential differences between meaningfulness *in* life and the meaning *of* life, where the latter registers a more wholesome and higher quality of meaningfulness which comes about as a by-product of living the worthwhile purpose of life and aligning all activities with this view. This sense of meaningfulness, which is essentially about “the qualities of his or her [one’s] inner experience,”⁸⁰⁴ is similar to what Yalom noted as the outcome of no longer being in the stage of existential isolation but instead engaging with oneself, the world and the surrounding community.⁸⁰⁵ Yet, as the empirical evidence indicates, the worthwhile

⁷⁹⁹ Yalom, *Existential Psychotherapy*, 23.

⁸⁰⁰ For instance, research by Peterson, Park and Seligman, “Orientations to Happiness and Life Satisfaction,” 25-41. Also, Steger and Kashdan, “Stability and Specificity of Meaning in Life,” 161–179.

⁸⁰¹ Abraham Maslow, *Motivation and Personality* (New York, NY: Harper, 1954).

⁸⁰² Yalom, *Existential Psychotherapy*, 355-447.

⁸⁰³ For instance, the research from Johan Brännmark, “Leading Lives: On Happiness And Narrative Meaning,” 321-343.

⁸⁰⁴ Eric Klinger, *Meaning and Void: Inner Experience and The Incentives in People’s Lives* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1978), 10.

⁸⁰⁵ Yalom, *Existential Psychotherapy*, 355, 478-483. Similarly, see Debats, Drost and Hansen “Experiences of Meaning in Life,” 359-375.

purpose of life defines and identifies relationships between every aspects of life, thus seeing a logical, consistent and meaningful relationship between the person's roles and events and therefore in the light of existence. Hence, such experience is only possible because it is underpinned by having a view of life that gives reason to the worthwhile purpose and coherence. Since the RPs' worthwhile purpose of life, which has brought about coherence, is essentially an expression of 'fearing God and keeping His commandments', it is clear that living by the maxim advocated by Ecclesiastes brings about qualitatively superior meaningfulness and hence true enjoyment of life.

A key attitude to life stemming from fearing God is being carefree and having the freedom to do the things that please the heart. Empirical findings show that meaningfulness is linked with carefreeness (3:12-13; 5:17-19 [5:18-20]) and follows "the impulse of the heart and the desires of the eyes" (11:9) expressed in the way RPs engage in things they aspire to do (but consistent with their worthwhile purpose of life). Furthermore, they have learnt to enjoy what is *really* before their eyes, namely spouses (family), the fruits of their labour and food and drink (9:7-10). As observed in the empirical data, meaningfulness was felt when they found their activities were good, which was consistent with their reason for existing. Clearly, when one has a more worthwhile and wholesome sense of purposefulness, which can at the same time enable one to see the reason for existing and how activities in life can be consistent and cohere with the view of life, it will result in superior meaningfulness. Hence, as astonishing as it may appear to be, the empirical evidence affirms enjoyment of life as an answer to the apparent meaninglessness of life by way of living harmoniously with a worthwhile purpose and experiencing coherence.

The presence of qualitative differences between the senses of meaningfulness is found in Ecclesiastes, in particular the distinction between the experiences of pleasure, found in 2:1-11, and the pleasure that satisfies, present in 2:24-26 and other passages on enjoyment. As noted in my earlier analysis in Chapter Two, although the two expressions of pleasure and activities are essentially the same, they are set apart by the quality of

‘satisfaction’ and ‘wholesomeness’, whereby the pleasure posited in 2:24-24 is enjoyable because it satisfies. In other words, the distinction between the qualities of ‘pleasure’ deriving from the two different purposes in life comes to the fore when one lives by ‘fearing God and keeping His commandments’. The striking resemblances between the characteristics of meaningfulness expressed in the empirical data and the ‘exhortation to enjoyment’ passages in Ecclesiastes demonstrate that the meaningfulness of life is associated with contentment and satisfaction derived from food, drink, work, family and personal life. This wholesome and all-encompassing sense of satisfaction undoubtedly negates the claim and interpretation associating the call for enjoyment in Ecclesiastes with indulgences of the epicurean kind, as understood by a number of interpreters. Enjoyment demands bold acceptance and lives harmoniously with the realities of death and uncertainty, as opposed to escapism and self-pity, the joint impetuses for indulgence. Hence, a fitting and sensible way to live is to be carefree and enjoy a contented life, to rejoice and to appreciate the simple necessities such as food, drink, relationships and work. Moreover, it is the outcome of living consistently with the worthwhile purpose of life. In this case, meaningfulness becomes an outcome of living harmoniously, resulting in an attitude of carefreeness and enjoying the freedom within the boundary of fearing God, to pursue activities that are pleasing to the eyes and heart. Nevertheless, whilst such meaningfulness permeates all spheres of life, the feeling is not an unchanged constant, as unpleasant experiences and challenges remain part of one’s existence. Furthermore, such enjoyment does not negate or ignore the presence of unpleasant experiences, but it can be accepted as an inescapable feature⁸⁰⁶ whereby if one lives by the sweat of their brow, one can still savour moments of sweet respite and be satisfied and contented by the fruit of their labours.⁸⁰⁷

⁸⁰⁶ Lee, *Vitality of Enjoyment*, 61.

⁸⁰⁷ Ibid., 61.

5.2.5 SUMMARY

The core component in the reconstructed theology is the emphasis and distinctiveness of the worthwhile purpose of life, which derives from the dynamic and interrelated relationship between the themes of *הבל*, enjoyment and undeserved suffering and the call to fear God. The theme of *הבל* is built upon the realities of the certainty of death and uncertainties in life, implying the possibility of anomalies and the certainty that human labour will eventually bear no ultimate profit. Hence, the coherence in life sought in Ecclesiastes is about making sense of life or a particular event in the light of these realities, even when one has no control over things to come. Since God moulds these realities in such a way that humans will fear Him, it suggests that the human need for coherence can be linked to this intention. In addition, Ecclesiastes teaches that the sensible way to live, when everything is *הבל*, is to enjoy the fruits of one's labour while one is still able to do so. However, since enjoyment is only possible by the grace of God, it motivates one to fear God and keep His commandments, aptly summarised in the injunction expressed in 12:13b-14. In the event that when one experiences an anomaly, Ecclesiastes encourages one to fear God without expecting anything in return. Therefore, considering the constellated relationship among these crucial themes in Ecclesiastes, coherence in life as taught in Ecclesiastes emphasises 'fearing God and keeping His commandments' as a point of reference and as a basis from which the constellated relationships are defined, as well as how one ought to live harmoniously with the created order and the purpose of realities.

As shown in this chapter, the empirical findings observe a similar clustering of themes, in that living consistently with a worthwhile purpose of life gives one a sense of purposefulness and the ability to find coherence, from which meaningfulness is the natural outcome. In fact, the comparison between and analysis of the biblical and empirical data shows a good amount of consistency between the two frameworks and their components in relation to their respective dynamic relationships essential for knowing the meaning of life and experiencing meaningfulness. It therefore shows the viability, relevancy and potentiality of the reconstructed framework of the theology of the

meaning of life, as it corresponds with the experiences of people representing different circumstances and religious stance. The worthwhile purpose of life propounded by Ecclesiastes is confirmed as the reference point through which one integrates realities and puts every aspect of life, including attitudes and behaviours, into perspective – and thus experiences meaningfulness of life. Since this is observable in those adhering to a religious stance, it actually confirms the practicality, reliability and relevance of the teaching of Ecclesiastes to all humans. Accordingly, to ‘fear God and keep His commandments’ not only serves as worthwhile purpose for everyone, but it is also pivotal to one’s ability to find coherence, and thus it enables one to experience meaningfulness in its fullest sense. Consequently, the comprehensive quality of the worthwhile purpose of life offered in Ecclesiastes has been proven to give a qualitatively superior sense of meaningfulness compared to that from just having a worthwhile purpose or experiencing coherence alone.

Putting these within the context of humans search for the meaning of life, the theology teaches that humans should live consistently with the very purpose of existence expressed in 12:13b-14, which includes living wisely and carefully and cherishing the food, people and work available to them. Any search for the meaning of life cannot begin with a quest for or the pursuit of temporal things or happiness, and neither is such an experience possible in the absence of a realistic view about life in the midst of the certainty of death and uncertainties in life. The entry point should be the decision to be what being human is all about and to recognise the intended purpose of the certainty of death and uncertainties in life, namely that one should fear God and keep His commandments.

5.3 THE THEOLOGY OF THE MEANING OF LIFE:

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings from the empirical study, and its corroboration of the biblical theology of the meaning of life based on the book of Ecclesiastes, have noteworthy implications for theological reflection. To begin with, the corroboration substantiates the validity of the theological framework and the building blocks crucial to experiencing meaningfulness.

More pertinently, it validates the reliability and practicality of the distinctive concepts of the worthwhile purpose of life as well as coherence in life, propounded by the book of Ecclesiastes as the source of meaning to humans and superior quality meaningfulness. Evidently, this corroboration enriches the study by filling the “experiential” gap in the theology, showing that the 12:13b-14 as the worthwhile purpose of life can be expressed through various purposes consistent with the altruistic nature of the Golden Rule, and that by so doing it is sufficient to bring about qualitatively superior meaningfulness. Intriguingly, this can be expressed effectively through the platform of one’s work through which one not only finds purpose in the light of one’s purpose of existence, but it also engenders purpose for toiling even within the framework of the certainty of הבל. This is of course on top of the benefits of toiling, such as food and drink, which form the basic necessities of life. This new-found purpose of work can lead to the reprioritisation of various roles, often resulting in better quality time with the family and healthier emotional wellbeing. This therefore sheds light on what it means when one is able to “say to himself that labour is good,” in addition to drinking and eating the fruits of one’s labour, found in the passages in Ecclesiastes exhorting enjoyment. Indeed, when work and the fruits of labour are put into the right perspective in light of the worthwhile purpose of life, one can truly say to oneself that labour is good (2:24).

Living out the Golden Rule can be expressed through the contributions and the benefits of the temporal things accumulated prior to one’s discovery of the purpose of life. This suggests that temporal things cannot be meaningless when they are viewed from the right perspective and are placed in relation to the worthwhile purpose of life. In fact, they become the means to fulfilling the demand of the injunction to fear God and keep His commandments. In hindsight, this sustains the description in the enjoyment passages found in Ecclesiastes affirming the role of wealth and labour (when these are placed in a proper perspective) to meaningfulness of life. Equating הבל as meaningless may be refuted (at least from the empirical evidence) when it comes to describing temporal things. Therefore, whilst the worthwhile purpose is a pivotal factor in meaning and meaningfulness, other factors, such as wealth and a sense of freedom, can play a contributory and yet sufficiently crucial role in the experience of meaningfulness.

Here lie significant theological implications for reflection. Considering 12:13b-14 from the theological framework, the meaning of life is found through the awareness of one's purpose in existence and the worthwhile purpose of life. Accordingly, the meaning of life and the meaningfulness of life are possible with or without the availability of wealth as a supportive means to an end. Notably, the teaching of Qoheleth links enjoyment with wealth, with the notion that wealth is a blessing from God and can be useful to one's enjoyment. When there is an absence of enjoyment, it is traced and directed to covetousness. Unsurprisingly, Qoheleth exhorted, "He that love silver shall not be satisfied with silver; nor he that love abundance with increase: this is also profitless" (5:10). Therefore, the command to fear God and keep his commandments is also a call against covetousness and a move toward embracing a healthy perspective and the use of wealth. Certainly, covetousness can be found in a person with or without financial wealth, thereby indicating that one's covetousness can be a cause of non-enjoyment regardless of the status of one's wealth. Hence, consistent with 12:13b-14, the meaning of life and meaningfulness of life can be experienced with and without the aid of financial freedom. Furthermore, the possibility that one may lose everything when one is still alive indicates that meaningfulness can indeed be found apart from the presence of wealth and the sense of freedom derived therefrom. This idea is stressed as the key message in the passages on undeserved suffering exhorting one to simply fear God for nothing in return. Such exhortation demands an appropriate knowledge and focus on God as one who works everything in order that humans will fear Him. Consequently, to observe the injunction as intended by Qoheleth, and so being able to find meaning and experience meaningfulness *in all circumstances*, one needs to have knowledge of who God is and thus understand that He is the primarily the source and giver of meaning and meaningfulness. Therefore, even though 12:13b-14 points one to the purpose of existence and the worthwhile purpose of life, it is ultimately undergirded by one's belief in who God is and the conviction that it is worthwhile obeying Him.

The issue resonates with the teaching of Jesus Christ in the New Testament, especially in relation to those looking for meaning beyond their riches and wealth. In one of Jesus Christ's teachings, recorded in Matthew 6:25-34, one's basic needs will be met when one

seeks the Kingdom of God and His righteousness. This adds a dimension to the issue whereby Jesus Christ addresses and resolves the need for the sense of “freedom,” presumably derived only from financial freedom. In fact, it seems that those who seek God’s Kingdom and His righteousness should be free from the concerns that their needs may not be met. In another text, found in Luke 18:18-25, it was recorded that Jesus Christ directed one from just (supposedly) fulfilling the commandments to Himself. The text recorded a rich young ruler asking Jesus Christ *what else* would be required of him to inherit eternal life, since he (or so he thought) had fulfilled the requirement of all the commandments, including the tenth on covetousness. To his dismay, unfortunately, he was instructed to sell all his property so that he could follow the Lord. Christ’s request can be interpreted as a test for the rich young ruler (which he failed) on the issue of covetousness.⁸⁰⁸ In this regard Cook notes,

Jesus then told the man one other thing he needed to do: he needed to follow Jesus, and in order to do that he had to give the money from his possessions to the poor. This action would touch on the 10th commandment against coveting... it was at the point that the man faltered.⁸⁰⁹

Nevertheless, the text does suggest the need for him to make a choice between keeping his wealth and following Jesus, which has naturally presumed choosing the latter as the better option. Evidently, the rich young ruler was caught with the quest for eternal life within the context of his wealth. Although he was seeking eternal life, wealth was still his worthwhile purpose. The interaction between Jesus Christ and the rich young ruler revealed the fact that the latter was caught in the bosom of financial freedom and was unable to trust Jesus Christ enough and hence not persuaded to abandon all that he had. Considering this in the context of this corroborated investigation, there is indeed a close connection between meaningfulness of life and financial independence and the luxury of choice. In this case, the meaning of life is sought beyond, but is still essentially to be

⁸⁰⁸ David C. Cook, *Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures by Dallas Seminary Faculties, New Testament edition*, Eds. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Colorado Springs, David C. Cook, 1983), 249-250.

⁸⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 249.

found through the presence of financial wealth. This is certainly accommodated within 12:13b-14, as, unlike the rich young ruler but like the biblical Job, one can be wealthy without being covetous. Nevertheless, it is worth pursuing whether there would be a possible change in meaningfulness when there is a change in the commitment to God and others within the context of 12:13b-14. Consider a change in commitment to the extent that Drummond wrote:

To love with agape means is to [be] willing to sacrifice all things – possessions and self-for the benefit of the one who is loved-regardless the character or worthiness of the one who is loved, and regardless of difficult and changing circumstances and situations.⁸¹⁰

If Drummond's statement represents a more sacrificial expression of the Golden Rule, would one register a higher level of meaningfulness if one's practice of the Golden Rule, for some reason, required one to give away completely instead of just sharing financial wealth? The investigation has shown that there is one group of RPs who, although already experiencing meaningfulness, looked forward to the time when they are able to give their life fully to their religion, thereby fulfilling the Golden Rule more sacrificially. Although they were already practicing the Golden Rule in more ways than just sharing their wealth or being a philanthropist, their desire was to indicate that by giving themselves fully to their religion and the work of helping others, they would experience a higher quality of meaningfulness. This suggests that a change in the level of commitment within the context of 12:13b-14 may indeed change the level of meaningfulness.

The discussion above suggests that the meaningfulness of life may not be an unchanging state in one's life. There is a possibility that one's meaningfulness may be adjusted, should there be an adjustment in the expression and practice of the Golden Rule. Furthermore, one's sense of meaningfulness may be enhanced depending on one's interpretation of reality from which one finds the purpose and significance of existence. In light of this notion, even when one claims to have found and experienced the

⁸¹⁰ Henry Drummond, *The Greatest Thing in the World Classic Love*, ed. Harold J. Chadwick (Gainesville, Florida: Bridge-Logos Publishers; updated ed. Edition, January 1, 1999), 82.

meaningfulness of life, it is most likely their experience represents only a part of the overall concept of fearing God and keeping his commandments, which means that one's journey to meaningfulness is an ongoing and unfinished journey of discovery.

Evidently, the theological framework, with its distinctive concepts of the worthwhile purpose of life and coherence, has been found to be theologically coherent and experientially relevant. Moreover, the discussion has shed light on the essence and potentiality of 12:13b-14 as the source of meaning and meaningfulness. In addition, considering the context of Ecclesiastes, even when work and life itself can be seen as הבל, one can still find meaning from temporal things when these are put in place within the context of 12:13b-14. As the exegetical and the empirical investigations have shown, this practice has indeed brought about a superior sense of meaningfulness, thereby also confirming that enjoyment is a by-product, a gift from God for those who fear Him.

5.4 RESEARCH LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES

This research has constructed and shown an empirically corroborated biblical theology of the meaning of life, based on the book of Ecclesiastes. Due to the subjectivity and complexity of the subject, the research and discussion are limited to the components of a worthwhile purpose and coherence, although these two factors represent the core elements the subject matter, and studies on these factors alone have been shown to be reliable. Future research may build upon this reconstructed theology by incorporating a more comprehensive investigation and discussion on the factors or solutions proposed by different fields and religions.

Furthermore, since the quality of meaningfulness of life correlates with the quality of one's view of life, which has also been shown to be subsumed by religious framework, it could be beneficial to investigate and compare frameworks offered by different religions and to consider its implications to meaningfulness. Even within Christianity itself, this reconstructed theology could be helpful for investigations seeking to incorporate the

theology with the teachings in the New Testament, which appeared to advocate that undeserved suffering for Jesus Christ is crucial to meaning and meaningfulness of life.⁸¹¹

A similar limitation is also noted in the discussion on the teaching of Ecclesiastes. This investigation primarily concerns the reconstruction of a theological framework from the themes found in the book in its entirety, i.e. the nature and the function of the themes in light of 3:14c and the injunction found in 12:13b-14. Thus, there was less focus on producing a more comprehensive analysis and interpretation of every passage in the book. Nevertheless, the integration of the biblical and empirical approaches on a same subject matter has shown that this integration sheds light to, or explains what is otherwise silent or assumed in the selected passage for analysis, themes and their constellated relationship. As demonstrated earlier, empirical evidence actually explains and enriches one's understanding on what it means and what it takes to have the ability to say to oneself that labour is good, and what it is to not expect anything in return in the midst of a painful event. Since this reconstructed theology has proven to be consistent with the experiences of real people, it offers an avenue and a means to improve the religious lives of Christian communities, especially in helping them to understand the meaning of life, and to experience meaningfulness in life.

Related to this is the possibility to build upon this theology of the meaning of life in practical approaches in daily life. An example of this would be in the medical field, as clinical treatment for those who lack meaning in life. Such possibilities and their applications – although yet to be researched or untested – offer promising possibilities and alternatives to existing treatments, which are thus far undergirded by assumptions foreign to Ecclesiastes.

Due to the nature of the qualitative study approach, the reliability and credibility of the study are in proportion with the skill and the objectivity of the researcher. Limitations associated with the methodology were discussed in Chapter Three. Nevertheless, in relation to the nature of this methodology, in that it requires an in-depth study of every unit of analysis, only a small number of cases could be studied and analysed. Accordingly,

⁸¹¹ A number of scholars linked the reading of Ecclesiastes with the teaching of Jesus Christ. See Douglas Sean O'Donnell, *Ecclesiastes*, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing 2014); Limburg, *Encountering Ecclesiastes*.

although the findings have answered the research questions and have shown that the theology of the meaning of life can account for human experience, it can still be argued that they account only for the number of cases in this particular investigation, though of course this is actually sufficient for this research. It can only show that human experiences can be consistent with the theology of the meaning of life based on the teaching of Ecclesiastes, and that from any pattern expressing the thematic correlations of every case we can infer that the findings do represent a larger part of the population in Malaysia sharing similar views to those of the research sample. A more comprehensive future study may include research participants who have found the meaning of life but are unmarried, or those who have not experienced financial freedom. It could even be extended to people outside Malaysia, from other races and other countries.

5.5 CONCLUSION

This investigation has filled the gap in the absence of a study on the theology of the meaning of life based on the book of Ecclesiastes, and it has shown that the book teaches distinctive concepts of the worthwhile purpose of life as well as that of coherence in life, both of which enable one to experience meaningfulness. In addition, although empirical research investigating the question on *the meaning of life* is generally considered to be “out of reach of modern objectivistic scientific methodology,”⁸¹² and few people expect that the meaning of life can actually be found;⁸¹³ nonetheless, the findings have shown that the subject can be investigated and proven to exist. More importantly, empirical evidence affirms the validity and viability of the theology of the meaning of life framework developed from the book of Ecclesiastes, thus confirming the function of the view of life, its conceptual distinctiveness of the worthwhile purpose of life and coherence in life, as well as their relation to meaningfulness.

⁸¹² Debats, Drost and Hansen, “Experiences of Meaning in Life,” 86, 359-375.

⁸¹³ Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis*, 215-216.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1

Invitation Letter

Date

Dear Potential Research Participant,

Re: Chinese Malaysian Businessperson and Meaning in Life.

I wish to invite you to participate in a research project on Malaysian business people and meaning in life. This project forms the second part of my doctoral dissertation sponsored by Bangor University, United Kingdom.

You are invited to participate because you fulfil the following criteria:

- A. You are married.
- B. You have gone through unfortunate experiences in life. This may include the loss of loved ones, setbacks in business, illness etc.
- C. You are a business-owner or a director of a business organization.

Your participation is voluntary. *Please read the Participant Information Sheet to see if you wish to participate.* While I would be grateful to have you participate I respect your right to decline. Even when you have decided to participate, you have the right to withdraw from the project by informing me through email at singuant@gmail.com or phone at 60123965477 at any point without giving a reason.

If you do wish to participate, kindly fill in the attached Participant Consent Form and complete the MLQ. Please return the completed documents to me at this email address: singuant@gmail.com

Thank you.

Best Wishes,

Tan Sin Guan

(No: 500198401)

APPENDIX 2
PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET
RESEARCH PROJECT

Dissertation Title:

The Empirically Corroborated Theology of the Meaning of Life in Ecclesiastes:
A Biblical and Empirical Analysis with Reference to Malaysian Business people.

1. What is this project and who is conducting it?

This project is part of my doctoral dissertation sponsored by Bangor University, United Kingdom. The purpose of the dissertation is to study the teaching (theology) of Ecclesiastes on the meaning of life and relate it to real life experiences today. The book of Ecclesiastes is an ancient wisdom literature that teaches one how to live life meaningfully.

I have examined the teaching of the book of Ecclesiastes on the meaning of life. This project, which forms the second part of my dissertation, seeks to understand how Chinese Malaysian business people's real life experiences can help us better understand the teaching of Ecclesiastes on the meaning of life.

2. Why have I been asked to participate and do I have to take part?

You are invited to participate because you fulfilled the criteria mentioned in the Letter of Invitation. Your participation is voluntary. You have the right to decline or withdraw from the project by informing me through email at singuant@gmail.com or phone at 60123965477 at any point of the project without giving a reason.

3. What does this study involve and what do I have to do?

This project will come in two stages. The first is to have you completing the *Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ)*. The *MLQ* is a 10-item measure of the Presence of Meaning in Life and the Search for Meaning in Life. The completed questionnaire will be evaluated. I may upon evaluating it invite you for the second stage. You may decide to end your involvement at this stage. The *MLQ* is attached.

The second stage involves an in-depth interview. The purpose of the interview is to understand your life experiences with respect to the meaning of life, in terms of your business, family, leisure and painful experiences. The interview will be digitally recorded and will take approximately one and a half hours (1 ½ hours). The designated place for the interview can be determined by your good self. In order to ensure accuracy of the interviewed data, I will send the interview transcript to you for verification. Data will be analyzed in Malaysia. Data may also be transferred to United Kingdom for further analysis and writing up of dissertation.

4. What is the benefit of the study?

Your contribution, along with the contributions from other business people will be analyzed, explained and compiled. In addition to fulfilling my dissertation requirement, your contribution may go a long way into guiding future generations to experience the meaning of life.

5. Who will have access to the information discussed in the interview?

The computer engaged in this project will be password-protected. Information in the form of digital audio recordings and field notes will be secured in a storage cabinet. The key to the storage cabinet is accessible only to me. The information is accessible only to me and the research supervisors. All field notes and data (apart from what is printed in the dissertation) will be deleted and destroyed after the completion of the research. Your identity will be absolutely confidential.

6. What if I require further information?

If you wish to discuss any aspect of this project please feel free to contact me via my email address at singuant@gmail.com or my mobile contact at 6012-3965477. I will be happy to discuss any aspect of the project with you.

This information sheet is for you to keep.

APPENDIX 3



Bangor University's 'Code of Practice for the Assurance of Academic
Quality and Standards of Research Programmes' (Code 03)
<https://www.bangor.ac.uk/ar/main/regulations/home.htm>

COLLEGE OF ARTS & HUMANITIES

Participant Consent Form

Researcher's nameTan Sin Guan.....

The researcher named above has briefed me to my satisfaction on the research for which I have volunteered. I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the research at any point. I also understand that my rights to anonymity and confidentiality will be respected.

I agree to having the interview/discussion recorded. (delete if not relevant)

Signature of participant

Date

This form will be produced in duplicate. One copy should be retained by the participant and the other by the researcher.

APPENDIX 4

Meaning in Life Questionnaire

Please take a moment to think about what makes your life feel important to you. Please respond to the following statements as truthfully and accurately as you can, and also please remember that these are very subjective questions and that there are no right or wrong answers. Please answer according to the scale below:

Absolutely Untrue	Mostly Untrue	Somewhat Untrue	Can't Say True or False	Somewh at True	Mostly True	Absolutely True
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

1. _____ I understand my life's meaning.
2. _____ I am looking for something that makes my life feel meaningful.
3. _____ I am always looking to find my life's purpose.
4. _____ My life has a clear sense of purpose.
5. _____ I have a good sense of what makes my life meaningful.
6. _____ I have discovered a satisfying life purpose.
7. _____ I am always searching for something that makes my life feel significant.
8. _____ I am seeking a purpose or mission for my life.
9. _____ My life has no clear purpose.
10. _____ I am searching for meaning in my life.

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APPENDIX 5

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

A. Research Participant's Background

(The purpose of this section is to gain insights on the participant's work, family and personal life)

1. Can you briefly share with me the nature of your business (or businesses)?
2. Which of these is your primary business (if the participant has several businesses)?
3. What are your roles and functions in this company?
4. Are your spouse and children helping you in your business (or businesses)?
5. In terms of percentage, how much of your time in a year is spent with your family?
6. How do you manage your role (as a father / husband or mother/wife)?
7. How do you remain emotionally and physically vigorous for the responsibilities above?
8. Are you satisfied with the present state of your life? Why?
9. Are you comfortable with the questions asked so far? Can we proceed to the next section?

B. The Meaning of Life and the Worthwhile Purpose of Life

(The purpose of this section is to understand how the participant arrived at the worthwhile purpose of life, if any. This section also seeks to comprehend the ways the presence of a worthwhile purpose could lead to meaningfulness of life)

1. Your MLQ score indicates that you have discovered a satisfying life purpose. Can you tell me what the satisfying purpose is? (Possible follow-up question: can you describe further what do you mean by ...)
2. When did you discover it?
3. What was your purpose (or purposes) in life prior to this?
4. How did you arrive at your earlier purpose (or purposes) in life?

5. Did you consider your life meaningful then? Why?
6. Please describe how the previous life purpose has shaped your life.
7. Tell me the story of events that led to the change to your present purpose in life.
8. Why was this change necessary?
9. What is the difference between the old and the new purposes in life?
10. Do you think your life is more meaningful now? Why?
11. Have you discarded altogether your previous purpose (or purposes) in life? If you have not, why. If you have, why?
12. Do you consider that your present purpose of life is the ultimate purpose of your life?
 - D. If 'yes', why?
 - E. If 'no', what is the ultimate purpose of your life? Why?
 - F. If you are unsure, what an ultimate purpose should look like; why?
13. Are you comfortable with the questions asked so far? Can we proceed to the next section?

C. Unfortunate Events and the Worthwhile Purpose.

(The purpose of this section is to understand how the participant copes with unfortunate events in life. And in what ways the life purpose offers meaning to painful experiences, if any)

1. We shall talk about unfortunate experiences in your life.
 - a. Please tell me two or three unfortunate experiences in your life. These unfortunate experiences may include illnesses, setbacks in businesses and relationship and the loss of love ones etc.
 - b. These events took place before or after you discovered your present purpose of life?
 - c. How did you cope with these experiences? (Alternatively, how differently have you coped with the first, second and / or third painful experience?)

- d. What insights have you gained from each of these experiences?
- 2. We shall be a little speculative now. If you had another round of unfortunate experience in life. How would you cope differently?
- 3. We shall now consider the reality of death. In what ways would the reality of death undermine the present purpose of your life?
- 4. Are you comfortable with the questions asked so far? Can we proceed to the final section?

D. The Worthwhile Purpose, Work and Family.

(The purpose of this section is to understand how the life purpose is expressed in work, family and personal life)

- 1. How has your present life purpose affected the way you work? Could you give one recent example / decision you have made?
- 2. How has your present life purpose shaped your relationship with your family members? Could you give one recent example?
- 3. Can you describe the relationship between your present life purpose and the meaning in your life?

Appendix 6

Research Ethics application - Tan

L.C.Jones <els042@bangor.ac.uk>
To: Sin Guan Tan <singuant@gmail.com>

Fri, Oct 19, 2012 at 11:49 PM

Dear Sin Guan Tan,

I am happy to report that your project 'The Theology of the Meaning of Life in Ecclesiastes: A Biblical and Empirical Analysis with Reference to Chinese Malaysian Business people' has now received ethical approval from the College of Arts and Humanities Ethics committee.

All good wishes,

Linda

—

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Sin Guan Tan wrote:

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