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A SECOND LOOK AT AMAL IN QOHELETH

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In my previous article on Ecclesiastes¹ I had accepted the interpretation of C. H. Gordon regarding the Hebrew word עָמַל as "profit," like the Akkadian *nēmelu* from the same root.² This had always left me with an uneasy feeling about the flavor which this translation would give to Qoheleth's oft-repeated injunction that we must enjoy our עָמַל.³ J. G. Genung urged the point that Qoheleth was advising us to "enjoy our labor."⁴ This view in itself is far nobler than a bland Philistinism which sees the world's greatest pleasure in the enjoyment of "profit."

It was a passing remark by Dr. Shemuel Abramsky during a seminar conducted by Professor Benjamin Mazar of the Hebrew University which finally brought me back to Genung's interpretation. Dr. Abramsky mentioned that in Eccl. 4:4 עָמַל stands in parallelism with כְּשָׂרוֹן הַמְּעֵשֶׂה, "skill in work." In other words, this term for "toil," עָמַל, can be used as a synonym for "skill."

¹ "A Study of Ecclesiastes," *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY*, XXXV (March 1964), 148—157.

² C. H. Gordon, "North Israelite Influence on Post-exilic Hebrew," *Israel Exploration Journal*, V (1955), 87, cited by Rainey, p. 150.

³ Eccl. 2:24, *et al.*

⁴ *Words of Kobeleth* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin and Co., 1904), whose viewpoint is strongly reflected in the article cited in note 1 above.

We can translate it idiomatically as "trade" (profession).

When we apply this meaning to Eccl. 2:18-21, we find it makes perfect sense.

I hated all my *trade* in which I toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me; and who knows if he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will be the master of my *trade* which I toiled at and which I practiced so wisely under the sun. This also is vanity. So I turned and gave up my heart to despair over my whole *trade* that I toiled at under the sun. For there is a man whose trade involved wisdom and knowledge and skill, yet to a man who has not toiled at it he will bequeath all he has.

The passage thus reflects the age-old practice of keeping the family trade or profession alive by passing it on from father to son. It is not only the material possessions that the man will leave for his heir; it is something more precious, his priceless skills that he learned from his forbears and perfected through a lifetime of toil. So we return to Genung's interpretation of Qoheleth that the greatest good in life is to find one's enjoyment in the practice of one's profession, in the use of one's God-given talents and skills. Qoheleth's message becomes relevant in a very vital sense to every human being.

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