

## **Chapter Five: Israel's Experience of the Fall – Cyclical Work Outside the Perfect Garden**

Does this mean that Israel is to be imitated as a rural society to receive divine blessing? I suggest not. Israel was not just a rural civilization from which we can extract so-called godly principles for another rural civilization or its work. Rather, national Israel was a temporary institution into which God wove painful tensions and ambiguities not resolved during its pre-Messianic period. For various reasons, but this being one of them, Israel is not to be duplicated. The following analysis will demonstrate this.

By far the most negative appraisal of Israel's land settlement is found in the indissoluble thematic link between land, blood, sons, and curse, the motifs of the genealogy of the heavens and the earth. In Genesis, the slaying of animals when Adam and Eve were exiled from the land of Eden signified (i) the strange consequence of humanity's sin being related to bloodshed (the first blood being shed), (ii) protection during that exile described as being covered by innocent animals, and (iii) a foreshadowing of how humanity would one day return to paradise (innocent blood will one day be shed for humanity to return). Adam, Eve, and all humanity were thus in exile from the land of Eden with strange tensions inserted into the relationship between humanity and the land. The tensions deepened with Cain's murder of Abel. Cain heightened the association between blood, land, and curse. Abel's blood cried out to God from the land and made it impossible for Cain to settle. Cain linked the face of the land with the face of God (Gen.4:14) describing his alienation from one by his alienation from the other. This episode identifies the general problem between humanity and the land and suggests that land ownership is a specific theological difficulty; how could any human community settle in a land when bloodshed occurs on it, as it invariably does?

Moses was given the answer: Atonement. Atonement was not just something that affected the relationship between Israel and God, but also the land on which the nation dwelled. God dramatized this connection early in Israel's wilderness wandering period because entering God's presence and entering the land were paralleled. Whereas Moses and Aaron initially could not enter the Tent of Meeting because of the glory of God (Ex.40:35), after blood had been shed in the sacrifices, they were able to go in (Lev.8:1 – 9:24). Likewise, in order to be settled in the land as a people peculiar in the world, Israel had to sacrifice innocent blood, lest the nation also incur God's curse on the land. Thus, the Levitical sacrifices prepared Israel to enter the land, once again linking atoning sacrifice and rest in the land. Any settling absolutely required the shedding of innocent blood (as Israel was to do) or the cursing of sons (like Cain implicitly did). Interestingly enough, Leviticus deals with the topics of the sacrificial bloodshed (Lev.1 – 9) and narrates a cursing of Aaron's priestly sons, Nadab and Abihu (Lev.10), suggesting that with Israel both were required because Israel existed in tension, as a nation experiencing both the blessings and the curses of God.

The thematic link between land, blood, sons, and cities continued in Israel's settlement in the land and found thematic union in the Levites. After being delivered from imperial Egyptian bondage and overthrowing the feudal city-state structure of Canaanite society, Israel settled in the promised land with a decidedly anti-urban disposition. YHWH gave directives for their rural life and frowned upon urbanization; recall that the anti-urban polemic in Genesis 1 – 11 was the beginning of Israel's Torah. The Mosaic ordinances demonstrate a cautious and negative attitude towards cities. For example, whereas land reverted back to its ancestral owners in the jubilee under any and all circumstances,

if a man sells a dwelling house in a walled city, then his redemption right remains valid until a full year from its sale; his right of redemption lasts a full year. But if it is not bought back for him within the space of a full year, then the house that is in the walled city passes permanently to its purchaser throughout his generations; it does not revert in the jubilee. The houses of the villages, however, which have no surrounding wall shall be considered as open fields; they have redemption rights and revert in the jubilee. As for the cities of the Levites, the Levites have a permanent right of redemption for the houses of the cities which are their possession. What therefore belongs to the Levites may be redeemed and a house sale in the city of this possession reverts in the jubilee, for the houses of the Levites are their possession among the sons of Israel. But pasture fields of their cities shall not be sold, for that is their perpetual possession. (Lev.25:29 – 34)

Whereas all Israel's land was viewed as belonging to God and not to any one particular person, this was not true with houses in cities. A non-Levite Israelite living in a walled city did not have full recourse to the jubilee protection. This condition provided a way for enterprising and greedy Israelites in a city to acquire more property at the expense of others. Urban problems and relations were expected to be problematic from the beginning of Israel's covenant charter because God did not claim to own the city like He did the land. Perhaps God was giving disincentives for Israelites to live in cities. Perhaps He was communicating how transitional and insecure life in the city would be. Perhaps He was communicating how the sabbath does not truly penetrate the city. Regardless, the city was a place where Israel could seemingly hide from certain claims of God. But in exchange, a negative situation would clearly arise: There would be no true rest and security in the city.

The Levites were the only legitimate city-dwellers from YHWH's perspective. Their houses alone returned to them in the jubilee year. Their residences were considered to be their own possession, qualified by their underlying alien and pilgrim status with the rest of the nation, of course. But the Levitical position was very peculiar. The links between settling in the land and shedding blood, building cities and cursing sons intersected in the Levites. Originating in the Exodus, the Levites were the priestly clan which was Israel's firstborn, sacrificed to God as a Passover offering so that the rest of the nation could escape death (Ex.13:1 – 2, 11 – 16, Num.13:13, 41). In essence, the Levites were the firstborn sons who were in a sense already dead. God claimed them. Corresponding to this was their adoption of the curse associated with the attempt to settle in the land, expressed by cities and bloodshed. The Levites could live in cities – in fact, YHWH mandated that they live in cities – because they bore the unceasing burden of service in bloodshed. Caretakers of the Tabernacle apparatus, the Levites labored endlessly so that the remainder of the nation could experience rest. From their numbers were drawn the priests, who reminded the people that innocent blood needed to be offered constantly for the nation to dwell in the land. Even on the holy days where the sabbath was in effect, the priests had to labor. If they failed in their duties, Israel failed to receive the blessings of the land. They were the ongoing reminder to the entire nation that Israel's possession of the land was somehow not complete, in fact, not even totally appropriate. Within Israel's land-based society, the city-dwelling Levites were the exceptions to the rule; but within the wider pattern of the world outside Israel, their position fit the rule. Their way of life in Israel was an absolute necessity because someone in the chosen family needed to labor constantly to provide the remainder of the community with rest and material provision, just like Enoch probably labored for his father Cain. Who would it be? The firstborn, the Levites. They dwelled in cities precisely because they trafficked in blood, which violated the land. No one who sheds blood can have an inheritance in God's land. Bloodshed is what originally disqualified Simeon and Levi and their whole tribes from land ownership, and only the zealous bloodshed of Phineas restored the Levites to a position of respectability in Israel. But it still did not undo what Levi had done before. The curse of the firstborn still fell on them; the Levites bore the burden for Israel settling in the land. The link between the Levites and the city shows that the inner logic of the city was operating within Israel, but God subverted that inner logic so as to benefit Israel and to bear witness to the priesthood of Jesus Christ.

In his final song before Israel, Moses looked far into the future and sang that God 'will atone for His land and His people' (Dt.32:43). Israel could enter the promised land only through the sacrifice of innocent blood, continuing in but inverting the relation between bloodshed and land. This time, the chosen people would shed the innocent blood of animals instead of the blood of human beings. And God designed this chosen people to be a people of peace, who would not commit violence against each other nor shed one another's blood. That, at least, was God's intent. Thus, we have both positive and negative appraisals, not of the land itself, but of Israel's claim to own the land. The very act of settling created tensions for Israel. Mosaic Israel was a community of faith echoing God's original true humanity, but it was also a human civilization claiming some level of permanence on a cursed land which prevented people from truly settling.

Leviticus, the very book that emphasizes Israel's relationship to the land, presses this issue. YHWH challenged Israel with the fact that they did not truly own the promised land; Israel's occupation of the promised land was temporary. By promising Israel that He would water their land, bring forth produce abundantly, and thereby nourish the people even when they did no work in their Sabbatical year every seven years, and in their Jubilee year every fifty years, God partially reenacted for Israel the nomadic days of the patriarchs. That best explains why, in the middle of the section on land sabbath practices, God made a statement that negated Israel's actual ownership of the land: 'The land, moreover, shall not be sold permanently, for the land is Mine; you are but aliens and sojourners with Me' (Lev.25:23). God inserted curious requirements of faith associated with land that can be superficially taken as an assurance from God that they would possess the land without any doubt about the matter. Deeper reflection, however, suggests more. God's commandment that every seventh year and every fiftieth year be a sabbath year of rest for the land was an additional moratorium on normal farming, the practice associated with a settler mentality. It is impossible to rationalize this away by arguing from our agricultural knowledge that regular crop rotation or letting the land lie fallow is a healthy practice. This is every seventh year, for an entire year, for the entire people, in a region that needed careful irrigation because of its unusual susceptibility to famines. This is a significant economic uncertainty. As such, it was a reminder of the seven days of creation and therefore a reminder that God Himself brings forth all life. And during this time, God said that 'everyone would have enough to eat' (Lev.25:1 – 7). This was a program of faith, where perhaps Israel was to experience again, albeit to a lesser degree, what Abraham's nomadic days of dependence on God were like. Not only is this alien and sojourner attitude encapsulated here, but also in the basic confession, 'My father was a wandering Aramean' (Dt.26:5). David also acknowledged that, like his ancestors, he was a stranger and a sojourner with YHWH (Ps.39:12) along with all Israel (1 Chr.29:15).

The theme of fragility and transitoriness can also be seen in Israel's festival calendar. The festival of booths, also called the feast of tabernacles, emphasized Israel's pilgrim status by enacting a very real vulnerability.

For one week on a predictable calendar known to all their neighbors and enemies, Israel gathered up all its possessions and placed them in tents. The Israelites themselves dwelled in tents apart from any walled city or fortress. This was not just a memorial of a past pilgrimage, but a reassertion of a contemporary pilgrimage. Undergirding these themes is Abel, the one whose very name and destiny was ephemeral. Abel gave an acceptable sacrifice, just as Israel was to be the people who offered acceptable sacrifices. And Abel was killed by the one who would grasp at permanence on the land in the form of a city.

Another piece of evidence pointing to Israel's status as a partial (not full) restoration of creational humanity was their exposure to the curse on creation. During the days and years that were not sabbath times, they had to labor. We can probably assume that at least some thorns and thistles were part of their daily experience. Moreover, they experienced death, not just in their own human lifecycle of dust returning to dust, but in the wider creation. They were subject to the series of pronouncements God made on Adam. They experienced circularity and death in the creation. In this context, one of Israel's Psalmists looked forward to the ultimate demise of the old creation, and perhaps hints at a fresh act of new creation: 'Of old Thou didst found the earth; and the heavens are the work of Thy hands. Even they will perish, but Thou dost endure; and all of them will wear out like a garment; like clothing Thou wilt change them, and they will be changed' (Ps.102:25 – 26, applied to Jesus in Heb.1).

It would not be fair, however, to say that the original creation is now defunct. God Himself apparently takes some delight in repetition, which is how Israel perceived Him 'at work' in the old creation. Unfortunately many current arguments for the work ethic begin with the vague assertion, 'God is a worker, therefore humanity must work,' citing the Psalms for reinforcement.<sup>1</sup> I would agree in part, but with a qualification. When we look at Psalm 104, the Psalm that has the most developed reflection on the original creation, we find that God's work is described as keeping the sun, moon, stars, seasons, and years in order. In other words, God is simply *maintaining* his creation. He established the sky and the clouds (Ps.104:1 – 4), the mountains (v.5 – 9), the springs and rains to water the animals and plants (v.10 – 13), the grass and vegetation for all living things (v.14 – 17), the dwelling places of the wild goats and rock badgers (v.18), the moon and the sun for seasons and days and nights (v.19-20), prey for young lions and *work for human beings* (v.21 – 23). The psalmist praises God for filling the creation with teeming life (v.24 – 26) giving food and life to them (v.27 – 28), and bringing death upon all things only to raise up another generation of living beings (v.29 – 30). In light of these cycles of creation where natural processes are maintained and generations go and come, the psalmist breaks forth with praise that the glory of the Lord, not anything else, would endure forever (v.31 – 32), and commits himself to praising God for as long as he lives (v.33-35). Nowhere in this Psalm or any other is God, in biblical cosmology, creating fundamentally new things in the universe and taking pride in that. He is not improving what has been done before; He is not building on it; He simply maintains what already is.<sup>2</sup>

Without exception, the Psalms concur with Genesis 2:1 – 3 that the creative acts of God are completed and now simply maintained in cyclical repetition. Certain comparisons and metaphors are drawn, but God's work in the old creation is completed, and human work takes its appropriate place as a means of gathering food in the repetitious cycle between birth and death (Ps.104:23). Humanity's cyclical work echoes God's. Survival is certainly not trivial, but nowhere in the Psalms does anyone say that God wants human beings to improve the old creation, control its cycles further, exert ourselves over and against nature, beautify it more, etc. Furthermore God did not want Israel's partnership in running the old creation; He had everything under His command. Rather, Israel was consistently called upon to recognize how ephemeral their existence was and participate in God's *new* work, *redemption* through His revelation to and historical activity with Israel (via the Law, prophetic words, the Temple, the Davidic king, etc.). Hence Psalm 104 is followed by and surrounded by such psalms as Psalm 105 and 106, which narrate God's works on behalf of Israel, a work that was not yet complete. This is why we owe our sense of history to the Jews and not any other ancient people, because though Israel saw circularity in creation like everyone else, they also saw linearity, promise and fulfillment, hope, and history in God's redemptive activity.

We can identify right away what is lacking in a large number of books today. To say that God is a worker, as many assert, is to blur a distinction that God Himself regards as important. God is working redemptively towards a new creation, and simply maintaining the old. He is not restoring or building upon the old. He does call upon us to

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<sup>1</sup> See Bernbaum and Steer (1986), Helm (1987), and Colson (1990). My disagreement with these authors is that they make far-reaching generalizations based on statements like this.

<sup>2</sup> Sometimes the completed creation is used as a point of comparison for the redemptive activity of God. In Psalm 19, to take another example, David described the creation in v.1-6 and used the heavens and the sun as a metaphor for the law of God in v.7-14: As the creation tells of the glory of God, so the law of God, being perfect and sure, speaks of true saving knowledge (v.7); as nothing is 'hidden' from the sun (v.6), so nothing is 'hidden' from God's law, including the errors and hidden ways of the psalmist (v.12). And in the New Testament, Jesus used the non-discriminating rain as an example of how God's compassion falls on the righteous and the unrighteous.

gather our food, and that is our work. It is a fine responsibility, and an absolutely necessary one. But to further science, art, and technology? To multiply wealth? Where do we find those ideas or that language used? The Psalms take a totally different view because they were written by Israel, the people who understood that a deep tragedy had fallen after God's curse.

The entire book of Ecclesiastes is the record of one person's search to test the iron law of circular experiences established by God in Genesis 3:17 – 19. King Solomon, the man of wisdom and fantastic resources, was uniquely qualified for this journey, so his observations about work are telling: 'Vanity of vanities! All is vanity!' (Ecc.1:2) After asking what benefit man has to laboring under the sun for so long, Solomon goes on to observe that everything comes back to itself in a strange circle (1:3 – 11). Like sunrise and sunset (1:5), the turning of the wind (1:6), and the courses of the water cycle (1:7), we find ourselves locked in a pattern of circular and repetitious experiences that significantly diminishes our sense of achievement. The question Ecclesiastes poses is, 'If everything repeats itself in a repetitious cycle, then what difference has my life made on the course of things?' Solomon's statement of purpose (1:12 – 18) is followed by his initial experiment with pleasure that he concludes is meaningless (2:1 – 11). After attempting to leave a legacy through wisdom, he considers the fact that the wise man does not overcome death and is inevitably frustrated by the fool (2:12 – 23). In common parlance, his mark will not last. And even the course of human experience swings constantly like a never-ending pendulum, repeating the same cycles (3:1 – 8). When people in ancient times leaned on their walking sticks and looked out into their world, they saw the regular pattern. They began in the early morning in spring, planting seeds in their fields. They tilled the soil, and waited. They watched the crops grow. They fought off weeds day after day. Then there was the harvest. This was the pattern of their lives. They were locked in nature's circle. And they wondered whether anything they did would have lasting significance.

However, contemporary people will insist on the linearity, not circularity, of human experience. Darwinian evolution postulates that life has been getting better over time, following not a circle but a line pointing upward, humanity being the latest stage on that line. Then, the idea of progress suggests that human achievement has been getting better and better over time, also following not a circle but a line pointing upward. Many of the civilizations of the world today would take issue with the sentiment about work and achievement expressed in Ecclesiastes because most people now see themselves as able to 'make an impact' when they are part of a family or group. Whether it be saving for one's children and giving them a 'better chance than I had,' or founding a corporation that lives on after you, or impacting the standard of living in your nation, people now find their way out of the iron circle of death through human organization. Human beings are delighted when we can leave something for the person after us. We believe we have escaped God's curse by expanding our own self-concept. Sociologically, groups extend the life of the individual beyond death; a person can find meaning as part of a family, corporation, or nation because these things will live on after them.

Yet closer examination reveals a disparity. My undergraduate field of study, Industrial Engineering, trained me professionally to make organizations efficient and to make corporations independent of any one individual. That means that work is designed deliberately as a routine, as a circle, so that if one person leaves, her place can be filled relatively easily. That is a necessity of organizational design. Thus, we return to a circular experience. We went from the farm economy, with a seeding to harvest cycle, taking one year, to the factory economy, where our work cycle revolved around the repetitious assembly line. We put a piece here, put a piece there, until the product was done, and then there was another product to make. Now, in the information service economy, our work cycle revolves around never-ending data. A financier, every quarter, or every fiscal period, runs through the same process to get a report in the same format. A teacher, every year, teaches the same material. A homemaker, every week, looks through coupons and runs through the same weekly routine. Projects start and end, only to begin again in a cycle.

In order to overcome the sense of circularity, we aspire to advance. We feel a sense of emotional and mental stimulation in advancing our career, changing jobs, expanding our skill set, moving from one city to another. But in each new situation, we become more enmeshed in a deeper circle, a stricter routine. Theologically, this seems to be part of 'the city,' the biblical symbol for human civilization. The supposed linearity of city-building (advancing human civilization) provides a deceptive, artificial environment that shields people from the circularity of nature. In reality, however, it imposes a more punishing circularity on human beings. We will deal more thoroughly with the circularity, not linearity, of contemporary human experience in chapter four.

At this point, however, I think we can affirm with many others that the notion of 'progress' was invented by European civilizations while Christianity in Europe was on the decline. The sense of Jesus' expanding kingdom, a linear phenomenon, had given fresh impetus to history and a vital sense of personal and collective destiny. Once that theological lynchpin was removed, European civilizations did not wish to return to a circular sense of history and meaninglessness regarding its corporate destiny. Post-Christian European society had to invent a linear view of history for itself, and it tried in its various forms: Adam Smith's notion of England's Industrial Revolution

producing wealth for all nations; G.F.W. Hegel's dialectical view of history culminating in European civilization, indeed in Hegel himself; Karl Marx's view that socialism is the end goal of history; European racism constructing the 'white man's burden' to 'civilize' the rest of the 'uncivilized' world. All these philosophical and socio-political traditions are parodies of the Messianic story where a salvation is worked out in Jerusalem and spreads over the world. These other stories have in common a salvation worked out in Europe and spreading over the world: an aping and a mockery of the true story of God. Behind the faulty analyses of history by all of these philosophers, one senses the desperate attempt to resist the law of circularity established by God with respect to the original creation. But reality intruded. Following World War I and prior to his conversion to Christianity, T.S. Eliot despaired of the linear modernist vision of progress; he saw a cyclical pattern in history, not a triumphant narrative, and thus penned *The Wasteland*, the very poetic structure of which defied narrative form. Circularity forced itself upon the consciousness of the West once again.

Perhaps we can attack Ecclesiastes for being 'irresponsible' because it appears to be written from the perspective of a person who seems essentially individualistic, since Solomon said, 'Thus I hated all the fruit of my labor for which I had labored under the sun, for I must leave it to the man who will come after me.' In reality, Solomon is not merely individualistic. He considers work from the angle of the community, and from many different angles, and his conclusions are always the same. His basic conclusion is that people are best off being content with the position into which they were born. Let us be reminded that these conclusions were made in the context of a mostly static agrarian community still exposed to famine and nature's uncertainties, where the consequences of uncertainty were extremely high! Solomon's radical conclusion is that every person must be content with the work he or she was born into: 'to eat, to drink, and enjoy oneself in all one's labor in which he toils under the sun during the few years of his life which God has given him, for this is his reward' (2:24 – 26, 5:18). A man does what his father did; a woman does what her mother did. Solomon repeats this in the concluding part of every section, as he tries to find meaning in a circular experience where things return to their source (2:24 – 26), as he seeks eternal permanence in the pendulum-like swing of life's repetitiousness (3:19 – 22), as he finds that achievement comes at too high a price to justify (5:18 – 20), as death counters all attempts at self-satisfaction (6:12, 7:15), and as death causes madness and wickedness among men (9:2 – 6). Every section is punctuated by the message of contentment in the presence of God. Work is not meant to fulfill us, but when we turn to God to fulfill us, then we can receive food, drink, and work as gifts from Him. Work in the creation is totally relativized for Israel. Solomon's only alternative is to fear God.

Solomon's attitude stands in contradistinction from the mindset of today's social engineer. Solomon contemplates leaving his hard-earned wealth to the unknown but usually deficient merits of his successor, and he throws up his hands, saying, 'Who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool?' (2:18 – 19) Another human being always introduces uncertainty, which Solomon accepts: 'Neither is bread to the wise, nor wealth to the discerning, nor favor to men of ability, for time and chance overtake them all' (9:11). He considers how easily a little foolishness undoes his carefully laid out accomplishments: 'Dead flies make a perfumer's oil stink, so a little foolishness is weightier than wisdom and honor' (10:1). So does Solomon respond by building a meritocracy where competition will assure him of competent successors? Or does he create a bureaucratic system where personalities can be standardized and human uncertainty can be reduced? Does he create a school system so he can standardize children? No. We respond this way, but Solomon accepts the vast uncertainty because he respects the sovereignty of other people, the sovereignty of God, and the curse of God! Work as a mechanism for ensuring achievement and security is nullified.

We cannot avoid the question mark Solomon puts over work as a means of achievement and self-fulfillment. According to Solomon, we are passive recipients, since God has given work to us. If I am a janitor, God wants me to be satisfied with that. If I am a farmer, God wants me to be satisfied with that. If I am a mailman, even with a graduate degree in a technical subject, God wants me to be the kind of person who can be satisfied with the mail route. Solomon pulverizes our modern attitude of entitlement. Just because today we have the option of not doing what our parents did does not mean that our satisfaction will be any greater. Every generation must accept the redundancy of work, the uncertainty of work, and the repetitiousness of work without seeking to alleviate work's uncertainties, without imposing a value judgment of accomplishment on work or other people, without seeking a promotion, and without seeking psychological gratification by the sensation of upward mobility! Young people seeking a quick path to fortune through professional sports, rap, or acting also need to be satisfied by less glamorous, more redundant jobs. Essentially, Solomon tells us we should never have left the farm! This is the searing judgment of Ecclesiastes. Solomon would applaud Paul's teaching of contentment in all circumstances, even in a low paying job that doesn't utilize all our skills.

From the Old Testament, Israel found herself doubly identified with God as a worker. God's work of creation was finished on the seventh day and He was maintaining His creation in cyclical repetition; Israel was called to take her place in this cyclical repetition, growing and harvesting her food according to the seasons. At the same

time, God has set about doing His work of redemption. There are therefore two types of work that are right and good: The cyclical, repetitious work of survival in the old creation which must be done, and the new, more linear and open-ended work of the new creation which must also be done. This affected Israel's expectations on human work. We would expect the average Israelite to feel some despair over the sense of insignificance over the repetitiousness and futility of trying to achieve something permanent when everything will, by God's decree, return to the dust. It seems to me that this is a compelling perspective that is not often explored or fully admitted. At the same time, however, Israel was still instructed to labor in the creation.

Israel's experience of both the creational blessing and the Adamic curse is the reason why I have called Israel a 'partial restoration' of the original creational state. On the one hand, Israel lived on an unusually abundant land and experienced supernatural blessings during their sabbath seasons, and they were therefore very close to what the creation may have originally been like in that sense. But on the other hand, they still had to work in conventional ways during non-sabbath times and experienced the cycles of repetition described by Ecclesiastes. And they had to experience the Cainite curse as well: To occupy the land, Israel had to engage in cycles of sacrificial bloodshed.