



Research Article

The Disgrace of the Unburied Dead: A Theological Exegesis of Ecclesiastes 6:3b

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Abstract

Ecclesiastes 6:3b contains one of the most arresting evaluative clauses in the Hebrew wisdom corpus: “and also he has no burial.” Qoheleth’s portrait of the wealthy man who begets a hundred children, lives many years, yet dies without burial represents a profound inversion of the conventional wisdom equating material abundance with divine favor. Despite its rhetorical prominence within Ecclesiastes 6:1–6, the burial clause has received comparatively little sustained theological attention in the commentary tradition, typically subordinated to the dramatic *nephel* (stillborn) comparison that follows in verses 4–5. This gap in the scholarly literature constitutes the background problem this article addresses. This article presents a focused theological exegesis of Ecclesiastes 6:3b, with particular attention to the clause “and also he has no burial” (Hebrew: *w’gam-q’vurah lo-haytah lo*). The study argues that this clause is not a biographical footnote but the theological climax of Qoheleth’s carefully constructed argument against the sufficiency of outward abundance without inward satisfaction, and that recovering its full theological force holds significant implications for both biblical scholarship and pastoral ministry. The study employs a combination of historical-grammatical analysis of the Hebrew text, canonical-theological reading across the Old and New Testaments, and socio-rhetorical examination of the burial motif within its ancient Near Eastern cultural context. Key lexical terms: *nephesh* (soul/life-force), *qevurah* (burial), and *nephel* (stillborn) are subjected to close exegetical analysis. Comparative analysis draws on Mesopotamian, Egyptian, and Israelite burial traditions, Hebrew prophetic judgment oracles, wisdom literature, and New Testament kerygmatic texts, supplemented by current Qoheleth scholarship. The study demonstrates that the denial of burial in Qoheleth’s framework functions simultaneously on three levels: as a marker of covenantal rupture within the Hebrew theological tradition, as an act of social and memorial erasure in the ancient Near Eastern context, and as an eschatological signpost that points beyond Qoheleth’s own literary horizon toward a final divine reckoning. Read canonically, the motif anticipates the New Testament theology of Jesus’ burial as the form of a death that holds resurrection hope. The article further draws pastoral and homiletical implications, arguing that the text constitutes a sustained theological summons to soul-satisfaction, relational legacy, and the disciplined contentment that alone can ensure a life of enduring worth.

Keywords

Ecclesiastes, Qoheleth, Burial, Hebel, Nephel, Wisdom Literature, Death Theology, Covenantal Honor, Contentment

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1. Introduction

The book of Ecclesiastes (Qohelet in Hebrew) is widely recognized as one of the most philosophically dense and theologically provocative texts in the entire Hebrew canon [1, 2]. It stands within the broader wisdom tradition of Israel yet consistently pushes against that tradition's optimism, subjecting its most cherished assumptions the retributive calculus of Proverbs, the sufficiency of long life and numerous offspring, the equation of material prosperity with divine favor to rigorous interrogation [3]. It is within this interrogative spirit that Ecclesiastes 6:3b presents its most startling reversal.

The verse in question reads in full: "If a man begets a hundred children and lives many years, so that the days of his years are many, but his soul is not satisfied with life's goodness, and also he has no burial I say that the stillborn is better than he" (Eccl. 6:3, ESV). The clause on which this article focuses "and also he has no burial" has received comparatively little sustained theological attention in the commentary tradition, often subordinated to the more dramatic comparison with the stillborn infant in verses 4–5 [4, 5, 17, 18]. This study argues that such subordination misreads the passage's rhetorical structure and diminishes the theological weight that Qoheleth deliberately places on the burial motif.

The central thesis of this article is as follows: in Ecclesiastes 6:3b, the denial of burial functions as the theological climax of Qoheleth's argument against accumulation without contentment, operating simultaneously on three levels as a marker of covenantal rupture within the Hebrew theological tradition, as an act of social and memorial erasure in the ancient Near Eastern cultural context, and as an eschatological signpost pointing beyond the boundaries of Qoheleth's own literary framework toward a final reckoning [6]. This threefold function gives the burial clause its unique force and deserves systematic theological attention.

The article proceeds as follows: Section 2 establishes the passage's textual and literary context. Section 3 examines the theology of burial in the Hebrew Bible and ancient Near East. Section 4 analyses the rhetorical function of the burial clause within Ecclesiastes 6:1–6. Section 5 explores the canonical trajectory of the motif into the New Testament. Section 6 draws pastoral and homiletical implications. Section 7 offers a concluding synthesis.

2. Textual and Literary Context

2.1. The Hebrew Text

The clause under examination displays a syntactical feature that is easily obscured in translation. The Hebrew places the noun *qevurah* ("burial") in a fronted, emphatic position before the negated verbal predicate. A more literal rendering would read: "and also a burial there was not for him" [7]. This fronting is not grammatically necessary and therefore carries rhetorical intent: Qoheleth is not merely noting the absence of

burial as a biographical detail but foregrounding it as an evaluative category, the climactic absence that seals the verdict on a life of joyless abundance [4].

2.2. The Literary Unit: Ecclesiastes 6:1–6

Ecclesiastes 6:1–6 constitutes a discrete literary unit within the book's broader meditation on the vanity of human existence [1]. It follows directly from 5:8–20, which discusses wealth and its discontents, and the thematic thread is continuous: material acquisition, however vast, cannot satisfy the human soul. The unit opens with what appears to be a catalog of blessings: a hundred children, many years of life, presumed abundance (v.1–2), only to reveal, with characteristic Qohelethian reversal, that these blessings are hollow because the man's soul (*nephesh*) has not been satisfied with life's good things [8].

The structure of verses 3–5 follows a classic wisdom comparison (*tov-min*, "better than") that is found throughout Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. The subject of comparison is the *nephesh* (stillborn child), who is declared "better" than the man of abundance who dies without burial. As Fox [5] and Longman [2] have noted, the comparison is deliberately hyperbolic; its shock is its point. But between the portrait of the joyless man (v.3a) and the elevation of the stillborn (v.3b–5) stands the burial clause, which functions as the hinge: it is the final, irreversible act that transforms the man's tragedy from recoverable to permanent [4].

2.3. Key Lexical Terms

Nephesh: Rendered as "soul" but better understood as life-force, inner being, or appetite [9]. The phrase "his *nephesh* is not satisfied" indicates not a metaphysical deficit but an existential emptiness: a life lived without genuine enjoyment, rest, or fulfillment [7]. Notably, *nephesh* is also the term used for hunger and appetite, reinforcing the irony: the man has everything to eat but cannot taste it.

Qevurah: The standard Hebrew noun for burial or burial place, derived from the root *q-b-r*, to bury [9]. It appears relatively infrequently in the Hebrew Bible (approximately 14 occurrences) and always carries social and theological weight. The related noun *qever* ("grave") distinguishes a specific burial site from the act of burial itself, which is what *qevurah* signifies here [7].

Nephel: A rare term (occurring only 3 times in the Hebrew Bible: Job 3:16; Ps. 58:9; Eccl. 6:3) referring to a stillborn child or miscarriage [9, 4]. The term's rarity intensifies its rhetorical impact. Qoheleth reaches for the most extreme image of an incomplete, unfulfilled life a life that never began to make his evaluative point: the joyless, unburied man has fallen below even this threshold.

3. The Theology of Burial in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East

3.1. Burial as Covenantal Honor

In the Hebrew theological framework, burial was far more than a hygienic or social necessity. It was a covenantal act, dense with theological significance [10]. The prominence of burial narratives in the Pentateuch is striking: Abraham purchases the cave of Machpelah at considerable expense as a burial site for Sarah (Gen. 23:1–20); Jacob extracts a solemn oath from Joseph that his body will not remain in Egypt but will be buried in Canaan with his fathers (Gen. 47:29–31; 49:29–33); and Moses ensures that Joseph's bones accompany the Exodus so that they may ultimately rest in the promised land (Exod. 13:19; cf. Josh. 24:32). These are not peripheral narratives. They communicate that burial in one's ancestral land, among one's covenant community, was an expression of participation in God's redemptive purposes for Israel [11].

The formulaic expressions "gathered to his people" or "slept with his fathers," used consistently for honorable deaths in the Old Testament, communicate this covenantal dimension [10]. To die well and be buried was to conclude one's life within the story of God's people, to be gathered into the ancestral community of faith. It was the final act of belonging.

3.2. Denial of Burial as Prophetic Curse

Conversely, denial of burial in the prophetic tradition was not merely an unfortunate circumstance but a marker of divine judgment and covenantal rupture [10]. Jeremiah's oracle against King Jehoiakim is among the most vivid: "He shall be buried with the burial of a donkey, dragged and dumped beyond the gates of Jerusalem" (Jer. 22:19). The comparison to a donkey's burial that is, no burial at all, merely a corpse left exposed is a deliberate reversal of royal honor. Similarly, the Deuteronomic curse formula in 28:26 warns that covenant unfaithfulness would result in corpses becoming "food for all birds of the air and for the beasts of the earth." The judgment formulas against the dynasties of Jeroboam (1 Kgs. 14:11) and Baasha (1 Kgs. 16:4) deploy identical imagery.

These prophetic texts establish a clear theological grammar: proper burial = divine favor + covenantal standing; denial of burial = divine judgment + covenantal rupture [10, 11]. When Qoheleth places the burial clause in Ecclesiastes 6:3b, he is drawing on this established grammar. The man who dies without burial is, in the theological imagination of Qoheleth's audience. This man has ended his life in a state of divine disfavor regardless of how many children he had or how many years he lived [7].

3.3. Burial, Social Memory, and Legacy

In the broader ancient Near Eastern context, burial was also

the mechanism of social memory. Tombs in Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Canaan were inscribed with names, genealogies, accomplishments, and cultic invocations precisely because burial was understood as the event that transferred a person from the register of the living into the register of the remembered [11]. The unburied dead were not merely dead; they were forgotten, erased from the communal consciousness [12]. Turner [21] has further observed that Qoheleth's treatment of the body and its fate reflects a broader ecological theology in which the earth itself bears witness to human dignity or its denial.

This dimension of burial considerably sharpens the irony of Ecclesiastes 6:3. The man in view has a hundred children, the epitome of a legacy. In conventional wisdom theology (cf. Prov. 17:6; Ps. 127:3–5), children are a man's memorial, the continuation of his name [13]. Yet the burial clause quietly signals that all this apparent legacy has collapsed. A man with a hundred children who dies unburied is, in effect, a man whose children have abandoned him to dishonor [14]. The legacy has not merely failed to persist; it has actively reversed into disgrace. The one who sought to be remembered above all others is the one who will be forgotten above all others.

3.4. Comparative Ancient Near Eastern Perspectives

The importance of burial was not unique to Israel. In Mesopotamian tradition, the unburied dead (*etemmu*) were believed to wander without rest, unable to join the community of the ancestors in the underworld [11]. The Epic of Gilgamesh poignantly dramatizes Enkidu's death and the care taken in his burial as a final act of honor. Egyptian mortuary religion was almost entirely organized around the preparation for and performance of proper burial and the preservation of the body. In all these traditions, there is a convergence on the same point: burial was the rite of passage from the world of the living to the world of the remembered dead, and its denial was a catastrophe of the highest order [6].

Qoheleth, writing within, but not uncritically, the wisdom tradition, could rely on his audience's shared cultural memory of these associations [15]. He did not need to explain what a lack of burial meant; its horror was self-evident. What he does, with characteristic rhetorical sophistication, is weaponize that self-evidence: he takes the man most expected to receive an honored burial (wealthy, many children, long life) and announces that he will receive none.

4. The Rhetorical Function of the Burial Clause in Ecclesiastes 6:1–6

4.1. The Climactic Structure of the Argument

Careful attention to the rhetorical structure of Ecclesiastes 6:1–6 reveals that the burial clause is not an ancillary detail

but the structural apex of the unit [4, 7]. Qoheleth builds his portrait of the joyless wealthy man in layers, each more devastating than the last. First, the man is introduced as one whom God has given "wealth, possessions, and honor" so that he lacks nothing (6:2) yet God does not give him power to enjoy them. Second, the portrait is intensified in verse 3 with the addition of a hundred children and many years, the two supreme markers of a blessed life in Hebrew wisdom. Third, and finally, the man dies without burial.

Each layer of the portrait strips away one more layer of the conventional equation between abundance and divine favor [5]. Wealth without enjoyment negates prosperity. Children without honor negate legacy. Long life without burial negates memory. The burial clause is the terminus of this stripping-away, the point at which there is nothing left to negate. In a single clause, Qoheleth dismantles the entirety of the conventional markers of a blessed life [4].

4.2. The Transition to the Nephel Comparison

The burial clause also serves as the transition point to the nephel (stillborn) comparison of verses 4–5. The rhetorical logic is elegant: the unburied man ends in darkness (metaphorically) just as the nephel begins in darkness (literally) [7, 4]. The nephel comes in vanity and departs in darkness; its name is covered in darkness (v.4). But the nephel, Qoheleth insists, has more rest than the joyless man (v.5–6). The bridge between these two portraits is the burial clause: the unburied man's fate is to enter the same darkness as the unborn child, but he does so after a lifetime of toil and accumulation, making his end qualitatively worse.

The word *hebel* (vanity, vapor, breath), which introduces the nephel's existence in verse 4, echoes the term's programmatic use throughout Ecclesiastes [8]. By applying it to the nephel and then implicitly extending the comparison to the unburied man, Qoheleth places both at the far end of the spectrum of human meaninglessness. The difference is that the nephel never knew otherwise, while the man of abundance chose or was chosen by his own unsatisfied soul to arrive at the same destination.

4.3. The Counterfactual Implied by the Burial Clause

It is worth pausing to consider what the burial clause implies counterfactually. If the man had received an honored burial, would Qoheleth's verdict change? The structure of the argument suggests not entirely, for the primary indictment remains the unsatisfied soul [2]. However, the burial clause intensifies the verdict from tragic to catastrophic. An unsatisfied soul that nevertheless ends in an honored burial might have been seen, within the wisdom tradition, as a life that possessed at least the outward form of blessing even if it lacked its substance. The unburied man possesses neither form nor substance. He is, to borrow a Pauline phrase, "sounding brass and

a clanging cymbal" (1 Cor. 13:1): much noise, no music, and in the end, not even the silence of a proper grave.

5. Canonical Trajectory: From Qoheleth to the New Testament

5.1. The Burial Motif in the Wisdom Tradition

The theology of burial developed by Qoheleth does not stand in isolation within the Hebrew canon. Psalm 49, a wisdom psalm that directly engages the question of wealth and death, makes the same fundamental argument: the wealthy cannot redeem themselves, and "their graves are their homes forever" (Ps. 49:11). The psalm's refrain "Man in his pomp will not remain; he is like the beasts that perish" (v.12, 20) resonates strongly with Ecclesiastes 6:3's portrait of the joyless wealthy man [13]. Both texts use the inevitability of death and burial (or its absence) to relativize accumulated wealth.

Proverbs 10:7 states: "The memory of the righteous is a blessing, but the name of the wicked will rot." This saying encapsulates the wisdom tradition's assumption that the righteous will be remembered, and that their burial, like their life, will be honored [14, 16]. Qoheleth's burial clause in 6:3b represents a troubling inversion of this assumption, one that anticipates the prophetic tradition's decoupling of outward prosperity from genuine righteousness [6]. The reception history of Ecclesiastes shows that this tension was recognised by patristic and medieval interpreters, including Bonaventure, whose reading of Ecclesiastes gave particular attention to the text's endings and moral reckoning [22]. Christianson [18] has documented how successive interpreters across the centuries have returned to these motifs of death and accountability as the heart of Qoheleth's enduring theological relevance.

5.2. Jesus and the Theology of Burial

In the New Testament, burial retains its theological significance. The burial of Jesus is narrated with remarkable care in all four Gospels (Matt. 27:57–61; Mark 15:42–47; Luke 23:50–56; John 19:38–42), and Paul includes it as one of the essential elements of the kerygma: "that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day" (1 Cor. 15:3–4). The burial of Jesus is not a theological footnote; it is integral to the proclamation of the resurrection [2]. Jesus was truly dead, truly buried, and truly raised; the burial seals the reality of the death and anticipates the reality of the resurrection.

This canonical context illuminates Ecclesiastes 6:3b from a retrospective angle. The man who dies without burial in Qoheleth's portrait has, in the New Testament framework, been denied the form that points toward resurrection hope [6]. The burial that Jesus received and that Qoheleth's man was denied becomes in Christian theology the sign of a death that has been entered into fully, the prelude to a life that cannot be

taken away. The unburied man's tragedy is not merely that he lacks earthly honor; canonically understood, it is that his death lacks the form of hope.

5.3. The Parable of the Rich Fool

Jesus' parable of the Rich Fool (Luke 12:15–21) stands in direct theological continuity with Ecclesiastes 6:1–6 [13]. The Rich Fool has accumulated abundantly and plans to enjoy it, only to be told: "This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" (Luke 12:20). The parallel with Qoheleth is striking in both texts, a man of great material wealth is confronted with the futility of his accumulation in the face of death. Where Qoheleth adds the burial motif, Jesus adds the divine verdict: "So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God" (v.21). The Lucan parable, read through the lens of Ecclesiastes 6:3b, suggests that the theological equivalent of dying without burial is dying without being "rich toward God."

6. Pastoral and Homiletical Implications

6.1. The Danger of the Crowded but Empty Life

The primary pastoral application of Ecclesiastes 6:3b concerns what might be called the pathology of accumulation without orientation. The man in Qoheleth's portrait is not condemned for greed or wickedness. He is condemned for not allowing his soul (*nephesh*) to be satisfied with the good things he possessed [3]. This is a subtler and perhaps more dangerous spiritual condition than outright sin, because it is invisible from the outside and may be invisible even to the person experiencing it.

Contemporary ministry contexts are full of people whose lives are crowded with the functional equivalents of a hundred children and many years of busyness, career achievement, family responsibilities, and church activities, yet whose inner lives are characterized by a deep, unaddressed dissatisfaction [8]. Qoheleth's text is a pastoral alarm: spiritual emptiness does not diminish with accumulation. On the contrary, the more one accumulates without attending to the soul, the more devastating the final verdict [4]. Ellul [19] has argued persuasively that Qoheleth's meditation is not nihilistic pessimism but a prophetic call to lucidity, a demand that human beings confront the real conditions of their existence rather than hide behind accumulation. Kidner [20] similarly reads the burial motif as Qoheleth's way of stripping away every layer of pretension to force the reader into honest reckoning with what a human life actually amounts to before God.

6.2. Honor Is Relational, Not Accumulative

The burial clause delivers a pointed word to any theology that equates legacy with output. The man has a hundred children and dies without burial, which, in the ancient cultural

grammar, can only mean that his children did not honor him at his death. A hundred children who do not bury their father is a more devastating indictment than childlessness [5]. Qoheleth's text reminds pastor and congregation alike that legacy is built not on the quantity of one's children, projects, or achievements, but on the quality of one's relational and moral formation of those around them [13].

In ministry specifically, this speaks to the difference between ministry as output (how many sermons preached, how many converts recorded, how many programs established) and ministry as formation (how many lives genuinely shaped, how many disciples truly formed, how many communities transformed from within). The minister whose ministry is all output and no formation may, like Qoheleth's man, arrive at the end of a long and apparently fruitful career to discover that the fruits of that career will not bury him with honor [15].

6.3. Death as Revealer

Qoheleth's burial theology carries an implicit eschatological warning: death reveals what life conceals. The manner of a person's death and burial in the ancient world was the final commentary on the character of their life [6]. While modern societies have largely separated the manner of one's death from the substance of one's life, the theological principle remains intact. Hebrews 9:27, "it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment," restates Qoheleth's intuition in explicitly eschatological terms: there is a final reckoning that will reveal the true quality of every life, beyond the screen of accumulated appearances [14].

6.4. Contentment as Theological Discipline

Finally, Ecclesiastes 6:3b points toward contentment not as a personality trait or a fortunate disposition but as a theological discipline [8]. Paul's declaration that he has "learned, in whatever state I am, to be content" (Phil. 4:11) is instructive: contentment is learned, not given. It is the fruit of deliberate spiritual formation, of choosing repeatedly to allow the soul to be satisfied with present goods rather than perpetually deferring satisfaction to future accumulations.

Qoheleth's wisdom, when read in its canonical fullness, points toward the same destination that Ecclesiastes itself reaches in its closing verses: "Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment" (Eccl. 12:13–14). The satisfied soul is not the soul that has accumulated the most. Still, the soul oriented toward God is the soul that, in Paul's language, has learned the secret of contentment "through him who strengthens me" (Phil. 4:13). This is the theological antidote to the tragedy of Ecclesiastes 6:3b [2].

7. Conclusions

This article has argued that the burial clause in Ecclesiastes

6:3b, "and also he has no burial," is far more than a biographical footnote in Qoheleth's portrait of the joyless wealthy man. It is the theological climax of a carefully constructed argument, operating simultaneously as a marker of covenantal rupture, social erasure, and eschatological warning [4, 10]. By drawing on the ancient Hebrew and Near Eastern grammar of burial as honor, denial of burial as divine judgment, and burial as the mechanism of communal memory, Qoheleth transforms a detail about funeral arrangements into a comprehensive verdict on a life that was full in quantity and empty in quality [11, 7].

Read within the canonical trajectory of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, the burial clause points toward a theological concern that exceeds Qoheleth's own literary horizon toward the burial of Jesus as the form of a death that holds resurrection hope, and toward the eschatological judgment in which the true quality of every human life will be made manifest [6, 2]. For the pastor and theologian in contemporary ministry, the text is a summons to attend to the soul, to build legacy relationally rather than accumulate it numerically, and to cultivate the disciplined contentment that alone can satisfy the *nephesh* and ensure that one's life, however long or brief, ends in something more enduring than the darkness of the unburied.

Abbreviations

ESV	English Standard Version
ICC	International Critical Commentary
LXX	Septuagint
MT	Masoretic Text
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament

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Biography



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Research Field

Eric Adjei Gyan: Biblical wisdom literature, Ecclesiastes theology, Old Testament exegesis, Pastoral and homiletical studies, Human Resource Management in African contexts, Ubuntu philosophy, Faith-based organizational studies, Theology of contentment.