

“Everything Is Vapor”: Grasping for Meaning Under the Sun

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INTRODUCTION

It is not surprising that many, even Christians, receive Qoheleth’s (the Hebrew name for the writer of Ecclesiastes) plainly stated portrayal of

all that occurs under the sun as “vapor” as skepticism or unorthodoxy that requires caution, needs chastening, or is unworthy of canonicity apart from a prologue that some orthodox “frame narrator” adds for theological correction.¹ For religious individuals, retreat to theodicy, a defense of God’s goodness and justice in the face of the existence of evil, is an understandable human reaction. Such a reaction seems reasonable when confronted with the stark enigmas of life under the sun, whether confrontation comes by way of evils of

this world befalling one’s personal realm of experience or by candid rehearsal of this world’s evils by another, such as Qoheleth.

One need not be an intentional participant in Pollyanna’s “The Glad Game” to react viscerally to Qoheleth’s worldview, to distance oneself from it, or to label it skepticism or unorthodoxy. Perhaps Qoheleth’s observations concerning death elicit the strongest revulsion that leads readers to indict Qoheleth with unorthodoxy (2:12-17; 3:16-22; 7:1-6; 9:1-6; 12:1-7).² Witness how people, even Christians, repress grief and sorrow. Euphemisms mute grim reality. Even for Christians, funerals have become celebrations of the deceased rather than ceremonies of mourning the death of a loved one. For it is unnerving and distressing to come face to face with the pervasiveness, perversity, and profundity of the curse with which the Creator inflicted his own creation on account of human rebellion. So, when Qoheleth’s austere observations concerning all things that occur under the sun confront readers, an impulse to retreat to some plausible avoidance mechanism is understandable even if unacceptable, unwarranted, and inexcusable.

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Does the fact that Qoheleth's worldview clashes with one's own give warrant to judge his, which is in the canon, as unorthodox and one's own as orthodox, though not canonized? Does not wisdom call for Qoheleth's readers to submit their worldview for assessment by his worldview rather than sit in judgment against his? Why does not Qoheleth's exaltation of God and abasement of humanity call for humility and for occupying one's mind with understanding why one's own beliefs are in need of adjustment rather than busying oneself with trying to explain how such an unorthodox book exists in the canon? What if Qoheleth's worldview enhances or completes the full range of the Bible's orthodox wisdom by confronting readers with the perplexing enigmas of life in this sin-cursed world where God, who already veils himself from his creatures lest he consume them (Exod 33:20-23), stands behind a frowning providence; a world where God's kingly will is not done as it is in heaven (Matt 6:10); where it rarely seems that the benevolent God who created all things has control over his own creation; and, where everything is subject to death, where the beauty of routines incites vexation, where wickedness drives out justice, where everything is subject to twisting and incompleteness?

REFLECTIONS UPON *HEBEL* AND GRASPING A HANDFUL OF AIR

Nearly three full decades ago a young ministry intern with his wife and two sons sustained waves of setbacks, afflictions, and anguish compressed in a few short years, sufficient for a lifetime. Life's storms pounded with incessant breakers. Economic stagflation depleted resources. Sudden unemployment taxed ingenuity. Petty pastoral jealousy thwarted vocational pursuits. Debilitating rheumatic fever with complications panged the body. Six hundred miles separated the young family from three parents/grandparents who suffered irreversible diseases that would terminate in untimely deaths. Infrequent long drives for brief visits had to suffice. Three funerals to mourn

departed loved ones took place in less than a year. Acquaintances rebuffed lamentations of grief with trite consolation as they mouthed the familiar verse: "All things work together for good for those who love God" (Rom 8:28).³ Discomfited, friends pulled away. Aloneness intensified grief and affliction. Desire to reinvigorate vocational pursuits required a cross country move. A home sale incurred financial loss. Living on a shoestring too short failed to make ends meet.

To this Christian man others seemed either oblivious to suffering or ill at ease and quick to suppress the grief of those who suffered. He wondered to what extent he had behaved the same way toward others until waves of grief broke over him, transforming his perspective. Early during those turbulent years, with sensibilities rubbed raw by suffering, these acute travails drew him to Ecclesiastes to seek and to understand Qoheleth's counsel that he might anchor his faith in God's wisdom so that he could provide spiritual stability for his young family. This turn to Ecclesiastes came because a brief portion read in J. I. Packer's *Knowing God* some years earlier stuck in his memory. Packer offers a three-paragraph summary of the message of Ecclesiastes, the gist being,

the real basis of wisdom is a frank acknowledgment that this world's course is enigmatic, that much of what happens is quite inexplicable to us, and that most occurrences "under the sun" bear no outward sign of a rational, moral God ordering them at all.... The God who rules it hides Himself. Rarely does this world look as if a beneficent Providence were running it. Rarely does it appear that there is a rational power behind it at all.⁴

What Packer states intrigued that young man, for it seemed so right.⁵ Yet, as the young seminary graduate plunged deeply into reading Ecclesiastes and researching the scholars, he found that Packer stood almost alone.

Qoheleth preoccupied him for the next few years while serving as a pastor. He came to realize

that Packer rightly understood Qoheleth, that true wisdom acknowledges that grasping what takes place under the sun leaves one with a handful of air. All is vapor. Endeavoring to comprehend all that God does under heaven is alluring but elusive. Such comprehension dissipates like vapor or eludes like a butterfly. The more one chases it, the more it flies away, escaping one's grasp. If efforts to grasp all that God is doing under the sun is as substantive as grasping air, true wisdom takes the posture of self abasement before God who is in heaven (5:1ff) and contentment to accept what God ordains as fitting, acknowledged in an old hymn.

Whate'er my God ordains is right;
Holy his will abideth;
I will be still whate'er he doth,
And follow where he guideth:
He is my God; Though dark my road,
He holds me that I shall not fall:
Wherefore to him I leave it all.⁶

So, with faith guarded by such hymns, as he engaged with Qoheleth in his quest, the young man came to understand that the notion that one can master life by reading God's providence is illusory. It is like seizing the wind, for God's grand scheme concerning what will befall each person cannot be discovered by adding one thing to another (7:27). Indeed, "all things work together for good for those who love God, for those who are called according to his purpose" (Rom 8:28). Qoheleth and Paul agree, but belief in God who purposes all things and brings all things to pass under the sun does not give privileged insight to all that God is doing, nor does faith shield one from suffering or anesthetize grief and anguish.

As with Qoheleth, resignation to fate was no option for the young Christian man; for Qoheleth is no fatalist, but rather, he believes that everything that takes place under the sun comes to pass under God's immanent providence, for God will call everyone to account for their deeds. Qoheleth asserts that God "has put eternity into man's heart,

yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from beginning to end" (3:11). For Qoheleth, seeking to comprehend the incomprehensible leads him to affirm, "I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live; also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil—this is God's gift to man" (3:12). This is not fatalism, nor is it hedonism. Rather, this is the behavior of faith in the God who is and who rewards those who seek him (cf. Heb. 11:6). Or, as Qoheleth expresses his faith without using the word *faith*, "I perceived that whatever God does endures forever, nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it. God has done it, so that people fear before him" (3:14). This is not submission moved by terror; it is godly fear governed by belief that every human deed has consequences and moral significance under God's providence (7:18; 8:12-13). This, of course, is why Qoheleth sums up the message of his book: "The end of the matter, after all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil" (12:13-14).⁷

The young man discovered kinship in Qoheleth that he could not find among living peers. He took Qoheleth's forthright observations to heart. Qoheleth's laments became his own. He embraced the full measure of Qoheleth's thematic affirmation: "Vapor of vapors, says the Preacher, vapor of vapors! All is vapor." The man nourished his faith on the wisdom of Ecclesiastes and anchored his confidence in the God "in heaven" whose frowning providence upon humanity became the sustained intimate acquaintance of his young family. He learned that faith in God is not a sedative to deaden pains incurred in this sin cursed world. On the contrary, faith in God actually intensifies one's senses concerning the disparities, inequities, and travails, for this world is not as it first was fresh from the Creator's hand, nor is it what it shall yet be in the new creation.

From intensified anguish the young man, dis-

satisfied with most of the secondary resources he studied and read concerning Ecclesiastes, determined to record what he had found in becoming deeply acquainted with Qoheleth in the crucible of life. He published his first substantial essay, “Qoheleth: Enigmatic Pessimist or Godly Sage?”⁸ Having walked with Qoheleth for several years, he argues that far from being a skeptic, Qoheleth is a man of faith. He came to understand that Qoheleth “looked upon the world and all of life from the vantage point of a genuine OT believer who well understood not only the reality of the curse of God placed upon life ‘under the sun,’ but also its pervasive effect upon everything ‘under heaven.’ It is just such a world and life that Qoheleth depicts in vivid terms.”⁹

He found that Qoheleth’s *hebel*, though bearing a range of senses, including insubstantiality and transitoriness in its various contexts (even with occasional exclamations of vexation), primarily accents the need to learn how to live with evil, to accept that life in this cursed world entails an inscrutable and enigmatic labyrinth. This calls for neither abandoned resignation nor striving to gain mastery over what transpires under the sun, for the former entails fatalism not faith and the latter fails to apprehend that such striving leaves one with a handful of air. Rather, Ecclesiastes calls for obedient fear and humility before the Creator who purposes and brings to pass everything that occurs under the sun. False and illusory hopes of deciphering God’s providence and thereby “shepherding the wind” should be replaced with confident enjoyment of the Creator’s good gifts which he gives in the few years given that pass as a shadow.

Though far from offering the definitive word on how to read Ecclesiastes, the discipline of formulating such thoughts for others to read and engage had a deep shaping impact upon the young man’s mind and spirit throughout his life that has passed as a shadow. Qoheleth’s message has become his own lived out in a way much more profoundly than the inadequate utterances of it found in his

essay of twenty-five years ago. Since then the literary irony, ingeniousness, and elusiveness of Qoheleth’s use of “vapor,” has become more profoundly apparent through reading scholars who have chased after elusive *hebel* to capture its meaning. This essay, then, revisits an earlier rather youthful reflection upon Ecclesiastes to offer a modest effort, confirmed by life under the sun and chastened by age, to examine Qoheleth’s elusive use of *hebel* by way of pondering the poetic prologue with his thematic affirmation that bookends the poem (1:2, 12-16) like it bounds the book (1:2, 12-15), and to do so without being left holding a handful of air.¹⁰

THE *HEBEL* TASK GOD ASSIGNS HUMANS IN THE WORLD HE HAS JUDGED

God has assigned humans a task that incites us to employ wisdom to study and examine all that occurs under heaven as we follow Qoheleth’s lead. This weighty burden occupies the mind that tries to comprehend that which transcends comprehension.¹¹ The enormity of the subject—all that takes place under the sun—prompts Qoheleth to announce, “Vapor of vapors, says Qoheleth, vapor of vapors! All is vapor” (1:2, 12:8). What does he mean by calling it *hebel*, “vapor,” “breath,” a “wisp of air”?

Among Bible versions and interpreters, the meaning of Qoheleth’s use of “vapor” as his thematic refrain seems almost as difficult as grasping vapor, “chasing the wind” as Qoheleth expresses it. Bible translators and interpreters diverge widely on how to understand *hebel*. Yet, how Bible versions and commentators translate *hebel* largely determines whether they present Qoheleth as an orthodox or unorthodox sage.¹² Qoheleth’s use of *hebel* and of “chasing the wind” tends to elude readers who become too easily satisfied with hastily and restrictively reducing the possible meanings to “everything is meaningless” or “everything is temporary.”¹³ The tendency has been to capture elusive *hebel* and to confine it within a singular and often pejorative meaning, whether “van-

ity” (ESV, NRSV, NASB), “futility” (HCSB), or “meaningless” (NIV, NLT). This is likely owing to the King James Version (“vanity”) which in turn succumbed to the influence of the Latin Vulgate which may reflect the Septuagint’s use of *mataiotēs*, which seems more restrictive than *hebel*.¹⁴ By translating *hebel* as *vanitas* Jerome foreclosed the semantic range left open by *mataiotēs*, for *vanitas* describes the value of something as “emptiness, worthlessness, unreality, vanity, or boasting” but not “transitoriness” or similar senses.¹⁵ The restricted semantic range of *vanitas* continues to influence English translations to opt for “vanity” or “meaningless” which induces many to read Ecclesiastes with a deprecatory slant. Vanity, meaninglessness, or futility all seem to present a much too negative view of life “under the sun.” Thus, they fail to do justice to what seems to be Qoheleth’s vintage use of *hebel* and to account for non-pejorative uses of the word throughout his reporting of discoveries made in his quest to fathom the unfathomable.¹⁶

QOHELETH’S POETIC PROLOGUE AND HEBEL AS LITERARY IMAGERY

The prologue captures the tone, theme, and tempo of the whole book with its relentless rounds. In compressed form, the prologue mimics the world Qoheleth observes and depicts throughout the book, imitating its cadence as it recycles words, phrases, and themes. Thus, Qoheleth captures in literary form the movements of life under the sun. He offers readers a sense of the recurrent refrains of life under the sun with his own literary refrains.¹⁷ It seems, however, that Qoheleth’s greatest literary genius shows itself in his thematic refrain, “Vapor of vapors. Vapor of vapors! All is vapor,” used as bookends, occurring at the beginning of the prologue (1:2) and immediately prior to the epilogue (12:8).

The poetic prologue which immediately follows Qoheleth’s thematic refrain of 1:2 suggests that it is reasonable to infer that the thematic question (1:3) followed by summations (1:4-11)

provides a compendium of the book’s contents.¹⁸ What led to Qoheleth’s announced theme, “Vapor of vapors. Vapor of vapors! All is vapor” (1:2)? His propositional question, “What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?” materially poses the query modern philosophers ask abstractly, “What is the meaning or purpose of life?”¹⁹ Qoheleth begins to establish his conclusion that “all is vapor” (1:2) by rehearsing the persistent cycles of the world and of humanity (1:4).

Life under the sun entails rhythmic routines of seasons and events—one generation is followed by another, the sun rises and sets with unbroken routine, the wind blows as it will through its journeys, waters ever move through their cycles from water to vapor to rain but never overflow the sea. Times and seasons, graciously given by God, provide regularity (cf. Gen 8:22), but predictability becomes human weariness that silences utterance (1:8). The appetites of the eye and of the ear are never satiated with this tedium of cycles because what takes place has occurred before, for nothing new occurs under the sun (1:9-10). Imitating the very subject it describes, as the prologue’s poem commences, so the prologue cycles back to where it begins. Death, the intruder, sweeps away a generation to be forgotten, and death is the plight of the next generation among those who follow (1:11). The world persistently endures as its cycles methodically advance with no obviously perceived progression. Movement occurs without progress which parallels work without gain (1:3; 2:11, 13).

Qoheleth portrays the world as a place where both curse and grace are common to all. God’s common grace is manifest in the world’s methodical endurance and in the cycles of seasons (Gen 8:22) but also in the continuation of human life despite pain of childbirth and curse of death (Gen 9:1, 7). A generation passes from the earth forgotten as a new generation takes its place only to be replaced and forgotten in its own time (Eccl 1:4, 11). This is the realm under God’s judgment that incites the exclamation, “Vapor of vapors, says

Qoheleth, vapor of vapors! All is vapor.”²⁰

Given the placement of the poetic prologue it is reasonable to infer that it begins to unravel the thematic refrain of *hebel* because immediately following the poem Qoheleth promptly returns to his *hebel* verdict as he explains, “I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is *hebel* and a striving after wind.” Human transitoriness (1:4) seems to be an integral element of what *hebel* entails without exhausting all the senses that *hebel* bears within Ecclesiastes. Additionally *hebel* seems closely associated with the taunting of human senses and so induces vexation. Routineness gives rise to words too full of weariness to be uttered (1:8a; cf. Rom 8:22). Appetites are fed but never satiated. Eyes cannot seize with satisfaction what they see, and sounds that fill the ears vanish into memories (1:8b). Death’s pall spoils the routines with oblivion (1:4, 11). Thus, the poem begins to tease out the referents of the *hebel* imagery as entailing that which is insubstantial, fleeting, and out of kilter.

In 1:12-15 Qoheleth provides additional clues to decipher his verdict that “all is *hebel*.” He restricts his verdict of *hebel* to the limitations of his search guided by wisdom. It is confined to “all that is done under heaven,” a phrase that has two parallel expressions, “on earth” and “under the sun,” with the latter dominating throughout Ecclesiastes.²¹ Many wrongly exploit these synonymous phrases to indict Qoheleth as unorthodox by claiming that the phrases restrict Qoheleth’s reasoning to “natural theology” that excludes faith in the God who reveals himself in Scripture.²²

LIFE UNDER HEAVEN

Contortions and imperfections of life “under the sun” vex Qoheleth (1:12-15). Does this embitter him against God? For Qoheleth, who is “under heaven,” is the Creator “in heaven” (5:2) an aloof and immoral despot?²³ No, Qoheleth holds no

such belief concerning God the Creator. Qoheleth does not impute moral evil to God. Rather, the kinks and gaps of all that God does “under heaven” manifest his curse for human rebellion: “God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes” (7:29).

The phrases “under heaven,” “on earth,” and “under the sun” do not restrict the horizons of an unorthodox worldview of a bitter man who ascribes to God remoteness, detachment, and moral evil. Rather, “under heaven” (1:13; 2:3; 3:1) with its synonymous phrases, “on earth” (5:2; 7:20; 8:14, 16; 11:2; 12:7) and “under the sun” (1:3, 9, 14; 2:11; etc.), declare the realm of Qoheleth’s experiences and observations over which he declares, “all is vapor.” “Under heaven,” with its parallel phrases, bears an ominous tone as it does in other biblical texts. It evokes the judgment of the Creator who blighted the whole of his own creation with his curse on account of his rebellious creatures. In the beginning Adam dwelled and walked with God “under heaven,” a realm that received the Creator’s approval (Gen 1:9). Since Adam’s rebellion “under heaven” bears ominous and threatening overtones concerning God’s curse and judgment. Thus, in Genesis 6:17 “under heaven” conveys God’s displeasure on account of sin. In this passage “under heaven” and “on earth” identify the realm of God’s judgment: “For behold, I will bring a flood of waters upon the earth to destroy all flesh in which is the breath [*ruah*] of life *under heaven*. Everything that is *on the earth* shall die” (cf. 7:23). Likewise, “under heaven” is associated with the Lord’s judgment upon the peoples that Israel will dispossess in taking the promised land (Exod 17:14; cf. Deut 7:24; 25:19).

Thus, “under heaven” is the realm that reflects God’s anger, whether for specified sins or generally for human rebellion in the Garden (cf. Ps. 90:7-11). To dwell “under heaven” or “on earth” is to inhabit the place that is under the realm God inhabits, which is heaven. Thus, for Qoheleth, “under heaven,” “on earth,” and “under the sun” are

phrases that convey more than simply the boundary of his observations. Heaven is the abode of God, the Judge who is to be feared (Eccl 5:1-7), for everything that God does “under the sun” serves as foreboding harbingers of judgment yet to come (cf. Luke 13:1-5). Consequently, Qoheleth understands that God has assigned a task that entails odious conundrum because he has subjected his creation to disfigurement, distortion, deficiencies, and deformities that disclose his anger for human rebellion. Things twisted and missing (1:15) incite human inquiry but also render it impossible for humans to decipher the mystery of God’s pattern and plan in his mingled common grace and common curse (7:27-28; 8:16-17).

Qoheleth’s observations concern life’s experiences in this cursed and sin ravaged world, which is what the phrases “under heaven” and “under the sun” indicate. So his verdict is over the whole realm where God’s judgment for human rebellion renders everything “vapor,” *hebel*. His uses of “under heaven,” “on earth,” and “under the sun” identify the earthly realm where God’s judgment for human rebellion intractably stands in contrast to the way the world once was, at the beginning before Adam’s transgression, and the way the world shall be, the realm where “neither moth nor rust destroys” and “thieves do not break in and steal” (Matt 6:19-20), the realm over which God’s reign will know no opposition or contradiction as his dominion already takes place “in heaven” (cf. Matt 6:10).

SHEPHERDING THE WIND

Genesis 6:17 is also instructive concerning another of Qoheleth’s phrases, “a chasing after wind” (1:14, *reut-ruah*, which uses *ruah* [*pneuma*, LXX], sometimes used as a synonym for *hebel* to mean “breath”). Already Qoheleth used *ruah* with reference to wind that blows about in its own rounds when he states, “The wind blows to the south and goes around to the north; around and around goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns” (1:6). Now Qoheleth’s placement of “and

a chasing after wind” (*ruah*) immediately following *hebel* powerfully evokes the *airiness* or *vaporosity* of his thematic imagery but also its *elusiveness*. However one translates the phrase, Qoheleth’s use of this evocative idiom suggests that *hebel* is something that cannot be grasped.²⁴ The phrase could be translated “shepherding the wind,” an apt portrayal of striving to do the impossible.²⁵ Wherever Qoheleth uses the phrase “shepherding the wind,” his observations address human endeavor and the lack of enduring benefit.²⁶ With regard to the interplay of “wind” (*ruah*) with *hebel*, of particular significance but also reflecting use in Genesis 6:17, Qoheleth states, “For what happens to the children of man and what happens to the beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath [*ruah*], and man has no advantage [*moṭar*] over the beasts, for all is vapor [*hebel*]. All go to one place. All are from the dust [*apar*], and to the dust [*apar*], all return” (Eccl 3:19-20; echoes of Gen 2:7; cf. Job 21:17-26).

Another crucial passage in Ecclesiastes concerning *ruah* in collocation with “on the earth” and with *hebel* is Ecclesiastes 12:7 where Qoheleth concludes his portrayal of aging, “and the dust [*apar*], returns to the earth [*ha-’eres*] as it was, and the spirit [*ruah*] returns to God who gave it. Vapor of vapors, says the Preacher; all is vapor.” Here are strong allusions to Genesis 2:7 and 3:17-19, even though Qoheleth uses *ruah* for “spirit” instead of *nismah* (Gen 2:7) and *ha-’eres* instead of *ha-’adamah* (Gen 2:7, 3:19). Though Qoheleth uses synonyms to suit his literary purpose, it seems apparent that his beliefs derive in part from meditating upon the foreboding trajectory of the curse from its entrance in Eden through its catastrophic effects in the flood. Humans and animals alike are fragile as dust. Death casts a pall over everything Qoheleth observes. Thus, as suggested by the prologue’s poem, confirmed within the body of his work, and in the epilogue, *insubstantiality* is one referent of Qoheleth’s *hebel* imagery.

Besides the *fragility* or *insubstantiality* of human life the prologue’s poem also introduces *brevity* or

transience (1:4, 11) which Qoheleth occasionally threads into the fabric of his book. For example, “For who knows what is good for a man while he lives the few days of his *vapor* [*hebel*] life, which he passes like a shadow[*sel*]? For who can tell man what will be after him under the sun?” (Eccl 6:12). Human life too soon dissipates like a vapor and passes like a shadow. Likewise, Qoheleth’s lament over the fleeting period of youth gives *transience* as *hebel*’s referent (cf. 8:10-15). So, again, the prologue’s poem and material within Qoheleth’s book confirm that another referent of his *hebel* imagery is *transience*, *evaporation* or *dissipation* of vapor.

Even though Qoheleth’s use of *hebel* may be elusive, he places his use of the theme imagery within contexts that provide texture, definition, and synonyms. In addition to phrases already considered that refer *hebel* imagery to insubstantiality and to *transience*, Qoheleth states, “And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. It is an unhappy [*ra’*] business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with” (1:13).²⁷ Here, and in numerous passages, sometimes in close proximity to *hebel*, Qoheleth uses “evil” (*ra’*, in the LXX, usually *ponēros*, variously translated as “evil,” “unhappy,” “grievous,” “sad,” and “disaster” in the ESV) with a sense akin to its use in the phrase, “the problem of *evil*” (1:13; 2:17; 4:3; 4:8; 5:15; 6:2; 9:3; 9:12; 11:2).²⁸ The preponderant use of this Hebrew word in Qoheleth does not refer to “moral evil” but to creation’s contrariety to the way it came from God at its creation and formation (Gen. 1-2), so that now, under God’s judgment with the infliction of sin’s curse, “What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted” (1:15; cf. 7:29).²⁹ Disparate distribution of wealth and poverty, inequities in justice, able bodies and strong minds offset with frail bodies and defective minds, missing limbs, maladies, and lives cut short all characterize life in this world where everything is marred with twists and deficits. Qoheleth regards this to be God’s work of judgment by way of common curse: “Consider the

work of God: who can make straight what he has made crooked?” (7:13). As God’s work, of course, this does not refer to God’s creational design over which he declared all things “good” (Gen 1:31), but it refers to his judgment upon creation on account of human sin. Humans cannot hammer out the kinks imposed by divine judgment nor can they insert pieces that are missing (1:15). All that transpires under the sun is a puzzle with pieces that defy assembly and with portions absent. As such, “evil,” with its varied English translations in Ecclesiastes, represents Qoheleth’s verdict concerning all that is an affront to his godly sense of what is just, proper, and befitting, even though he acknowledges that there is a time for every purpose under heaven, including everything that is odious in the juxtaposed opposites of his poem in 3:1-8.

A WISP OF AIR

As contextual linkage of “shepherding the wind” with *hebel* signals Qoheleth’s concern with the insubstantiality of human effort, so correlation of “evil” (*ra’*) with “vapor” (*hebel*) features things that are odious, loathsome, or foul.³⁰ Add to this, two synonyms, “vexation” (*ka’as*, 11:10) and “sickness” (*holi*, 6:2) and two of “evil’s” antipodes, “good” (*toḥ*, e.g., 2:1, 24) and “satisfy” (*saba’*, e.g., 4:8; 5:9; 6:2-4). Within their respective contexts these synonyms and contraries qualify *hebel*’s referent to be *foulness* rather than insubstantiality or *transience*.³¹ It is crucial to observe that Qoheleth uses “evil” (*ra’*) never equal to but only as a subset of “vapor” (*hebel*). This means that Qoheleth positively affirms “all is vapor” (1:2; 12:8), but he never says “all is evil.”

Though everything is “vapor” in one sense or another and sometimes even in more than one sense, not everything is “vapor” in the same sense. Consequently, Qoheleth contends that certain things that are “vapor” are also “evil,” but other things that are “vapor” he does not call “evil” but “good.”³²

Douglas Miller convincingly argues that Qohe-

leth uses “breath” or “vapor” as a single imagery or symbol that embodies multivalency (layers of meaning) with various referents that he teases out throughout his book including insubstantial-

Figure 1



ity, transitoriness, and foulness.³³ Two additional insights seem apropos to enhance Miller’s instructive and persuasive proposal.

First, the onomatopoeic nature of *hebel* as the imitation of the sound it names in word form adds support to hearing *hebel*, a “wisp of air,” as an apt single imagery with three referents—insubstantiality, ephemerality, and foulness.³⁴ As such, a sigh, a murmur, a groan, which entails exhalation, “*hebel*,” is an act that captures Qoheleth’s announced verdict over all things that reside under God’s judgment (“under heaven”).³⁵ It is all a wisp of air. Does Qoheleth allude to a sigh that expresses what utterance cannot: “All words are full of weariness; a man cannot utter it” (1:8)?³⁶

Second, Qoheleth’s use of *hebel* as a single but rich and full onomatopoeic imagery that aptly summarizes his verdict upon everything done under heaven, especially when pronounced, mimics what his quest has discovered, that it is insubstantial, transient, and even foul, expressed with a “wisp of air.” It is all vapor. Qoheleth, who “taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs with great care” who also “sought to find words of delight, and uprightly he wrote words of truth” (12:9-10), ingeniously employs *hebel* as his thematic imagery woven throughout the fabric of his work with multiple

referents, all eliciting incessant efforts to grasp *hebel* to solve the riddle, the grand enigma which eludes the wisest human (8:16-17). For anyone who claims to solve the enigma or to capture the elusive puzzle is left holding a handful of air.

Ironically, Qoheleth’s verdict—“All is *hebel*!”—has itself become an elusive enigma chased after by generations of scholars, hence, “of making many books there is no end” (12:12). With the aid of a few biblical scholars, the elusiveness of *hebel*’s meaning has come into fuller focus. In particular, Douglas Miller’s insights on Qoheleth’s symbolic use of *hebel* have been instructive and compelling but also evocative. He states, “To this purpose, Qoheleth holds forth לָבַח both as a symbol and as a kind of puzzle. In just what ways, he challenges us, is life vapor? A matter has been hidden, and it is up to the reader to find it out.”³⁷ The three referents of Qoheleth’s *hebel* imagery—insubstantiality, transience, and foulness—form the intangible pieces of a puzzle, an enigma. Miller acknowledges that *hebel*, as a literary imagery, poses as a puzzle.³⁸ Hence, even though *hebel*’s referent itself may not be “enigma,” *hebel* as multivalent imagery referring to insubstantiality, transience, and foulness, functions as a kind of riddle or enigma. This confirms, while chastening with much greater fullness and clarity, my own youthful instincts that Qoheleth’s *hebel* bears a flexibility that no single word can adequately capture for every contextual usage and that *hebel* does pose an enigma.

CONCLUSION

Contrary to popular interpretations of Ecclesiastes largely based on 2:24-25, Qoheleth does not rehearse all his observations in an attempt to show “the emptiness of a life lived apart from God.”³⁹ Though one properly infers such a message from Scripture, it is not Qoheleth’s thematic message. Also, contrary to another popular interpretation of Ecclesiastes, Qoheleth does not preach that enjoyment of life nullifies life’s enigmas or resolves life’s problems. The wisdom to which Qoheleth calls readers is not that remembering the Creator,

fearing God, and keeping his commandments unlocks the enigmas of life for the righteous. To the contrary, Qoheleth observes, “There is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evildoing” (7:15). It is precisely this great inequity that prompts Qoheleth to declare, “I said that this also is vapor” and to announce, “So I commend enjoyment, for there is nothing better for people under the sun than to eat, and drink, and enjoy themselves, for this will go with them in their toil through the days of his life that God gives them under the sun” (8:14-15, NRSV). So, precisely because God’s providence in this cursed world fills life with conundrums that consist of insubstantiality, transience, and odiousness Qoheleth encourages readers to enjoy life, which is God’s gift, because “there is nothing better” (2:24; 3:12, 22; 5:18-20; 8:15; 9:7-9; 11:9).⁴⁰ Qoheleth’s counsel to enjoy life as God’s gift which follows his candid observations concerning the enigmas done under the sun resembles neither Pollyanna’s view of the world nor that of a bitter skeptic.

Humanity’s quest to fathom the unfathomable entails inquiry that brings true creatural knowledge, insight, and understanding, which, however expansive or comprehensive one may think such creatural knowledge is, it falls immeasurably short of being exhaustive. Exhaustive knowledge of “all things that occur under the sun” (i.e., creation) belongs not to creatures whose knowledge is derived and learned by observing but belongs to the one who alone has original, innate, or unlearned knowledge, the Creator who made all things and subjected “all things under the sun” to sin’s curse on account of Adam’s rebellion. The Creator and Sustainer is the one Shepherd who provides wisdom for life “under the sun” (12:11).⁴¹

Attempts to grasp the pattern and plan of all that takes place under the sun is to try to grasp wind, for what one grasps dissipates as vapor, leaving one holding a handful of air. On the other hand, one who grasps Qoheleth’s meaning of “vapor” is not disappointed but takes hold of

wisdom which is to submit before God, the one Shepherd, with fear and obedience to dwell contentedly under heaven within the vapor of the Creator’s enigmatic providence that envelopes all things with insubstantiality and transience and some things even with foulness. For, as Qoheleth’s instruction in wisdom from the one Shepherd begins, wisdom that entrusts one to the Creator acknowledges concerning all things under the sun, “Everything is vapor!”

ENDNOTES

¹For example, Sheppard and Wilson think that an editor appended the epilogue to connect Ecclesiastes with the canon (G. T. Sheppard, “The Epilogue to Qoheleth as Theological Commentary,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 39 [1977]: 182-89; and G. Wilson, “‘The Words of the Wise’: The intent and Significance of Qoheleth 12:9-14,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* [JBL] 103 [1984]: 175-92). Roland Murphy believes that the epilogue fails to represent the book accurately so that he oversimplifies its message (*Ecclesiastes*, [Word Biblical Commentary; Dallas: Word, 1992], lxv, 126). Michael Fox proposes that the epilogue places Qoheleth’s dangerous words in a frame that makes it safe for orthodox readers to read him with tolerance without subverting their religious beliefs (*Qoheleth and His Contradictions* [Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement 71; Sheffield: Almond, 1989], 315ff). See also Tremper Longman III, *Ecclesiastes* (New International Commentary on the Old Testament [NICOT]; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 2-9, 57-59, 274-82; and Peter Enns, “Book of Ecclesiastes,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings* (eds. Tremper Longman III and Peter Enns; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity), 124-29. Longman contends, “In my view, the body of the book contains the first-person speech of Qoheleth; the prologue and epilogue contain the first-person speech of an unnamed speaker who refers to Qoheleth in the third person, as another person whom he knows (e.g., 12:8-12)” (*Ecclesiastes*, 7).

²For example, concerning Eccl 3:16ff, Franz Delitzsch states, “If Koheleth had known of a future life ... he

would have reached a better ultimatum” (Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes [trans. M. G. Easton; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950], 262). On the same passage Longman states, “In short, this section is one of a number that indicate to us that Qoheleth did not have a conception of the afterlife. Without such, he realizes that there is no place for divine retribution outside the present evil world. In other words, his observation extends beyond ‘under the sun’ to what takes place in the afterlife, but he concludes that there is nothing there” (*Ecclesiastes*, 128). Is it not curious that Longman earlier defines “under the sun” as “the restricted scope of his inquiry,” yet now he equivocates to state that Qoheleth’s “observation extends beyond ‘under the sun’ to what takes place in the afterlife”(66)? If, by definition, “under the sun” refers to a restricted worldview that “does not allow him to take a transcendent yet immanent God into consideration in his quest for meaning,” then, should not Longman’s claim that Qoheleth’s “observation extends beyond ‘under the sun,’” by definition, mean that at least in 3:18 Qoheleth breaks the restrictions of his own worldview to allow “a transcendent yet immanent God into consideration in his quest for meaning”? Does not this equivocation expose a flaw in Longman’s original defining of “under the sun”?

³Such abuse of Romans 8:28 does not consist in understanding the passage as referring to suffering. Indeed, the context makes it clear that the apostle Paul is referring to suffering when he says “all things work together for good.” Abuse of Romans 8:28 consists in using its truth to mute or to quench biblically warranted lamentation concerning grief brought on by God’s curse for human rebellion. Christians are subject to the vagaries of human emotion, including desire to suppress grief, whether their own or that of another, because mourning is discomfiting.

⁴J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity 1973), 94, 95. Drawing upon his instructive illustration from the electrical simulation of train movements at the York station, Packer makes the point that the mistake that many Christians make is to suppose that when God bestows wisdom he gives “a deepened insight into the providential meaning

and purpose of events going on around us, an ability to see why God has done what He has done in a particular case, and what He is going to do next. People feel that if they were really walking close to God, so that He could impart wisdom to them freely, then they would, so to speak, find themselves in the signal-box; they would discern the real purpose of everything that happened to them, and it would be clear to them every moment how God was making all things work together for good. Such people spend much time poring over the book of providence, wondering why God should have allowed this or that to take place, whether they should take it as a sign to stop doing one thing and start doing another, or what they should deduce from it. If they end up baffled, they put it down to their own lack of spirituality” (92). Additionally, Theodore Plantinga, *Learning to Live with Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) provided significant wisdom and insight.

⁵Deep study of Ecclesiastes prompted thorough and critical reading of Harold S. Kushner’s *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Avon, 1981) and *When All You’ve Ever Wanted Isn’t Enough* (New York: Summit, 1986). Despite the numerous defects of Kushner’s view of God, his candid portrayal of human suffering confronts readers with courageous humane compassion. From within the crucible of suffering, critical engagement and rejection of Kushner’s beliefs concerning God made for deep, attentive, and biblically guided assessment of “Open Theism,” an “evangelical” version of Kushner’s beliefs, that was beginning to emerge at that time under influence from Richard Rice, *The Openness of God: The Relationship of Divine Foreknowledge and Human Free Will* (Nashville: Review & Herald, 1980), reprinted as *God’s Foreknowledge & Man’s Free Will* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1985). Clark Pinnock admits that he learned Open Theism from Rice whom he acknowledges in “God Limits His Knowledge,” in *Predestination & Freewill: Four Views of Divine Sovereignty & Human Freedom* (eds. David Basinger and Randall Basinger; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1986), 143-62.

⁶Samuel Rodigast, “Whate’er My God Ordains” in

Trinity Hymnal (trans. Catherine Winkworth; Philadelphia: Great Commission Publications, 1962), 94. To avoid any lurking confusion, the word “right” in the first line—“Whate’er my God ordains is right”—does not mean “morally right” but what is “fitting” or “appropriate” to God’s purposes.

⁷Unless otherwise indicated, the English Standard Version (ESV) translation is used throughout this essay. Where the ESV uses “vanity,” this essay will alter the wording indicated with *italics*.

⁸Ardel B. Caneday, “Qoheleth: Enigmatic Pessimist or Godly Sage?” *Grace Theological Journal [GTJ]* 7 (1986): 21-56. See also *idem*, “Qoheleth: Enigmatic Pessimist or Godly Sage?” in *Reflecting with Solomon: Selected Studies on the Book of Ecclesiastes* (ed. Roy B. Zuck; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 81-113.

⁹*Ibid*, “Qoheleth,” *GTJ* 7 (1986): 30; *idem*, “Qoheleth,” *Reflecting with Solomon*, 90.

¹⁰This essay is offered with the hope that if wisdom is increased it may offer greater clarity concerning Qoheleth’s message and correct previous shortcomings.

¹¹The wording alters what was originally written which entails the turn of phrase—“comprehend the incomprehensible.” This alteration aims at preventing readers from drawing the unwarranted inference from such purposeful word combinations as “comprehend the incomprehensible” or “fathom the unfathomable” that what is being argued is that God and his ways are so far beyond humans that they are “ineffable,” “unutterable,” or “unintelligible.” As used throughout this essay, “incomprehensible” and “unfathomable” should not be confused with “ineffable,” “unintelligible,” or “unknowable.” What is “incomprehensible” or “unfathomable” is accessible to humans and can be known *truthfully* but not *exhaustively*. As used in this essay, what is “unintelligible” or “unknowable” is inaccessible to humans and cannot be known. The deliberate phrasing, “comprehend the incomprehensible,” reflects that of the Apostle Paul who prayed that his letter recipients might “know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God” (Eph 3:19). “Unknowability,” “unintelligibility,” and “ineffabil-

ity” find no endorsement from either Paul or Qoheleth. Such notions derive from neither ancient Bible writer but from ancient pagan mystery cults. W. E. Staples actually argued that Qoheleth’s use of *hebel* derives from the mystery cults, denoting what is “unfathomable, unknowable, or incomprehensible” (“The ‘Vanity’ of Ecclesiastes,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 2 [1943]: 95-104, esp. 96; see also *idem*, “Vanity of Vanities,” *Canadian Journal of Theology* 1 [1955]: 141-56, esp. 142). Take note that Staples incorrectly confounds the three terms as synonymous. Distinction of “incomprehensible” and “unfathomable,” as Qoheleth’s categories, from “ineffability,” “unintelligible,” or “unknowable” is notable given the dominating view advanced by James Crenshaw and followed in large measure by Tremper Longman III. Longman states, “My understanding of Qoheleth’s thought is closest to that articulated by James Crenshaw. He identified Qoheleth as a prime representative of skepticism in Israel. He argued that Israel’s skeptics severed a vital nerve at two distinct junctures. They denied God’s goodness if not his very existence, and they portrayed men and women as powerless to acquire essential truth” (*The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 36). The notion that Qoheleth teaches that essential truth is inaccessible suggests that knowledge of God is “unknowable” if not “unintelligible.”

¹²For example, Douglas B. Miller observes, “Because of its crucial use in the book, the approach taken to הבל dramatically shapes the way the entire book is understood. If, for example, the reader takes הבל in 1:2 to indicate ‘meaningless’ (so NIV), then this appears to be Qoheleth’s message about all of human experience as well, for then, ‘All is meaningless’ (“Qoheleth’s Symbolic Use of הבל ,” *JBL* 117 [1998]: 437).

¹³For example, Longman states that the debate resides here: “As Qoheleth uses the term, and as the frame narrator picks it up and summarizes Qoheleth’s thought with it, does it signify that ‘everything is meaningless’ or that ‘everything is temporary’” (*Ecclesiastes*, 62).

¹⁴Both *vanitas* and *mataiotēs* allow for broader senses than the English “vanity” denotes or connotes. *Mataiotēs* signifies “emptiness, futility, purposelessness, transitoriness” (*BDAG*, 621). Thus, because the

Greek term entails “transitoriness,” it allows for a broader sense.

¹⁵See D. P. Simpson, *Cassell's Latin Dictionary* (New York: Macmillan, 1968), 630. For a different understanding of *vanitas* as including the sense “unsubstantial or illusory quality,” see Robert V. McCabe, “The Message of Ecclesiastes,” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal [DBSJ]* 1(1996): 90. He cites P. G. W. Glare, ed., *Oxford Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982), 2010.

¹⁶Concerning the meaning of *hebel*, in an earlier attempt to account for its rich and full nuances in Ecclesiastes, my previous essay was less than successful to avoid unintended ambiguity that invites some confusion that this essay endeavors to correct (see Caneday, “Qoheleth,” 35-37. Cf. Shank who states, “an attempt to find a ‘static’ meaning of *hebel* in Ecclesiastes ... fails to take note of the richness of the concept as used by Qoheleth” (“Qoheleth’s World and Life View,” 66). Among recent works on Ecclesiastes that have chastened and corrected my understanding are three essays in order of impact: (1) Douglas B. Miller, “Qoheleth’s Symbolic Uses of לָבַח,” *JBL* 117 (1998): 437-54; (2) Graham S. Ogden, “‘Vanity’ It Certainly Is Not,” *The Bible Translator* 38, no. 3 (1987): 301-07; and (3) Robert V. McCabe, “The Message of Ecclesiastes,” *DBSJ* 1 (1996): 85-112.

¹⁷“Qoheleth involves the whole reader in an incessant movement of thought as he carefully weaves his various strands of thread into a multiform fabric, fully reflecting this world and life in it. His literary image reflects the harsh realities of this present world as he places side by side contradictory elements to portray the twisted, disjointed and disfigured form of this world (1:15; 7:13) (Caneday, “Qoheleth,” 40).

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 37-38.

²⁰Graham Ogden has convincingly argued against the proclivity of English translations and the bent of many scholars that Qoheleth’s use of *hebel* does not bear the sense “vanity” (“‘Vanity’ It Certainly Is Not,” 301-07.

²¹The prepositional phrase “under the sun” occurs 29 times throughout Ecclesiastes. “Under the sun” means

the same as “under heaven” (1:13; 2:3; 31) and “on earth” (5:2; 7:20; 8:14, 16; 11:2). Everywhere Qoheleth uses “under the sun” he employs it to describe the sphere where the activities he observes take place; never does he use the phrase, or parallel phrases, to bracket out God and his providential role from his inquiry. The phrases circumscribe the realm of all that Qoheleth observed where God’s judgment for human rebellion rules in contrast to that realm over which God’s reign knows no opposition (Caneday, “Qoheleth,” 26). Cf. H. Carl Shank, “Qoheleth’s World and Life View As Seen in His Recurring Phrases,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 37 (1974): 67.

²²For example, “Ecclesiastes is the book of man ‘under the sun’ reasoning about life. The philosophy it sets forth, which makes no claim to revelation but which inspiration records for our instruction, represents the world-view of the wisest man, who knew that there is a holy God and that He will bring everything into judgment” (*The New Scofield Reference Bible* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1967], 696). It does not suggest that Qoheleth engages in “natural theology” (cf. H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Ecclesiastes* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1974], 42-43). Longman contends that “under the sun,” “under heaven,” and “on earth” indicate an exclusion of the God of Scripture from all Qoheleth’s considerations: “In brief, Qoheleth’s frequent use of the phrase *under the sun* highlights the restricted scope of his inquiry. His worldview does not allow him to take a transcendent yet immanent God into consideration in his quest for meaning” (*Ecclesiastes*, 66). To take “under the sun,” “under heaven,” and “on earth” as “the restricted scope of his inquiry,” as describing Qoheleth’s belief system, is to misread how Qoheleth actually uses the phrases. Instead of restricting his worldview, the phrases indicate the realm where the activities observed take place, namely, “under heaven,” “on the earth.” Ecclesiastes 1:13-14 should suffice to make the point obvious that Qoheleth uses the phrases “under heaven” and “under the sun” in parallel as *the restricted sphere of activities he is privileged to observe*, not a bracketing God out of his inquiry.

²³In Ecclesiastes 1:13 Longman explains that he prefers to translate עָרָא as “evil” because he believes that Qoheleth bears an “acerbic attitude” toward God. Longman thinks that “evil is a translation more in keeping with Qoheleth’s subtle criticism of God throughout the book” (*Ecclesiastes*, 80). Likewise, on 2:17 Longman states, “I believe that Qoheleth here subtly accuses God of moral evil” (p. 100). See also his comments on 5:1, where he claims, “Qoheleth warns his readers to be cautious in approaching God with words because *God is in heaven and you are on earth*. We take this statement not as an assertion of divine power, but of divine distance, perhaps even of indifference” (*Ibid.*, 151).

²⁴The expression, “chasing the wind,” is reminiscent of “harness the wind,” a rather pretentious idiom since wind that fills the sails of ships or turns the blades of mills, though channeled is hardly harnessed, for wind has destroyed many.

²⁵Graham Ogden suggests, “What Qoheleth describes is the attempt to bring the wind under control, to make it blow in a certain direction according to the dictates of the shepherd ... a delightful idiomatic phrase for attempting the impossible” (*Qoheleth* [Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007], 24; *idem*, *Qoheleth* [JSOT Readings: A New Biblical Commentary; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1987], 21). As such, “shepherding the wind” has its counterpart in the contemporary expression, “herding cats,” an idiom for attempting to control the uncontrollable.

²⁶See Ecclesiastes 1:14; 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4, 6, 16; and 6:9. Cf. 1:17, where *hebel* does not occur, and 5:16. Miller observes, “Qoheleth does not say that one cannot achieve pleasure, wisdom, or wealth, nor does he say that these things once achieved are necessarily gone quickly. Rather, he sees that people are working hard to achieve pleasure, wisdom, and wealth, but when they have them there is still no ‘advantage’ (see, e.g., Eccl 2:1-11)” (“Qoheleth’s Symbolic Use of לְבַבָּה,” 447, n. 37).

²⁷In relation to *hebel* the word *ra’* functions like “shepherding the wind.” Two patterns are discernible: (1) “all is/was *hebel* and . . .” (a) shepherding the wind (1:14; 2:11, 17), and (b) *ra’* (9:1-3); and (2)

“this indeed is/was *hebel* and . . .” (a) shepherding the wind (2:26; 4:4, 16; 6:9), and (b) *ra’* (great evil, 2:21; unhappy business, 4:8; grievous evil, 6:2). See Miller, “Qoheleth’s Symbolic Use of לְבַבָּה,” 449-50.

²⁸In addition to the Septuagint’s uses of *ponēros* in Ecclesiastes, the Masoretic Text uses עָרָא or עָרָא in 4:4 (*zēlos*) and 7:3 (*kakia*). In some passages the word “evil” has in view “moral evil,” as in 8:3, 11, 12 and 12:14, but in the majority of passages, unless one is bent to read Qoheleth pejoratively, the word does not refer to “moral evil” but to God’s curse upon his whole creation that intensifies the enigma.

²⁹As we address “the problem of evil” we use the word “evil” to include “non-moral evils,” calamities that befall humans, such as hurricanes, tsunamis, floods, fires, tornadoes, economic collapses, airplane crashes, car wrecks, etc. Qoheleth also frequently uses the word “evil” in the same way, referring to “non-moral evils.” See passages listed above.

³⁰Miller, “Qoheleth’s Symbolic Use of לְבַבָּה,” 450.

³¹These terms, including *ra’*, are used often in contexts without *hebel*. For example, see 4:1-3; 7:13-14; 8:1-9; 9:11-12; 10:5-7; 10:12-15; 11:1-6; 12:1. See Miller, “Qoheleth’s Symbolic Use of לְבַבָּה,” 451, n. 51. On Qoheleth’s uses of עָרָא and עָרָא in this sense of “odious” or “loathsome” and not as “moral evil,” see David W. Baker, “רָעָע,” in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (ed. Willem A. VanGemeren; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 3:1154-58. Cf. Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 19.

³²Cf. Miller, “Qoheleth’s Symbolic Use of לְבַבָּה,” 451.

³³The statement above extrapolates Miller’s concepts with my own wording preferences. Cf. Miller, “Qoheleth’s Symbolic Use,” 437-54. To “insubstantiality” and “transience,” two well recognized figurative referents for *hebel*, Miller adds “foulness” reflecting הָעָרָא/עָרָא functioning as a synonym for *hebel* (449, more on this subsequently). Instead of “imagery,” Miller prefers to identify *hebel* as a “literary symbol” or “image.” I prefer to use the word “imagery” when considering the literary realm and “image” concerning the corporeal realm. He states, “Such symbols are well known in Israelite wisdom material as well as elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. However, Qoheleth did not choose

a symbol used previously in the tradition. He did not employ ‘the way,’ or ‘the tree of life,’ nor did he personify a characteristic, as do ‘Lady Wisdom’ and the ‘Woman of Folly’ in Proverbs 1-9. Rather, he chose to hold forth לַבַּיִת a vapor or breath as his primary symbol” (444-45).

³⁴Jason DeRouchie brought it to my attention that *hebel* (breath) when spoken entails the initial release of breath aspirating the initial “h” followed by the fricative “v” sound warrants identifying the word as an example of onomatopoeia, a word that sounds out what it represents (DeRouchie, Bethlehem College & Seminary, unpublished lecture notes, 2011). Cf. K. Seybold, “לַבַּיִת *hebhel*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, et al.; trans. John T. Willis, et al.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 3:314.

³⁵In light of this, it is intriguing to ponder Paul’s three-fold mention of “groaning” in Romans 8. In 8:22, creation *sustenazō*; in 8:23, believers *stenazō*; and in 8:26, the Spirit *hyperentunchanei stenagmois alalētois*.

³⁶As with the Hebrew *hebel*, one may plausibly suggest, as some have, that the English “sigh” also imitates the sound that it identifies, forcing air through a constricted passage.

³⁷Miller, “Qohelet’s Symbolic Use of לַבַּיִת,” 454.

³⁸See Ogden, “‘Vanity’ It Certainly Is Not,” 306-07.

³⁹Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1991), 200. See also Charles R. Swindoll, *Living on the Ragged Edge: Coming to Terms with Reality* (Waco, TX: Word, 1985), 16.

⁴⁰Graham S. Ogden, “Qoheleth’s Use of the ‘Nothing Is Better’—Form,” *JBL* 98 (1979): 339-50. Cf. *idem*, “Qoheleth XI 7-XII 8: Qoheleth’s Summons to Enjoyment and Reflection,” *Vetus Testamentum* 34 (1984): 27-38.

⁴¹On One Shepherd, see Jason DeRouchie, “Shepherding Wind and One Wise Shepherd: Grasping for *Breath* in Ecclesiastes,” in this volume of *SBJT*.