

Theologische Studien

**Siegbert Riecker,
Julius Steinberg (Hrsg.)**

Das heilige Herz der Tora

Festschrift für Hendrik Koorevaar zu seinem 65. Geburtstag

Shaker Verlag
Aachen 2011

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.

Copyright Shaker Verlag 2011

Alle Rechte, auch das des auszugsweisen Nachdruckes, der auszugsweisen oder vollständigen Wiedergabe, der Speicherung in Datenverarbeitungsanlagen und der Übersetzung, vorbehalten.

Printed in Germany.

ISBN 978-3-8440-0584-4

ISSN 1433-4534

Shaker Verlag GmbH • Postfach 101818 • 52018 Aachen

Telefon: 02407 / 95 96 - 0 • Telefax: 02407 / 95 96 - 9

Internet: www.shaker.de • E-Mail: info@shaker.de

The Translation of *Hebel* in Ecclesiastes

Mart-Jan Paul

1. Introduction

Hendrik Koorevaar loves the Scriptures; his desire for a deep understanding is evident in his internal and external publications. Concentrating himself on the literary structures of the books of the Old Testament, he wants to detect more of the theological message. In contrast to many scholars, he accepts the authorship of the books as indicated by the self-designations, and he wants to defend the historical reliability of the historical Biblical books.

In this article¹ I want to honor Hendrik Koorevaar's contribution by focusing on a disputed book, the Book of Ecclesiastes. Even in conservative circles, many scholars have accepted a date for this book after the Exile, e.g. F. Delitzsch and G.Ch. Aalders, yet Koorevaar defends the Solomonic origin of the book. He claims that the last verses are not a later addition to the book, but an integral part of it. Koorevaar translates the word **הֶבֶל** (*hebel*) with the usual translation »vanity« and delineates as many as twelve vanities in the book. However, in his opinion, the author of Ecclesiastes also gives us answers that are relative and absolute.²

In many aspects I agree with Koorevaar's approach. However, it is useful to have a further look at the keyword *hebel*. In the last years, several suggestions have been made for other translations of this word, and the results affect the understanding of the book. We can say that the history of interpretation of Ecclesiastes is one mainly of its meaning of *hebel*.

In this article, I will go on to pay attention to the recent and old translations of *hebel*, the use of the verb and the noun in the Old Testament, and especially

¹ I am grateful to Johan Hegeman for the improvement of the English language in this article.

² H. J. Koorevaar, *Wijsheidsanon: De 11 Wijsheidsboeken*, Versie 5.3, Leuven: Evangelische Theologische Faculteit, 2010-2011. Chapter 27 »Het boek Prediker«, p. 231-251. The translation of *hebel* is »nutteloosheid« and »zinloosheid«.

in Ecclesiastes.³ I will continue to evaluate three important suggested translations and then put forward an own proposal. At the end I will provide some short remarks about dating and purpose of the book and its place in the canon, with the aim to verify the translations of *hebel*.⁴ Questions to be answered are: Is the message carried out by the translation and the book a deviation from the message of the Torah? Or should we conclude that the holy hart of the Torah is beating in this book?

2. Basic Meaning

The word *hebel* is used nearly eighty times in the Old Testament and has the literal meaning »breath, vapor«, but is only used a few times in this sense:⁵

- »Lowborn men are but a breath, the highborn are but a lie; if weighed on a balance, they are nothing; together they are only a breath«.
(Ps. 62:10⁶ NIV; the word is used two times.)
- »A fortune made by a lying tongue is a fleeting vapor and a deadly snare.« (Prov. 21:6)
- »When you cry out for help, let your collection of idols save you! The wind will carry all of them off, a mere breath will blow them away.«
(Isa. 57:13)

Even in these texts, the word is not used to describe the respiration of man, but to illustrate breath-like, weightless, transience, and insubstantial futility. The other 75 nominal and verbal instances of the word are metaphorical. We note that metaphorical use is open for different understanding, especially depending on the context, and hence different translations have been offered.

Before I review the metaphorical employment of the word, I will survey the modern and old translations in order to sufficiently grasp the difficulties of translation involved.

³ For the book the usual designation Ecclesiastes is used and for the author the self-designation Qohelet (see 1:1).

⁴ Cf. M. J. Paul, G. van den Brink, J. C. Bette, eds., *Bijbelcommentaar Psalmen II – Prediker*. Studiebijbel Oude Testament, Veenendaal: Centrum voor Bijbelonderzoek, 2011. Cf. www.studiebijbel.nl. I want to thank my colleague Marco Rotman for his contribution to this volume, especially with regard to the explanation of Ecclesiastes.

⁵ K. Seybold, »הֶבֶל«, *THAT 2*, p. 334-343; G.J. Johnston, »הֶבֶל«, *NIDOTTE 1*, p. 1003-1005; D. C. Fredericks, »הֶבֶל«, *NIDOTTE 1*, p. 1005f.

⁶ Verse number according to the Hebrew Bible. In English translations verse 9.

3. Modern Translations and Commentaries

The word *hebel* is used 38 times in Ecclesiastes, especially in the theme, expressed in 1:2 and 12:8, in the beginning and at the end of the book.⁷ The classical translation of the word is »vanity« and the stronger expression הַבְּלִיּוֹת is translated with »vanity of vanities« (KJV) and this is maintained in the modern English translations RSV and NRSV. However, NIV and NLT have »meaningless« and »utterly meaningless«. The JPS Tanakh gives »utter futility« and GNB »useless«. It seems that these are more modern expressions for the same idea.

In Dutch language, the classical translation is »ijdelheid der ijdelheden«. The NBV has »lucht en leegte« (»air and emptiness«), but the HSV has »een en al vluchtigheid« (»total fleetingness, transience«).⁸ This last translation can be termed a deviation from the old tradition of translation.

The commentaries and monographs offer a broader range of possibilities for the translation of *hebel*:⁹

- W.E. Staples (1943): incomprehensible, unknowable,
- E.M. Good (1981): irony,
- M.V. Fox (1986): absurd,
- G.S. Ogden (1987) and C.G. Bartholomew (2009): enigmatic,
- K.A. Farmer (1991) and D.C. Fredericks (1993): temporary, transience,
- T. Longman (1998): meaningless,
- D.B. Miller (2002): transience, insubstantiality, or foulness,
- N. Lohfink (2003): a puff of breath.

In the overview above the word »vanity« is replaced by »meaningless«, but also other possibilities are offered. Fox gives the extreme meaning »absurd«, referring to existentialist philosophers and he denies any meaning to the term *hebel*.¹⁰ Other scholars are more positive: the temporary aspect of it does leave room for its possessing or referring to meaning. To be sure, »enigmatic« does

⁷ Some would emend הכל to הבל in 9:2, per LXX.

⁸ Bram Maljaars, one of the members of the translation team of the HSV, suggested »lucht en een zucht« (»air and a sigh«). Personal communication.

⁹ Cf. J. J. Lavoie, »הבל הבלים הכל הבל«. Histoire de l'interprétation d'une formule célèbre et enjeux culturels, *Science et esprit* 58 (2006), p. 219-249. C. G. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms, Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009, p. 93, 105. D. C. Fredericks and D. J. Estes, *Ecclesiastes & The Song of Songs*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary, Nottingham: Apollos, Downers Grove: IVP, 2010, p. 49-50.

¹⁰ M. V. Fox, »The Meaning of *Hebel* for Qohelet«, *JBL* 105 (1986), p. 409-427, and *Ecclesiastes*, The JPS Bible Commentary, Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2004.

not indicate that there is no meaning to *hebel* but that it appears ungraspable or incomprehensible.

Given all these variations, it behooves us to explore the older traditions of interpretation of *hebel*.

4. The Older History of Interpretation

The Jewish festival of Booths (Sukkoth) includes in its ceremony the reading of Ecclesiastes. The feast celebrates the blessings of God throughout the year. The emphasis Ecclesiastes puts on enjoying one's life, food and drink is a very appropriate part of Sukkoth. Hardly would a message of pessimism and themes of vanity and futility as portrayed in *hebel* encourage the joy and festivities supposed at a celebration.

We see that some Jewish Greek translations render *hebel* in its literal sense of »breath«, for example Symmachus, Aquila and Theodotion. The LXX translates *hebel* as *mataiotēs*, which has a similar breadth of meaning as *hebel*, including »emptiness«, »futility« and »transience«.

The allegorical and spiritual approach dominated Jewish reading of Ecclesiastes in the following centuries, as is evident from the Talmud and the Targum; the latter was the first entire commentary on this book, as far as we know.

The first significant Christian study of Ecclesiastes was undertaken by Origen in the third century. In his view, Ecclesiastes prepared the ground for the Song of Songs by teaching that all knowledge deserves contempt and that the physical realm merits little more than our disdain.¹¹

The first extant commentary in Latin is written by Jerome (d. 420), the translator of the Vulgate.¹² He translated *hebel* with *vanitas*. As the English »vanity« this means »hollow, empty, worthless«, at most »trivial«. Jerome made the important choice to translate *hebel* by using the one connotation pertaining to value rather than to that of transience.

Jerome wrote the commentary as a guidebook on spiritual devotion for one Blesilla, an aristocratic Roman, in order to provoke her to hold contempt for the world and thus to encourage her to adopt a monastic-like vocation. Two principles govern his allegorical reading of Ecclesiastes, namely *contemptus*

¹¹ Origen made this remark in his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*.

¹² See Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 26-30.

mundi – the world is worthy of contempt – and that the entire earthly scene may be considered valueless, that is *pro nihilo*. Jerome asserts the notion of the vanity of every enjoyment under the sun and the necessity of an ascetic life devoted to the service of God.

Since the Vulgate was given unquestioned authority to determine Christian theology and exegesis, this translation and the accompanying explanation casted the book's future for centuries. E.g., Thomas à Kempis gave the first chapter of his book *The Imitation of Christ* (ca. 1424) the title »Imitating Christ and Despising All Vanities on Earth«. Thomas emphasizes the importance of the grace and love of God and says »Vanity of vanities and all is vanity, except to love God and serve Him alone. This is the greatest wisdom – to seek the kingdom of heaven with contempt for the world.«

Luther reassessed the function of *hebel* in the book. This word is taken by him to refer not to God's creation order but to the self, the human condition. *Hebel* in his view relates not to the created realm but to anthropology; not to the body but to the heart, the volitional center of the human person. The translation of *hebel* remained the same.¹³

In the European context of artistry, the value of *vanitas* can be recognized in medieval funerary art, with most surviving examples found in sculptures. The word *vanitas* is especially related to the symbolic work of art in the 16th and 17th centuries. Paintings executed in the *vanitas* style serve as reminders of the transience of life, the futility of pleasure, and the certainty of death.¹⁴

Lacking space to further sketch the further history of exegesis of Ecclesiastes, I conclude that in the last two centuries most scholars have seen the book as a negative, skeptical reaction to the Biblical wisdom as represented by Proverbs. With regard to the message of Ecclesiastes, historical-critical scholarship differed notably from pre-critical reading in its general rejection of the need to harmonize Ecclesiastes with theological orthodoxy. Usually the epilogue of the book in 12:9-14 has been considered as a later addition to make the work acceptable for the Jewish canon.

¹³ Ibid, p. 31.

¹⁴ See e.g. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vanitas>

5. The Verb הָבַל and the Noun הֶבֶל in the Old Testament

After this survey of the tradition of interpretation, I return to the discussed words and try to understand the use of the verb and the noun in the Old Testament.

The verb הָבַל means: be futile, profitless, worthless; become vain, act foolish; speak in a futile manner, speak to no avail, meaningless talk.¹⁵ In the wisdom literature the verb and noun focus on empty content: false claims without substance (Job 27:12), contradictory assertions that render one's argument empty and meaningless (35:16).

The basic sense of the root הָבַל describes the immaterial, transient nature of one's breath and evanescent vapor (Prov. 21:6; Isa. 57:13), which is a synonym for רוּחַ, breath, wind. However, the meaning »breath, vapor« is more about the visible aspect than the sense of רוּחַ as »spirit«. This use yields the abstract negative, viz. that which is unsubstantial (Jer. 10:15; 16:19), worthless (2 Kgs 17:15; Jer. 2:5; 10:3), futile (Lam. 4:17), transient and fleeting (Job 7:16; Pr. 31:30).

The word *hebel* functions many times as a metaphor for »insubstantial because false«. It is used 32 times to appraise the substantiality of personal action or heretical cults on the basis of their veracity or falsity. In some passages *hebel* is nearly a synonym for »idol« (e.g. Jer. 10:8; 14:22). In Jeremiah the word refers to the totality of any false religion.

We do well to recognize that there are other insubstantial human efforts that are addressed by the biblical poets. The righteous themselves despair of their »vain« piety since no immediate fruit is evident (Job 9:29; Isa. 49:4). Truly vain efforts come from foreign nations who intend to help Israel, when God's people need only his assistance (Isa. 30:7; Lam. 4:17). False speech is of no value (Job 21:34; 27:12). More devious are the vain, dishonest words of false prophets (Jer. 23:16) and diviners (Zech. 10:2) and unscrupulous businessmen (Prov. 13:11; 21:6).

Several instances of the word *hebel* point to the temporality of breath:

- Job 7:16 »I despise my life; I would not live forever. Let me alone; my days have no meaning.« This is the translation put forward by the NIV, but also possible is »breath like are my days« or »my days are as short as a breath«. The last translation gives a better parallel in the verse.

¹⁵ See the aforementioned theological wordbooks.

- Ps. 39:6-7a »You have made my days a mere handbreadth; the span of my years is as nothing before you. Each man's life is but a breath [in shortness]. Man is a mere phantom as he goes to and fro: He bustles about, but only in vain.« The words »in vain« can also be translated with »temporarily«. The consequence is that the acquired wealth, mentioned in verse 7b, goes to another person and this fits better in the context.
- Ps. 78:33 »So they ended their days in futility and their years in terror«. The context deals with Israel in the desert. God cut down the young men of Israel, but in spite of all this, they did not believe. It is not necessary to think about a meaningless life, also possible is the shortness of it as a pertaining meaning.
- Ps. 144:4 »Man is like a breath; his days are like a fleeting shadow.«
- It is likely that the name »Abel« in Gen. 4 has this connotation. His life was short, not useless or valueless.

My conclusion of this overview concerning *hebel* is:

- a. The basic meaning is »wind«, »vapor« or »breath«. There are only a few instances with a literal meaning, the most examples show a metaphorical use.
- b. Sometimes the word is a designation for false gods as »nothing«.
- c. Several times the word designates the brevity and uncertainty of life.

6. The Word *hebel* in Ecclesiastes

I will now focus on the manner in which *hebel* is used in the book of Ecclesiastes. It is mentioned in Eccl. 1:2, 14; 2:1, 11, 15, 17, 19, 21, 23, 26; 3:19; 4:4, 7, 8, 16; 5:6, 9; 6:2, 4, 9, 11, 12; 7:6, 15; 8:10, 14; 9:9; 11:8, 10; 12:8.

The usage is very general in הַבֵּל הַכֹּל (1:2; 1:14; 2:11, 17; 3:19; 12:8) and applied to specific situations as גַּם־הוּא הַבֵּל (2:1) and גַּם־זֶה הַבֵּל (2:15, 19, 21, 23, 26; 4:4, 8, 16; 5:9; 6:9; 7:6; 8:10, 14).

For determining the meaning it is useful to observe the parallel expressions of it, רָעוּת רִיחַ (1:14; 2:11, 17; 2:26; 4:4; 6:9) and רָעוּן רִיחַ (4:16). These expressions are usually translated with »chasing after the wind«. In 2:11 a further expression is added: »nothing is gained under the sun«.

Three times we find an expression with the word רָע \ רָעָה »bad thing, evil« (2:21; 4:8; 6:2). Further the parallel »darkness« is used in 6:4.

How can these translations be evaluated?

6.1 Vanity

There are several reasons for harboring serious doubt that *hebel* means only »vanity« or »meaninglessness« in Ecclesiastes.¹⁶

I explore some reasons for this claim.

- a. Qohelet has many lessons for his readers. When we choose »vanity« as meaning, it could only be applied in a limited way. That some aspects of life are *hebel*, as well as severely evil (2:21; 6:2) and inflicting (4:8), speaks against seeing it merely as meaninglessness. In fact, these evils are grievous and seen from a moral standard encompass more than meaninglessness.
- b. Qohelet gives several comparisons like »nothing is better than« (e.g. 2:13) and »the one thing is better than the other thing« and so he is making qualitative distinctions. Therefore, not all things are meaningless or absurd.
- c. The author gives the advice to be wise and shows the value of wisdom (2:13, 26; 7:11-12, 19; 9:16, 18; 10:10).
- d. We note the reference to industriousness and diligence; these convictions Qohelet drives home to his hearers, and these are hardly to be played upon if the one giving the orders knows it will eventually be utterly futile. The same can be said about the advice to feast on food and to enjoy life.
- e. Qohelet questions many things, but not the existence of God; such is obvious (3:9, 13, 18). People are going to the temple (5:1) and have to pay their vows (5:4). The message at the end of the book is clear: »Fear God and keep his commandments« (12:13) and »God will bring every deed into judgment« (12:14). Even earlier in the book comparable expressions are found: »God will bring you to judgment« (11:9; cf. 3:17) and »Remember your Creator in the days of your youth« (12:1). The spirit of man goes back to God who gave it (3:21; 12:7).

Hence, I conclude that all these reasons are in accordance with the other books of the Bible and therefore it is not possible to see life on earth as being only in

¹⁶ Cf. Fredericks, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 47-48.

terms of vanity. More likely is that only several aspects of life are to be seen as vanity.

6.2 Temporary, Transience

In several contexts in the OT, the meaning »temporary« fits very well, as already seen above. In Ecclesiastes this aspect can also be applied to things done under the sun. The sense here is that the temporary can have great value. A breath, after all, is of considerable value to the one who breathes it. It is not something one can hang on to for long. It is air-like, fleeting, transitory, and elusive rather than meaningless. Immediately equating the temporariness of breath with futility would be a serious *non sequitur*.

Sometimes accent is placed on the shortness of life, as in the expression »the days of his *hebel* life« (6:12; 7:15; 9:9). However, in some other texts the meaning »temporary« does not fit very well. In 2:22-23 we find a man in an anxious state, and he has pain and grief; even at night his mind does not rest. This is not a temporary situation, but a big problem and great riddle. The common death of man and animal is a remaining problem for the one who thinks about the value of human life (3:19). The meaning »temporary« does not seem likely as a description of the value of dreams (5:6) and of the laughter of fools (7:6).

Daniel C. Fredericks, who defends the meaning »temporary« has to admit, in the section dedicated to inappropriate worship, 5:1-7, that *hebel* does perhaps mean what it means in cultic passages in the OT, namely »vanity« (5:6). He sees no problem for his interpretation, because the word is used in its own unique phrasing.

A more severe objection to his proposal is the phrase »chasing the wind« or some similar denotation of futility. However, Fredericks wants to interpret the phrase not as an objective genitive, but as a subjective, possessive genitive. Therefore he translates it accordingly as »the wind's desire«, or »the whim of the wind«, connoting the brevity of life and its experiences, which are like the unpredictable ways of the wind.¹⁷ The wind periodically changes from north to south, east to west, downward, upward, around, and even temporarily becomes absolutely still.

In reviewing this proposal, we must admit that this translation is grammatically possible. However, the meaning is not quite understandable:

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 53.

the wind's desire is understood as the will to change many times, but why is this not expressed more clearly? The problem of Ecclesiastes is not that there are so many (unpredictable) changes, but: Can we grasp the meaning of the events?

Further, in 2:11 Qohelet mentions his own ineffective efforts, and it seems much more likely that this is a comparison with a chasing after the wind, rather than with a temporary action of the wind itself. In 6:9 the comparison is with the appetite of man, his longing to have several things. This fits better with the traditional translation.

A further objection is found in Hos. 12:2 »Ephraim feeds on the wind; he pursues the east wind all day and multiplies lies and violence.« Here is Ephraim, not the wind, the actor.

My conclusion is that the usual translation »chasing after the wind« is more likely. This result affects the possibility to translate *hebel* as »temporary« in all the contexts in Ecclesiastes. Especially the texts with »evil« (2:21; 4:8; 6:2) are not easily to combine with that translation.

6.3 Enigma

Craig Bartholomew translates *hebel* with »enigma«, i.e. »mystery, riddle«. He sees the word applied to the epistemology of Qohelet, not to the cosmology of anthropology. What is at stake in Qohelet's quest is his epistemology, How can we come to know such so that we can trust the result of our explorations? The proximity to »wind« is instructive, for *hebel* is several times associated with »chasing after wind«. The wind is real enough, but it cannot be grasped. This does not mean that there is no meaning, but that if there is a sense of meaning, yet, it eludes us, it cannot be grasped.¹⁸

A problem with this pertaining translation is that the word *hebel* does not have this exact meaning in other texts. It is more influenced by the context than by lexicography. However, in his commentary Bartholomew explains the word as »ungraspable« and that fits the meaning of *hebel* as »vapor«. Therefore, in combination with the search for wisdom in the book, many times this translation seems to be a good choice. However, in the texts with »days« it seems better to translate with »temporary« than with »ungraspable days«.

¹⁸ Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 93, 106.

6.4 Metaphor

Most of the above mentioned proposals give one translation of the word *hebel*. Choon-Leong Seow with others, maintains that Ecclesiastes uses this word in a variety of ways, so that no one translation covers all uses.¹⁹ Douglas B. Miller rightly notes that in order to understand *hebel* in Ecclesiastes we need to take seriously its metaphoric and symbolic nature. He argues that *hebel*, whose basic meaning is vapor, is a tensive symbol, a word causing tension: it has the function of holding together a set of meanings but it cannot be exhausted by any one of them. Miller discerns three referents of *hebel* in Ecclesiastes: insubstantiality, transience and foulness.²⁰

To understand the multiple senses, it is useful to consider the function of a metaphor.

Qohelet uses many metaphors, such as darkness, light, and wind, among others. Metaphors involve associations and implications that structure reality a certain way for those who use them. They have a cognitive content, but the images often raise emotional and valuational aspects that contribute to the persuasive power of the language. Usually the audience can reduce the multiple possibilities of understanding the metaphor through additional elements, such as synonyms, contrary words, or further information.²¹

In the motto in 1:2, according to Miller, *hebel* functions multivalently as a metaphor to refer to the totality of human experience. This is a puzzling statement which the reader is invited to solve and at the end of the book in 12:8, the same statement is made, to recall each of the examples.²²

In the other, shorter statements, usually additional information is given to highlight an aspect of the possible meanings: sometimes transience, sometimes insubstantiality and sometimes foulness. Not everything is *hebel* in the same way. There is nothing inherently bad with insubstantiality, although this can be disappointing. The meaning of *hebel* in combination with »wrong« is more negative (2:21; 4:8).

¹⁹ C. L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*. AncB, New York: Doubleday, 1997, p. 102.

²⁰ D. B. Miller, *Symbol and Rhetoric in Ecclesiastes: The Place of Hebel in Qohelet's Work*, Atlanta: SBL, 2002, p. 152.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 33, 37, 43.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 152.

7. My Own Proposal

I agree with Miller that Ecclesiastes does use *hebel* with a variety of nuances. A metaphor has a range of meanings, sometimes positive and negative, and usually it is not easy to detect the exact meaning. When God is compared with a »rock« (in many Psalms, e.g. Ps. 18:3, 32) we can think about a firm foundation and about might and strength. In a special context other, more negative associations are exposed (Jes. 8:14; 1 Pet. 2:7). Meanings projected by metaphors then can alternate with multiple understandings.

Therefore, we can ask the question whether or not it is good to explain the metaphor. As already pointed out, the basic meaning of *hebel* is »vapor, breath« and but sometimes the context points to »temporary«, sometimes to »ungraspable«, and sometimes to »weightless«. In each case, the reader has to grasp the meaning of the metaphor.

Fredericks objects that although a multiple-meaning approach may appear in its flexibility to solve the enigma of *hebel*, it ignores the poetic consistency and grammatically *formulaic* presentation of *hebel* in almost every instance where it occurs in Ecclesiastes.²³

However, this objection is not decisive, because it does not evaluate the use of a metaphor. I have pointed out that the contexts in Ecclesiastes indicate a diversity in uses of the term *hebel*. The author uses the word thirty eight times and he seems to play with the meanings of the word. Rather than trying to establish the exact meaning of *hebel*, it seems better to read Ecclesiastes as literature and to accept that Qohelet intended to give certain information to his readers, but doing so left many things unexplained.

We do well to recognize that the term *hebel* is a keyword that has its own unique character and function in the book and that the author uses its connotations. Following this approach, I will look at the lexicographical possibilities of the word, and go on to take into account the context in Ecclesiastes. Instead of pursuing an exact as possible translation of *hebel* with different words in different contexts, it is preferable to accept the approach followed by the author that one keyword is chosen. From this perspective, I prefer the translation »vapor« for *hebel* and in the thematic sentences the more intensive »totaly vapor«. This translation is established outside Ecclesiastes, in the other books of the Old Testament, and has a slightly negative connotation, while

²³ Fredericks, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 51.

»breath« is usually more positive. This word vapor can be used as a metaphor in all the above mentioned meanings.

8. The Purpose of Ecclesiastes

After determining the meaning of the keyword, it is necessary to have a short look at the purpose of the book, in order to verify if this meaning is correct. As stated above, usually interpretation and translation are connected with the total view on the book.

The author, with the name Qohelet, does not question the existence of God. He is the Creator, who gives men their spirit (12:1,7). What God does will endure forever and He does it so that men will revere Him (3:14). Ecclesiastes presupposes several parts of the Torah, the first chapters of Genesis (3:11, 20; 7:29; 12:7), a house of God (5:1), the making of vows (5:3), the offerings, and the difference between clean and unclean (9:2). Therefore, it is not justified to make a sharp distinction between the traditional belief in Israel and the message of Qohelet.

Ecclesiastes describes many difficulties in this world, but the book does not question the fundamental beliefs.²⁴ Qohelet himself is a wise man (1:16; 12:9) and he advises his readers to become wise. The difference between the righteous and the wise on the one side and the sinners and fools on the other side is not always seen in this world (2:16; 9:1-4), it is better to fear God and to live wisely (7:18-19).

Although Qohelet has disturbing observations, he never questions the retribution. He acknowledges this as a principle (8:12-13) and states that all people have to render account of their deeds. God will judge the life of everyone (3:17; 11:9; 12:14).²⁵

The emphasis on the temporary aspect of the human life brings along the mentioning of the end of life and death. Qohelet has the fundamental conviction that God judges. However, this is not always done in this life on earth (8:10-11). It seems that there is a continuation of life after death, in relation-

²⁴ Fox writes: »Qohelet never sets himself across the divide from the more conventional beliefs, and he does not invoke the anomalies to undermine orthodox wisdom.« M.V. Fox, »The Inner-Structure of Qohelet's Thought,« in: A. Schoors, ed., *Qohelet in the Context of Wisdom*, BETL 86, Leuven: University Press; Peeters, 1998, p. 225-238, here p. 231.

²⁵ Cf. R.N. Whybray, »Qoheleth as a Theologian«, in: Schoors, ed., *Qohelet*, p. 239-265, here p. 259-260.

ship with God's judgment.²⁶ The spirit of man goes to God (12:7) and what happens then? Qohelet provides no further information: he concentrates on what is seen on earth (7:14; 9:1).

On earth, he looks at the lives of men and sees all sort of activities. He has a look »under the sun« (1:9, 14) and asks what man does gain from all his labor at which he toils under the sun. The answer is not sought directly in God's revelation but in what can be seen in this world. This epistemological search is applied to all sorts of activities, and usually the result is disappointing. »Who knows?« and »No one can comprehend« (3:11, 21; 8:17). A profound and satisfying answer is not found in the things that can be seen on earth.

In these circumstances the advice of Qohelet is to revere God and to live according his commandments (12:13). A similar conclusion is found at the end of the speech about wisdom in the Book of Job (28:28).

Many times the epilogue of Ecclesiastes is seen as an orthodox correction of a message foreign to the Israel beliefs. However, when it is acknowledged that Qohelet does not question the fundamental beliefs, but restricts himself to observations »under the sun«, this objection appears solved. The epilogue is connected by many ties to the earlier chapters of the book.²⁷ It seems better to see the epilogue as the climax and the main message of the book after reporting a search that was disappointing in many ways.

Qohelet is not a skeptic without a message, but he tries to persuade his audience to follow a way of living in wisdom.

The message of Ecclesiastes is not fundamentally different from the other wisdom books.²⁸ Those books are all related to creation. The Creator is also the source of wisdom how to behave in this world. Law and wisdom share an underlying and often tacit presupposition of a »carved« creation order. Instruction from Him would therefore not be seen to conflict with the way He ordered his creation, but would provide the ethical principles for discovery of that order. Therefore, Bartholomew advises us to read the Torah vocabulary in Ecclesiastes with its full religious and ethical connotations.²⁹ Wisdom has much to do with the title of this Festschrift!

²⁶ See M. J. Paul, »De vergelding van gedrag in Job, Spreuken en Prediker«, in idem, ed., *Bijbelcommentaar Psalmen II – Prediker*, p. 930-936.

²⁷ E.g. the fear of God and his judgment in 12:13-14 is connected with 3:14; 5:6; 11:9; 12:1. Cf. A. G. Shead, »Reading Ecclesiastes »Epilogically«, *Tyndale Bulletin* 48/1 (1997), p. 67-91.

²⁸ Whybray, »Theologian«, 264f. It remains unclear when the original Ecclesiastes, if unorthodox, would have been deemed worthy of editing, and why the editing was done so unsuccessfully.

²⁹ Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 91-92.

9. Dating

In Jewish and Christian tradition, the authorship of Solomon always has been accepted. In the last centuries questions arose in Western Europe about the dating of the book, especially in relation to linguistic observations. Now, most scholars date the book after the Exile, and philosophical arguments are adduced for this view. The book has to be written and accepted as canonical before the time of the Qumran manuscript 4QQoh^a from ca. 175-150 B.C.

The last twenty five years several changes have occurred. In 1988, Daniel C. Fredericks published his conclusions that the linguistic features fits the period of the kings of Israel, not later than the 8th or 7th century B.C.³⁰ In his later commentary he does not exclude a Solomonic authorship (10th century B.C.).³¹ Several scholars as Antoon Schoors and Choon-Leong Seow reacted on this proposal. Avi Hurvitz admits that many arguments, adduced in earlier times, are not conclusive.³² And Tremper Longman acknowledges so many uncertainties that he refuses any longer to use the linguistic argument for the dating of the book.³³

The language of Ecclesiastes is in many aspects unique. It is possible that Qohelet used several foreign words to discuss the realities of every life in a cosmopolitan way.³⁴ Therefore the dating of his language is very difficult.

Here is not the place to deal with the many arguments for and against the Solomonic origin of the book. Only one aspect needs mentioning. In Ecclesiastes many times we read a reference to the king and his kingship. Commentators often explain these features in the first chapters in relation to the real or fictional Solomon. It is important to note that in the further chapters the context of kingship is presupposed. The land is reigned by a king (4:13-14; 9:14), and advice is given on how to behave in the vicinity of a king (8:2-4; 10:20). Many times the king is mentioned (e.g. 5:7-8; 10:16-17). Such advice was useful in the time of the monarchy of Israel, but no longer after the Exile.³⁵ This is

³⁰ D.C. Fredericks, *Qoheleth's Language: Re-evaluating Its Nature and Date*, Lewiston: Mellen, 1988, p. 262-263, 267.

³¹ Fredericks, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 31-36.

³² A. Hurvitz, »The Language of Qoheleth and its Historical Setting Within Biblical Hebrew«, in: A. Berlejung and P. van Hecke, eds., *The Language of Qohelet in its Context: Essays in Honour of Prof. A. Schoors on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday*, OLA 164, Leuven: Peeters, 2007, p. 23-34. Hurvitz proposes a date after the Exile.

³³ T. Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, NICOT, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998, p. 14-15.

³⁴ Fredericks, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 55.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 32. D.A. Garrett accepts the Solomonic origin of the book in *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, NAC, Nashville: Broadman, 1993.

another argument that Ecclesiastes is not written as opposition against the prevailing wisdom, but showing a way of living in the Israelite context.

10. The Canonical Context

In the Hebrew Bible, Ecclesiastes belongs to the Ketuvim, the third part of the canon. In the Masoretic order it is one of the five Megillot, festival scrolls, together with Ruth, Song of Songs, Lamentations and Esther. The Babylonian Talmud³⁶ and the Septuagint place Ecclesiastes between Proverbs and Song of Songs. The position between two books that are ascribed to king Solomon (Prov. 1:1; Song 1:1) reflects the conviction that the same author wrote Ecclesiastes (1:1, 12).

The Book of Job is the first of the Wisdom books and maybe a didactic motive can be seen in the order of the books: the situation of pain stimulates thinking about wisdom and wickedness.³⁷ However, also a chronological placement is possible.

In each case, the place in the canon means that the message of the book was seen in accordance with the other books.

11. Conclusion

Reiterating what has been pointed out in detail above, I maintain that the author of Ecclesiastes played with the word *hebel* and used its meaning in several aspects. The translation with the connotation »vapor« is preferable and understanding its meaning as metaphor depends on the context. The negative meaning associated with *hebel* is related to the claim that it is impossible for man to grasp the meaning of life by observation only. This word is not used by the author to proclaim a final conclusion about the properties of man's life, but in my interpretation it serves only as a conclusion to his enquiry about experiences in man's life.

To be sure, this interpretation is a certain break with tradition. The translation of *hebel* with *vanitas* has traditionally had a profound influence in the his-

³⁶ b.Baba Bathra 14b.

³⁷ J. Steinberg, *Die Ketuvim – ihr Aufbau und ihre Botschaft*, BBB, Hamburg: Philo, 2006, p. 447. Cf. the suggestions of H.J. Koorevaar about linear and chiasmic structures in »De opbouw van de Ketuvim als wijsheids canon«, in *Wijsheids canon*, Inleiding, par. 2.

tory of exegesis of the book. As we have seen, Jerome made the important choice to translate by using the one connotation pertaining to value. Luther reassessed the function of *hebel* in the book and related it not to the created realm but to anthropology. The translation of *hebel* remained the same. In the last two centuries, many exegetes relate the word *hebel* to the world order and as pertaining to theological concepts. Their conclusion is that Qohelet deviates from orthodox faith. However, it is also possible to see the meaning of the book as more positive and in coherence with the other books of the Bible.

Instead of relating *hebel* to the earthly reality, or to anthropology or to theological questions, it seems better to me to restrict the concept to understanding it as Qohelet's search »under the sun«. Then it becomes clear that many questions of man's life cannot be answered by observation. Here Qohelet plays with the word *hebel*: as with vapor, meaning that we cannot grasp the matter. The metaphor is used for pointing our incomprehensible things, temporary actions and matters that are very light. It is a task for the reader to apply the appropriate meaning of the metaphor to the things described.

Dating the book in the time of the kings, confirms the position I have put forward of the book being part of the wisdom tradition in Israel: trying to cope with the difficulties in life. In all sort of circumstances the advice is: Fear God!

Abstract

The translation of *hebel* with *vanitas* has had a profound influence in the history of exegesis of the book.

Instead of relating *hebel* to the earthly reality, or to anthropology or to theological questions, it seems better to restrict the concept to Qohelet's search »under the sun«. Then it becomes clear that many questions cannot be answered by observation. Here the author plays with the word *hebel*: as with vapor, we cannot grasp the matter. The metaphor is used for incomprehensible things, for temporary actions and for matters that are very light. It seems better to retain the metaphor and not to translate the word by one of these aspects.

Dating the book in the time of the kings confirms the position as part of the wisdom tradition in Israel: trying to cope with the difficulties in life and showing a way to live with God.

