

## **Is Life Vanity? Reinterpreting the *Qoheleth*'s Elusive Use of *Hevel* in Ecclesiastes**

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### ***Abstract***

*Over the years, the translation of hevel as “vanity” has had great influence in the history of the exegesis of Ecclesiastes. This present author has often heard or seen preachers use the text under study to caution people about the “vanity” of life and of acquisition of riches. Often preachers have used this text to call their audience to “abandoned resignation”; since for them, the Qoheleth’s statements connote that all that occurs under the sun is “vanity”. This paper tries to critically reexamine how the Qoheleth uses the word, hevel in Ecclesiastes in order to understand the essence of the book. The methodologies adopted are the historical-critical analysis and grammatical-historical analysis approaches. The findings show that the Qoheleth does use hevel with a variety of nuances. However, the basic meaning of the word is “vapor”, “breath” but sometimes the context points to “temporary” sometimes to “ungraspable”. Thus, the Qoheleth may not have been pessimistic about life but only disturbed about life’s essence in the light of its ephemeral or transient nature. The study ended by recommending that people should not be passive in life. Life can be meaningful and enjoyable when people obey God’s laws and fear Him.*

**Keywords:** *Qoheleth*, Ecclesiastes, Hevel/Vanity, and God

### **Introduction**

The wealth of publications and scholarly works on matters relating to the Old Testament (OT) generally is witness to the fact that the items

and/or ideas portrayed in this part of the Bible are still relevant to the modern person. The Old Testament part of the Bible is rich, complex, multifaceted and multilayered as it is composed in different genres: prose/narratives, songs, prayers, eulogies, poems, wisdom sayings and so forth. The books that make up this part of the Bible are divided into sections or categories; namely The Pentateuch (or Torah), Historical Books, Poetic Books and Prophetic Books.

Going through the OT, one discovers that there are three distinct groups of officials in the ancient Israelite religion: the priests, prophets, and the sages. Among these three groups of persons, the prophets wrote many of the Books of the OT which bear their names. Most of the historical writings were also authored by these prophets (Patterson, 2003, p. 83). The books of Job through the book of Songs of Solomon are generally believed to have been composed by Hebrew sages and thus, they are primarily classified as Wisdom Literature for the reason that they contain wisdom sayings and remarks that appeal to human experience, reason and common sense. However, it is important to mention that classifying some books of the OT as Wisdom Literature does not mean that there is no wisdom in other books of the OT. These books are classified thus because they simply represent the works of Israel's teachers and sages. The items or ideas found in them illustrate the personal ideas and experiences of the sages; hence, none of the authors prefaced his remarks or sayings with a "thus says the LORD" but simply present them in forms of songs, laments, poems, pedagogic language/wisdom sayings (Ahiamadu, 2013, p. 80). Purkiser et al (1955), acknowledge that the Wisdom Literature is "another popular expression of Hebrew religion" that deals with major issues of life, ethics and morality and more especially, the meaning of life and love (p. 249).

The book of Ecclesiastes which is part of the Wisdom Literature, is a unique book. In it, the *Qoheleth* (Preacher) reflects on existential problems and issues like the essence of life especially from an

unconventional perspective. Many have thus accused the author as being a skeptic or pessimist: one who sees life as “vanity”. As a consequence, such interpreters have concluded that since the *Qoheleth* was a skeptic or cynic his ideas must be carefully examined before approving and applying them (McCain, 2008).

Over the years, this present author has heard preachers using the text under study to caution people about the “vanity” of life and of acquisition of riches. Often preachers have used this text to call their audience to “abandoned resignation”; since, for them, the *Qoheleth*’s statements connote that all that occurs under the sun is “vanity”. Hence, Ecclesiastes 1:2 is often a catchphrase used in consoling people - repressing grief and sorrow. The problem with this traditional idea that everything under the sun and/or about life is “vanity” is that such interpretation or thought fuels in people an impulse to retreat to some plausible avoidance mechanism or passivity.

As a consequence, this paper tries to critically reexamine how the *Qoheleth* uses the word, *hevel* in the book of Ecclesiastes in order to understand the essence and message of the whole book. But before doing this, the paper first briefly discusses wisdom, in Israelite socio-religious milieu and then some isagogic issues in order to discover the uniqueness, especially, the literary features, contents, message, and place of Ecclesiastes in the whole Hebrew canon. This is done so as to give the study a proper background. The aim of this paper is not to give a detailed analysis of the contents of the entire book but to simply mention some of the basic issues about the book and then discover the proper meaning and importance of the word, *hevel*. *Hevel* is the key word in the book of Ecclesiastes that for one to understand the authorial intention, he or she needs to understand how he uses the word. The methodology adopted is the historical-critical analysis and grammatical-historical analysis approaches.

### **Wisdom among the Hebrews**

The term, “Wisdom” comes from a Semitic root which means “to know” in the Assyrian; “to be firm” “fixed”, “free from defect” in the Arabic (Purkiser et al, 1955). The Hebrew word for Wisdom, *Chokmah* is often related to skillfulness (cf. Gen. 41:33, 39; Ex. 28: 3; 31:3; 2Sam. 14:20) but in the book of Proverbs, it is more related to ideal ethical principles and morality. The OT reveals that among the ancient Hebrews, wisdom was treasured and applied in different areas of life (cf. Ex. 28:3; 35:31; 2Sam. 20:22; 1Kgs. 3:28; 10:24; Prov. 2:2; 3:13; 4:7; 8:11; etc.). However, for the Hebrew, it is the LORD God that gives wisdom to people and thus, the Supreme Teacher (Ex. 28:3; 31:3, 6; 1Kgs. 4:29; 5:12; Prov. 2:6; 3:11-12). Hence, anyone who possessed wisdom was revered and his or her advice was taken seriously (cf. 2 Sam. 20:22; 15: 12 ff; Prov. 10:13; 12:8). It is by Wisdom that the LORD God found the earth (cf. Prov. 3:19). For the Hebrew, true wisdom was to believe in Yahweh and fear Him (cf. Prov. 1:7; 9:10). Hebrew wisdom does not question God’s existence but is based on an accepted belief in God. According to Oswald (1936), “all its beliefs are based on God and in the actual whirl of things as they are; all its mental energy is bent on practical living” (p. 4). Consequently, Hebrew sages concerned themselves with teaching or imparting truth and standard which they believed were divine. Greek wisdom is more speculative than concrete; whereas Hebrew wisdom is more concrete than speculative or abstract. Hebrew Wisdom sets out to deal with practical things as they are. Hence, when one reads Wisdom Literature, tangible existential problems are mentioned and practical counsels are given. Though these counsels or advice were originally directed to the Hebrews, they have a universal application, and this makes the items found in these books “a valuable contribution to the whole scope of the inspired writings” (Purkiser et al, 1955, p. 249).

## **Ecclesiastes**

This is a very interesting if not the most puzzling of the Old Testament books. The name “Ecclesiastes”, is the LXX (Greek) translation of the Hebrew word “*Qoheleth*”. The meaning of this Hebrew word is uncertain and it appears nowhere else in the Bible. But, according to Bill and Beyer (2008), “The term ‘Ecclesiastes’ has a long history. It came into English through the Latin (Vulgate) and Greek (LXX: Septuagint) versions of the Bible” (p. 326).

In the Hebrew Bible (Tanak), Ecclesiastes belongs to the *Ketuvim*, which is 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. However, the Babylonian Talmud and the Septuagint place Ecclesiastes between Proverbs and Song of Songs (Mart-Jan, 2011, p. 300).

The major thesis or argument of the book is: “What is the essence of life?” “Is life worth-while?” The Book is still relevant today. Dillard and Tremper (1995) affirm, “Ecclesiastes gives the appearance of being written with our time in mind [because it] expresses a skepticism that sounds modern. Commenting on the book, McCain (2008) underscores that “the book gives remarkable insight into the worldview of the “secular” person of that day” (p. 263). For Patterson (2003), the author of Ecclesiastes was a moderate pessimist unlike the author of Job. He comments:

The Ecclesiastes writer is indeed a cynic, but he is a gentle cynic who has not become embittered toward the world, for he resolves to make the best of what he can unlike the author of Job, who is emotionally troubled that innocent people suffer. The Ecclesiastes writer accepts his situation as it is and refuses to become upset about it...Although he accepts a kind of fatalism according to which there is a definite time and place for everything, his book is filled with advice about how a person should live in order to get the greatest enjoyment out of life (p. 87-88).

Though the above comments reflect the traditional idea about the *Qoheleth*; but this present author would beg to differ. He would not like to subscribe to the view that the author of Ecclesiastes was a pessimist or cynic even though, ordinarily, the book may seem to be skeptical in tone especially for an average reader. The whole essence of Ecclesiastes is to exalt the Divine, namely, God, and portray human abasement. For the author of Ecclesiastes, everything else including humans is subject to twisting, incompleteness and death except the Divine.

## **Historical Background**

### **Date and Authorship**

In order to understand and properly interpret the message of any book of the Bible, knowing the dating of the book is very important. In fact, establishing the date of a book and its historical context is often one of the major keys to its interpretation. And in most cases in Biblical studies, dating and authorship are often discussed together. If an author is known or established, it becomes easier to know the historical context and date. “However, if the authorship is unknown, then the date of the writing becomes unknown (McCain, 2008, p. 265). So, in the case of Ecclesiastes, just like many other books of the Bible, there are many arguments back and forth, about the dating and authorship. One of the major reasons scholars have found it difficult to precisely date the book is because of idea of the possibility that *Qoheleth* made use of several foreign or alien words in discussing existential issues. Scholars agree that the language of Ecclesiastes is in many aspects, unique and also, that *Qoheleth* presented his ideas in a cosmopolitan way. The above points are what make the dating of *Qoheleth's* language very difficult (Mart-Jan, 2011, p. 299; Frederick, 1988). Most of these arguments cannot be fully mentioned and/or discussed in this present study but only few are going to be mentioned.

Even though the author of this book does not mention his name, however, Solomon is traditionally believed to have composed it. The author starts by calling himself the “*Qoheleth*” (1:1), which basically means one who convenes a congregation or a “preacher” (McCain, 2008). Dillard and Tremper (1995) argue that the name, “Qoheleth” is not the author’s real name but a pseudonym. According to them, though many English versions translate the name as “Preacher” or “Teacher”, but “The verbal root of the name means “to assemble” (a *Qal* active participle feminine singular); thus, the word should be literally translated “assembler.” Tremper and Enns (2008) corroborate that the word *Qōhelet* probably is a title rather than a name. This is suggested by the fact that the morphologically feminine word *Qōhelet* is formally similar to other words describing occupations (e.g., Ezra 2:55, 57; Neh. 7:57, 59). Young (1964) believes that the reason for the feminine is probably because the word denotes an office rather than a person. This word can also be explained in a neuter sense, “with an intensive force” (p. 347). Translating *Qoheleth* as “Preacher” or “Teacher” in modern English is a result of guess work by translators and interpreters who try to speculate what type of group the *Qoheleth* is gathering to instruct (p. 248). Moreover, there are strong reasons to associate this name as used in the book with a religious context. First, is the fact that *Qoheleth* is said to teach the people (Eccles 12:9) and second, his activities are compared to a shepherd pastoring a flock (Eccles 12:11). These incidences are good evidence that the religious overtones of “Preacher” are appropriate (Tremper and Enns, 2008; Seow 2001, p. 249).

Traditionally, the Solomonic authorship of Ecclesiastes is widely accepted by both Jewish and Christian tradition down to a relatively recent period because of the following reasons:

First, starting from 1:1, the author associates himself to King David: “the son of David, king in Jerusalem.” Hence, many, including Jewish Rabbis conclude that Solomon must have been the author. According to one Rabbinic tradition, “Solomon wrote the Song of Songs, with its

accent on love, in his youth; Proverbs, with its emphasis on practical problems, in his maturity; and Ecclesiastes, with its melancholy reflections on the vanity of life, in old age” (Gordis 1951, p. 39). Garrett (1993) also accepts the Solomonic origin of the book. Based on internal evidence, there are reasons to believe Solomon authored this book.

### **Literary Features**

One thing with Wisdom Literature is that it employs several literary devices to communicate its ideas. And according to McCain (2002), “The Book of Ecclesiastes reflects all of the standard literary devices that other wisdom literature uses: reflections (cf. 1:13-17; 2:1, 17; 3:16), proverbs (4:6; 5:10; 7:9), rhetorical questions (1:3; 6:8b, 12), allegory (12:2-7) and so forth. This is part of what makes Ecclesiastes a rich literary masterpiece.

### **Outline**

There are many ways the items in the book can be categorized or outlined, but for the sake of this study, a simple outline will be adopted:

- I. Title and theme (1:1-11)
- II. Wisdom Reflections (1:12-4:16)
- III. Admonition and Observations (5:1-12:8)
- IV. Conclusions (12: 9-14).

### **Message of the Book**

The message the author of Ecclesiastes wants to pass to his audience was simple: since life is transitory, in pursuing whatever visions or ambitions one has in life, one is to fear God. This is because nothing is worth dying for - humans will not always be here on earth to enjoy everything they labored for in life. The author is presumed to be an old person who has tested life and pursued various things/goals of which none of his achievement gave him satisfaction. Thus, he sees “...that life is full of uncertainties, enigmas and contradictions, the greatest



being humanity itself” (McCain, 2002, p. 266). The most important message communicated in this book is that people should never leave God out of their lives.

### **Understanding the Meaning of *Hevel* in Ecclesiastes**

*Hevel* is the key word in the book of Ecclesiastes. And as earlier noted, for one to understand the authorial intention, one needs to understand how he uses the word, *hevel*. How one understands and interprets *hevel* determines how he or she understands and interprets the whole book. Mart-Jan (2011) acknowledges that “...the history of interpretation of Ecclesiastes is one mainly of its (sic) meaning of *hevel*” (p. 285). Over the years, many have made a lot of suggestions on the translation and interpretation of this word.

### **The Text**

*“havel havalim ’amar qohelet havel havalim hakkol havel. mah yitron la’adam bekal ’amalo sheya ’amol tachat hashshmesh: Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity. What profit has a man from all his labor in which he toils under the sun?” (Ecclesiastes 1: 2, 3)*

### **Basic Meaning of *Hevel***

The *Qoheleth* begins his reflection with the bleak assertion: “Vanity of vanities...all is vanity” (1:2). The word, *hevel*, often translated “vanity”, appears about five times in this verse 2 alone. *Hevel* is used about thirty eight (38) times in the entire book of Ecclesiastes and eighty (80) times in the whole of the Old Testament. Though this Hebrew word, *hevel* is difficult to translate; it can be interpreted in two basic ways: literal and metaphorical. Literally, *hevel* means “breath”, “wind” or “vapor” (cf. Ps. 62: 10; Prov. 21:6; Isa. 57:13). Moreover, when *hevel* is translated “breath” or “wind”, it does not usually used to connote or describe the respiration of humans, “but to illustrate breath-

like, weightless, transience, and insubstantial futility” (Mart-Jan, 2011, p. 286). Figuratively, *hevel* connotes the idea of something transitory and/or unsatisfactory and often used as an adverb.

### **Various Translations of *Hevel***

Many Jewish Greek translations or versions like the Symmachus, Aquila and Theodotion translate *hevel* as “breath”; while the Septuagint (LXX) has *mataiotes*, which may be translated “emptiness” or “futility”. In his commentary (which was to serve as a guidebook on spiritual devotion), written for one Blesilla, Jerome renders *hevel* as *vanitas* meaning “hollow, empty, worthless or trivial”. Both *vanitas* and *mataiotēs* allow for broader senses than the English translation, “vanity” suggests. *Mataiotēs* denotes “emptiness, futility, purposelessness, transitoriness” (*BDAG*, 621). Accordingly, because the Greek term entails “transitoriness,” it allows for a broader sense. McCabe (1996) citing Glare (1982), has proposed that the word, *vanitas* could be understood in many ways: as “unsubstantial or illusory quality. Mart-Jan (2011) however observes that Jerome “made the important choice to translate *hevel* by using the one connotation pertaining to value rather than to that of transience” (p. 288). Moreover, it is worthy to note that this commentary Jerome wrote to Blesilla was not a sort of theological treatise but a simple devotional homily written to challenge the woman to distance herself from worldly pleasures and adopt a monastic lifestyle which was fashionable then.

The KJV, RSV, and NRSV all translate the term as “vanity”; whereas the NIV and NLT translate it as “meaningless”. The GNB renders it as “useless”. There are other possible translations: Staple (1943) renders it as “incomprehensible”, “unknowable”; Longman (1998), “meaningless” while Miller (2002) gives the meaning as “transience, insubstantiality or foulness” and Lohfink (2003) translates it as “a puff of breath”. All the above understandings of *hevel* are acceptable depending on the context in which the word is used. In fact,

someone like Bartholomew (2009) gives the meaning of *hevel* as “enigmatic”, which is also in order. “Enigmatic” as Bartholomew suggests does not mean that *hevel* has no meaning; it simply connotes incomprehensibility.

According to the NET Bible Commentary, this word can be translated “breath; puff of air, vapor”. *Hevel* can also mean “pointless”, “useless” or “emptiness”. Many English translations retain the “vanity” (ASV, ESV, KJV, NKJV, and NRSV) while others render it based on modern parlance or nuance: “futility” (e.g. CSB, NASB, NJPS etc.). Miller (1998) is of the opinion that the *Qoheleth* uses “breath” or “vapor” as a single imagery or symbol that embodies multivalency (layers of meaning). Thus, for Miller, *hevel* is used with various referents that the *Qoheleth* teases out throughout his book including insubstantiality, transitoriness, and foulness.

### **Seeking a Proper Understanding of *Hevel* in Ecclesiastes**

Over the years, many interpreters and commentators have understood this word to mean “vanity” in the sense that life is worthless and that whatever people achieve on earth is “vanity” and useless. On the surface, this interpretation seems correct, but it is not totally accurate. In interpretation, the context that produced a word matters more than the etymology of that word. Words may mean different things depending on the context that produced them. In consequence, translating *hevel* as “vanity”, “uselessness” and so forth, often leads to misinterpretation of the *Qoheleth’s* reflections in the whole of Ecclesiastes. Such translations do not perfectly or absolutely grasp the basic or essential meaning of the Hebrew word, *hevel*. It has made many to see and take life as trivial, and which is not good. Rather than denoting meaninglessness, uselessness, emptiness, or triviality, *hevel* means “vapor” or “wisp.”

When the *Qoheleth* says that “Everything under the sun is *hevel*, what does he mean: First, he meant incomprehensibility: that any

human attempt to fully comprehend all that God does on earth, that is, the world of humans, is appealing but elusive and hard to pin down just like a *vapor*. Thus, such knowledge and understanding often dissipate or dissolve like *vapor* and the more one chases such knowledge, the more it dissipates and flies away like a butterfly. Consequently, instead of humans trying to grasp all that God is doing under the sun, they should rather take the posture of self abasement before God who is in heaven (5:1f) and therefore be content to accept whatever God has ordained for them in His wisdom.

Many a time people have the illusory view that they can fully master life by experience, studying, or observing some rituals. But according to the *Qoheleth*, trying to master life is like trying to catch or seize the wind. The *Qoheleth* is of the view that “God’s grand scheme concerning what will befall each person cannot be discovered by adding one thing to another (7:27)” (Caneday, 2011, p. 28). As long as people are here on earth, nobody can fully grasp or comprehend what God’s purpose or plans are. God does not always give humans the privileged insight to all that He is doing under the sun. Humans cannot thus completely decipher God’s providence. For this reason, the *Qoheleth* resigns to fate believing in and relying on God’s wisdom and providence. For him, since people cannot comprehend the ways of God and His plans, they should thus confidently enjoy God’s good gifts which He gives them in the few years they have to stay here on earth, which pass as a shadow. It is in this context: Humans trying to fully comprehend the incomprehensible (that which transcends them) that the Hebrew word, *hevel* should be interpreted. For the *Qoheleth*, even though this enormous task of comprehending the incomprehensible was given to humans by God Himself, they are “vapor” (elusive).

The second possible interpretation of *hevel* is as regards the transient nature of life. For the *Qoheleth*, the problem is not that life is intrinsically meaningless, useless or trivial, but that it goes by like a vapor or mist. The point he is thus trying to make is that life on earth

generally, is brief: human's existence is transient. People do not live long to enjoy what they had labored for in life. Commenting on the text under study, Schaser (2022) notes:

Being equipped with this understanding of *hevel* can also deepen our reading of one of the Bible's first stories: the death of Abel at the hands of his brother. In Hebrew, Abel is *Hevel* (הֶבֶל) the same word we find at the outset of the *Qohelet*. Insofar as Abel's name means "vapor" or "mist," readers should not be shocked when they hear that "Cain rose up against his brother Abel and murdered him" (Gen 4:8). Just like a passing mist, Abel is not around for long!... the narrative tells us the reason when the man called "Mist" exits the narrative only six verses later! Like a vapor, Abel is here one moment and gone the next (p. 1).

From all indications, Abel's (*Hevel*) life was not meaningless or useless; even though he did not live long since just like a "vapor", he fleetingly passed away; but the Bible records that he pleased God and offered a more acceptable offering to Him. Abel must have led a quality and purposeful life for God to have taken notice of Him and approved him. God had respect for Abel (cf. Gen. 4: 4 Heb. 11:4). In the same way, the *Qoheleth* is not saying that life altogether is useless or pointless in the sense that it does not worth living. He only highlights the fleetness or swiftness of people's days on earth. He by no means denies the meaningfulness of life. Such understanding or interpretation raises some serious questions: If everything done here is vanity, should one then be idle or passive? Is idleness not also vanity? Are there passages in the Bible where God admonishes or expects humans to pursue vision and accomplish great things for Him? (cf. Gen. 1:17ff; 12:1ff; Ex. 3-4; Jer. 1:5; 29:11 etc).

This present author would like to agree with Mart-Jan's (2011) view that "Instead of relating *hevel* to the earthly reality, or to anthropology or to theological questions (as Jerome, Luther and others have done), it seems better to restrict the concept to understanding it as

*Qoheleth's* search “under the sun”. It is in this context that “...it becomes clear that many questions of man’s life cannot be answered by observation” (p. 301). This present author has heard many preachers often use the *Qoheleth's* thoughts in Ecclesiastes to talk against or discourage people from acquiring riches and pursuing their dreams in life. Such preachers often make it look as if acquiring wealth or riches, fame, glory and fulfillment and so forth, are intrinsically evil and non-essential in life. In their eyes or estimation, making efforts to become rich and fulfilled is “vanity” and not profitable. This view may not be totally right because, first, in Genesis 2: 8, 15, human beings were given the task to care for the earth. Hence, by all indication, God desires that people work with their hands and pursue their dreams and visions (cf. Gen. 3:19; Prov. 14:23). For this researcher, labor is profitable and worthwhile when done in line with the will of God and put in its proper place. For people to live meaningful life here on earth, they must work. In the New Testament, Paul admonishes the Thessalonians to work or labor with their hands in order to be independent. He also speaks about work of faith and labor of love (1Thess. 1:3; 4:11).

Commenting on the above text, Jamieson et al (1997), note that interpreters should put the word, “vanity” in proper perspective, because based on the teachings of other canonical books of the Bible, not everything in and about life is intrinsically bad or vanity for God made nothing in vain (1Tim. 4:4, 5; Rev. 4:11).

From all indications, the *Qoheleth* is only bemoaning the brevity of life and that is how the whole of his reflections in this *pericope* should be understood. For him, since life moves very quickly, and grey hair is waiting for everyone and death is inevitable, the best humans could do is to enjoy themselves, fear God and obey his laws: “Remember your Creator in the days of your youth.... The end of the matter, when all has been heard, [is to] fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of humanity” (Eccl. 12:1, 13). According to Schaser (2022):

The problem is that nothing lasts; the sun rises and falls quickly, and the north winds are soon in the south. Humanity is subject to the same fleeting reality: “A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth stands forever” (Eccl 1:4). This lament over life’s brevity supports an understanding of *hevel* as a temporary vapor. For *Qohelet*, the temporality of human existence makes it the mist of all mists (Israelbiblecenter.com/iseverythingvanity?).

So, precisely because of the candid observations of the *Qoheleth* concerning the enigmas done on earth and life’s puzzles that consist of insubstantiality, transience, and odiousness, he advises his audience to enjoy life, which for him, is a gift from God. For the *Qoheleth*, “there is nothing better” or worth doing, than taking pleasure in life (2:24; 3:12, 22; 5:18-20; 8:15; 9:7-9; 11:9).

Job’s statement underscores the above understanding of the Hebrew word, *hevel* as explained above. Job corroborates, “I loathe my life; I would not live forever. Leave me alone, for my days are a vapor (*hevel*) (Job 7:16). In the above text, Job expresses the same concerns of the *Qoheleth*: life is *brief* and *fleeting*. In Psalms 39: 5, the Psalmist expresses the same concerns when he tells God, “Behold, you have made my days handbreadths, and my lifetime is as nothing before you. Ah, all humanity stands as all vapor (*kol-hevel*)”. Furthermore, the Psalmist again asserts, “Humanity is like a vapor (*hevel*); its days are like a passing shadow (*ketsel ‘over*) (cf. Ps. 144: 4).

The idea that *hevel* means vanity, uselessness, pointlessness or perplexity over existence, is at odds with the *Qohelet’s* context and message in Ecclesiastes. The problem for *Qoheleth* is not that everything about life is useless; rather the problem is that nothing lasts on earth. For example, the sun rises and sets quickly; times and seasons come, and before one knows it, they have passed. Thus, human beings are subject to the same ephemeral reality or truth: “A generation goes, and a generation comes...” (Eccl 1:4). This expression of grieve over

life's brevity, as Schaser (2022) observes, supports an understanding of *hevel* as a fleeting vapor rather than uselessness or vanity.

## **Conclusion**

This study set out to understand the proper meaning and interpretation of the Hebrew word, *hevel* as used in Ecclesiastes. The paper started by discussing some isagogic issues before discussing the main issue. Going through the book of Ecclesiastes, one will discover certain facts: first, the book is more philosophical than theological in nature. The author is more critical or rational than religious. Second, the book contains the reflections of a critical thinker who is puzzled about the transient nature of life. If life is like a vapor, then what is it all about: what is the essence of life? Third, the ideas of the *Qoheleth* seem not to be a testimony of faith or belief but a subjective reflection based on personal observations and experiences. Thus, the author questions certain accepted beliefs and traditions of the Hebrews. Fourth, from all indications, it seems the point that the *Qoheleth* is trying to make in Ecclesiastes is that the worship of God fills or permeates human's time on earth with purpose and value. For the *Qoheleth*, worshipping and fearing God and obeying His laws is what provides humans with a valuable purpose in their lives (12: 13). Finally, concerning the usage of *hevel*, this present author would like to subscribe to the fact that the *Qoheleth* does use *hevel* with a variety of nuances. As already pointed out, the basic meaning of *hevel* is "vapor", "breath" but sometimes the context points to what is "temporary" sometimes "ungraspable", and "weightless". In each case, the reader has to grasp the meaning of the metaphor (Mart-Jan, 2011, p. 296).

Based on the findings of this study, the *Qoheleth* may not have been pessimistic about life. He was only disturbed about life's essence in the light of its ephemeral or transient nature. God does not want humans to be pessimistic but optimistic about life. God's plan for humanity is that they progress and make novel impact on their society.



It is wrong for people to misinterpret the *Qoheleth*'s thoughts about life concluding that he meant his audience should be passive in life since they will die and leave the world. God gave humans wonderful brains to develop their society and it gives Him joy when people improve on what He, God, has given them. Rather than seeing the *Qoheleth* as a pessimist or cynic; he should rather be seen as a man of faith (a believer): one who believes that nothing is worth pursuing in life except the fear of God even though that does not guarantee success or long life (7:15).

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