

# Shepherding Wind and One Wise Shepherd: Grasping for Breath in Ecclesiastes

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## INTRODUCTION

Of the book of Ecclesiastes, James L. Crenshaw once wrote:

Life is profitless, totally absurd. This oppressive message lies at the heart of the Bible's strang-

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est book. Enjoy life if you can, advises the author, for old age will soon overtake you. And even as you enjoy, know that the world is meaningless. Virtue does not bring reward. The deity stands distant, abandoning humanity to chance and death. These views contrast radically with earlier teachings expressed in the book of Proverbs.<sup>2</sup>

When put in this light, Ecclesiastes is a difficult read for the Christian.<sup>3</sup> In the quote above, Crenshaw suggests that this

unique book represents an "intellectual crisis" in ancient Israel's wisdom tradition by which earlier optimistic claims are given a necessary corrective.<sup>4</sup>

Many have affirmed that Qoheleth (the Hebrew

title given to the main speaker in Ecclesiastes) is a skeptic, fatalist, and agnostic, who questions the benefits of wisdom and the meaningfulness of life.<sup>5</sup> For example, the conservative Tremper Longman III affirms that Qoheleth's message is wholly pessimistic and stands in contrast to the orthodox wisdom teaching of the rest of the Old Testament.<sup>6</sup> For Longman, the book includes two disparate voices, the main voice of Qoheleth providing a literary foil or contrast to the true message preserved in the epilogue's call to fear God and keep his commandments (Eccl 12:13-14): "Just as in the book of Job, most of the book of Ecclesiastes is composed of the nonorthodox speeches of the human participants of the book, speeches that are torn down and demolished in the end."<sup>7</sup> A number of well-known contemporary preachers have followed Longman's proposal in order to reconcile the challenging assertion that "all is vanity" (NASB, NRSV, ESV), "meaningless" (NIV, NIV11), or "futility" (HCSB).<sup>8</sup>

Not all scholars agree with this assessment. Indeed, a number of interpreters have tagged Qoheleth more positively as a "preacher of joy,"<sup>9</sup> a "godly sage,"<sup>10</sup> or an orthodox "realist."<sup>11</sup> While

the message of Ecclesiastes is highly disputed,<sup>12</sup> every book in the Christian canon matters, and I am convinced that this book in particular bears distinct lasting significance in this increasingly broken world. We must wrestle with the orthodoxy of Qoheleth's teaching and consider whether the book witnesses divergent and even contradictory voices between the body and its epilogue and with the body itself.<sup>13</sup>

There are at least two issues interpreters often overlook that provide a lens for correctly understanding, evaluating, and applying the message of Ecclesiastes today: (1) the meaning of the Hebrew term *hebel*, which serves as an overarching motif within the book (“All is *hebel*” [1:2; 12:8; cf. 1:14; 2:17; 3:19]); and (2) the role and perspective of the epilogue (12:9-14) in relation to the rest of the book. While this study is devoted to the first of these issues, I hope the unity of the volume as a whole will become apparent in the discussion as we move toward synthesizing the book's lasting message. My prayer is that this fresh look at Ecclesiastes will faithfully disclose the book's teaching and motivate a new generation of “under-the-sun,” curse-tasting believers to fear God and to look to him, the Creator-Shepherd, for satisfaction in this trying, suffering-filled, enigmatic world.

Fig. 1. The Structure of Ecclesiastes at a Glance<sup>14</sup>

Prologue (Eccl. 1:1)		
Qoheleth's Queries (1:2-12:8)	Indicative Motto: All is <i>HEBEL</i> (1:2)	Part 1
	Introductory Poem (1:3-11)	
	Qoheleth's Investigation of Life (1:12-6:9)	Part 2
	Qoheleth's Conclusions of Life (6:10-11:6)	
	Concluding Poem (11:7-12:7)	
Indicative Motto: All is <i>HEBEL</i> (12:8)		
Epilogue (12:9-14)		

## HEBEL IN ECCLESIASTES: AN OVERVIEW OF THE ISSUE

The noun *hebel* bears a base meaning of “breath, vapor, or wisp of air” and occurs sev-

enty-three times in the Hebrew Masoretic Text, with over half of these (thirty-eight) occurring in Ecclesiastes.<sup>15</sup> Only three instances of the material sense of “vapor” are found in the Old Testament, and even these highlight the breath-like futility of wickedness (Ps 62:9[10]; Prov 21:6; Isa 57:13). All the rest of the occurrences are non-material and metaphorical, including all instances in Qoheleth.<sup>16</sup> The programmatic use of *hebel* as the thematic motto at both ends of the volume (“Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity” [Eccl 1:2; cf. 12:8, ESV])<sup>17</sup> as well as its employment as a sustained conclusive refrain in Ecclesiastes suggests that a proper understanding of this term will in large measure uncover the meaning of the book.

A number of the occurrences outside of Ecclesiastes retain the sense of the “ephemeral” or “fleeting” (e.g., Job 7:16; Pss 39:6-7, 11-12; 144:4). In other instances, the noun denotes “valueless” or “inefficacy” (and so “vain”), in that something does not or cannot fulfill what it implicitly promises (e.g., Isa 30:7; 49:4; Job 9:29; Jer 10:2). Accordingly, *hebel* appears to mean “worthlessness” in a number of contexts where it parallels nouns like *tohu* “nothingness,” *riq* “emptiness,” and *lo'yo'il* “it will not profit” (Isa 30:6, 7; 44:25; 49:4; 57:12; Jer 16:19). Furthermore, in contexts where *hebel* is aligned with nouns like *'awen* “iniquity,” *kazab* “lie,” *ma'al* “unfaithfulness,” and *seger* “falsehood,” it carries the sense of “deceit” (e.g., Zech 10:2; Ps 62:10; Job 21:34). As such, *hebel* is regularly used by extension to connote false gods (e.g., Deut 32:21; 2 Kgs 17:15; Jer 8:19; 10:8; 14:22; 16:19; Jonah 2:8[9]). Finally, in some texts *hebel* appears to express that which is senseless, foolish, or without thought, as when Elihu states that “Job opens his mouth in *empty talk* (*hebel*); he multiplies words without knowledge” (Job 35:16; cf. Jer 10:3, 8; Ps 39:6[7]).<sup>18</sup>

In Ecclesiastes, the following various actions, situations, and events are judged *hebel* in Ecclesiastes:<sup>19</sup>

- (1) Human behavior
  - (a) toil and its products (Eccl 2:11; 2:18-26; 4:4, 7-8, 15; 5:10; 6:1-2)
  - (b) pleasure (2:1; 6:9)
  - (c) wisdom and growing wise (2:15; 7:15-16)
  - (d) words (5:6-7; 6:10-11)
- (2) Living beings and times in their lives (3:18-19; 6:12; 7:15-16; [9:1-2; 9:9;]<sup>20</sup> 11:10)
- (3) Divine behavior—events
  - (a) divine justice (2:15, 26; 6:1-2; 8:10, 14)
  - (b) “everything” (1:2, 14; 2:17; 6:3-4; 11:8-9; 12:8)

Over half of the occurrences of *hebel* are found in categories 1a and 3b.

Interpreters generally assign at least one of four distinct categories of meaning to *hebel* in these texts, all of which are at some level extensions of the uses elsewhere, but only the first two of which necessitate a negative reading. *Hebel* may denote that which is (1) “Vain, meaningless; futile”;<sup>21</sup> (2) “Irrational, senseless, absurd”;<sup>22</sup> (3) “Transient, temporary, fleeting, ephemeral”;<sup>23</sup> (4) “Mysterious, incomprehensible, ungraspable, enigmatic.”<sup>24</sup>

A number of interpreters of Ecclesiastes employ multiple senses when rendering *hebel*. Douglas B. Miller has observed, for example, that the *Modern Language Bible* renders *hebel* as futility; worthlessness; fruitless; useless; emptiness; profitless; follies; vain; unproductive; ineffective; passing; and transit.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, in his commentary, R. B. Y. Scott employs “breath,” “vapor,” “futility/futile,” “empty/empty thing,” “hollow mockery/thing,”

“transitory,” “meaningless,” “makes no sense,” “anomalies,” “oblivion,” and “fleeting”—the common element being the lack of value.<sup>26</sup>

Arguing against this practice, however, is the fact that in the book-encompassing motto statements Qoheleth considers as *hebel* everything (*kol*) “under the sun” (1:2; 12:8; cf. 11:8). As such, Michael V. Fox is likely correct that interpreters must maintain continuity of meaning for all the book’s *hebel* texts—at least those wherein conclusive judgments are made:<sup>27</sup>

Qoheleth’s thematic declaration that everything is *hebel* and the formulaic character of the *hebel*-judgments show that for Qoheleth there is a single dominant quality in the world and that this quality inheres in the particular *habalim* he identifies.... If Qoheleth were saying, “X is transitory; Y is futile; Z is trivial,” then the summary, “All is *hebel*” would be meaningless.... To do Qoheleth justice, we must look for a concept that applies to all occurrences, or, failing that, to the great majority of them. Then the summary statement “all is *hebel*” can use the word in the sense established in the particulars.

### GRIEF & GLADNESS—FAR FROM “MEANINGLESS” OR “ABSURD”

The dominant pejorative translation of *hebel* as “vanity” or “valuelessness” in English versions is likely owing to the influence of “vanity” in the 1611 King James Version, which took its lead from

Fig. 2. Categories of Meaning Assigned to *HEBEL* in Ecclesiastes

	Less Abstract	More Abstract
+ Negative view of <i>HEBEL</i>	(1) Vanity, meaninglessness (of things); futility (of actions) “All things in this world are worthless, valueless, or profitless”	(2) Irrationality, senselessness, absurdity “All things in this world are counter-rational or a violation of reason”
± Negative view of <i>HEBEL</i>	(3) Transience, temporariness, fleetingness, ephemerality “All things in this world are brief”	(4) Mystery, incomprehensibility, ungraspability, enigma “All things in this world are not fully in humanity’s power to comprehend”

Jerome's use of *vanitas* in the Vulgate—a Latin term that limited the semantic range to a value statement such as “emptiness, worthlessness, unreality, vanity” but not “transitory” or “enigmatic.”<sup>28</sup> The rendering of “vanity,” “futility,” or even “absurdity” induces many to read Qoheleth's words with a deprecatory slant, thus requiring great efforts to redeem or correct his theology.<sup>29</sup> However, at least three arguments stand against this reading.

First, if the traditional rendering of “worthlessness” is to color the use of *hebel* in Ecclesiastes, one would expect that other words or phrases that denote “vanity,” “meaninglessness,” or the like would be found alongside the term in the book. However, Ecclesiastes is completely absent of any of the more negative words that accompany *hebel* outside of Ecclesiastes and thus give it a negative tone. Daniel C. Fredericks provides the following list of words that occur collectively nearly one hundred times outside of Ecclesiastes and that might have been expected in the book if *hebel* denotes “valueless”: *'ayin* “nothing, naught”; *req* “empty, idle, worthless”; *riq* “emptiness”; *siwe'* “worthless, without result”; *tohu* “nothingness.”<sup>30</sup>

Second, if everything being *hebel* signifies that “all is meaningless or absurd,” when Qoheleth claims that “nothing is better than” (3:22; cf. 2:24; 3:12) or that “*x* is better than *y*” (4:9; 5:1; 7:1, 3, 8, 10; 9:4, 16-18), he would be asserting that one thing is more meaningless or more absurd than another. How is this possible?<sup>31</sup>

Third, and most importantly, if indeed *all* things “under the sun” are “meaningless” or “senseless,” on what basis did Qoheleth expect people to find truth in his own argument, which is also made “under the sun”?<sup>32</sup> Was this sage truly so blind as to affirm the impossible relativism (“nothing has meaning”) espoused by contemporary post-moderns or existentialists? Qoheleth's own teaching would not suggest so, for his queries are fully grounded in metaphysical reality (i.e., the quest for knowing truth) and express a highly developed (even orthodox) understanding about God,

humanity, and the role of each in this world.<sup>33</sup>

Qoheleth testified, “I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven” (2:13). His programmatic question was, “What does man gain (*yitron*) by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?” (1:3).<sup>34</sup> In the end, Qoheleth became convinced that “all was *hebel* and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun” (2:11). Such truths pained the sage as he wrestled to understand what today is often called “the problem of evil.”<sup>35</sup> Indeed, he tagged much in this life “evil, trouble” (9:3; cf. 4:3; 9:12; 11:2), “grievous evil” (5:13, 16; 6:2; cf. 2:17), “great evil” (2:21), and “unhappy business” (1:13; 4:8)—all declarations that affirm a standard of truth and a conviction that the universe needs “straightening” (1:14-15; 7:13; cf. 7:29).<sup>36</sup> One would not say such things if one was convinced that life was of no consequence, pointless, or futile. Pain or offense testifies to one's innate sense of meaning and purposefulness, whether accurate or misguided.

Qoheleth's conclusion regarding no advantage was qualified by the phrase “under the sun” (2:11), which is shorthand for *the restricted sphere of activities he was privileged to observe* without any bracketing out of God or his providential role.<sup>37</sup> To be “under the sun” is to be identified to what is universally true for all humanity, believer and non-believer alike, throughout all time since the fall of mankind.<sup>38</sup> Significantly, while there was no gain “under the sun” (2:11), even in this beautiful yet broken passing life (3:11; 7:15), the wise—those who fear God—can experience gain (2:13) that will be enjoyed beyond God's promised future judgment (3:17; 7:12, 18-19; 8:12-13; cf. 12:13-14; Ps. 73:23-26). “There is more gain (*yitron*) in wisdom than in folly” (2:13), “wisdom preserves the life of him who has it” (7:12), and “the one who fears God shall come out” (7:18).

In this age, *all* humans (and not just rebel unbelievers) are scathed by the vexing realities of the curse (1:14-15; 7:13) and by the creaturely limitations of not *fully* being able to know “what God

has done from the beginning to the end” (3:11; cf. 8:17), both with respect to the present (6:12; 9:1, 12; 11:5) and to the future (2:19; 3:22; 6:12; 7:14; 8:7; 10:14; 11:2). Nevertheless, such challenges can themselves be means of grace—gifts of the Creator designed to show us our place (3:18), to motivate fear of him (3:14), and to free us truly to enjoy moments of life in this vexing world (2:24-26; 3:12-13, 22; 5:18-20; 7:14; 8:15; 9:7, 9-10; 11:8-9).<sup>39</sup> This supreme Overseer of all not only gives mankind its toilsome life (5:18; 8:15; 9:9) and “unhappy business” (1:3; 3:9) but also grants to some people tastes of wisdom, knowledge, and joy (2:26).<sup>40</sup> God alone supplies the power to delight in wealth, possessions, and honor (5:19; 6:2), and he alone grants the ability to eat, drink, and take pleasure in toil (3:13; 5:19). He “makes everything” (11:5), and therefore humanity’s call is to surrender dependently to the one who governs all, fearing him in a way that fuels persevering trust in God through pain and pleasure unto eternal salvation (7:12, 18; 11:9; 12:13-14). “Though a sinner does evil a hundred times and prolongs his life, yet I know that it will be well with those who fear God, because they fear before him. But it will not be well with the wicked, neither will he prolong his days like a shadow, because he does not fear before God” (8:12-13).

Intriguingly, Qoheleth’s frustrations do not appear to have been limited to the “problem of evil.” He also struggled with the “problem of good”—namely, how God could allow some things to work out as one would expect in this crooked world.<sup>41</sup> Qoheleth recognized the true nature of mankind (“there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins” [7:20; cf. 4:4; 7:29; 9:3]) and the global impact of the curse (“Consider the work of God: who can make straight what he has made crooked” [7:13 with 11:5]). As such, to him what was *hebel* included not only times when life appeared “unfair,” as when “a person who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave everything to be enjoyed by someone who did not toil for it” (2:21),

but also when justice was followed, as when “to the one who pleases him God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, but to the sinner he has given the business of gathering and collecting, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is *hebel* and a striving after wind” (2:26). Similarly, the sweetness of fresh mercies at dawn and of pleasures during cloud-cast skies was as much *hebel* (11:7-8) as the unjust gain of the wicked (8:14).

Qoheleth was neither a relativist nor a skeptic; he was an orthodox realist and godly sage. He did not dismiss life as inconsequential or even counter-rational but instead called his readers to use the very pains and pleasures of life as generators of dependence (i.e., fear) in one Supreme Creator, whose judgments are unsearchable and whose ways are inscrutable (12:1; cf. Rom 11:33).<sup>42</sup> As observed by Graham S. Ogden, because Qoheleth applies *hebel* to both negative and positive situations, “the traditional rendering ‘vanity’ is most inappropriate.”<sup>43</sup>

#### **INSCRUTABLE REPETITIVENESS— FAR FROM “TEMPORARY”**

While likely not pointing to any “meaninglessness” or “absurdity” in life, could *hebel* for Qoheleth have signaled life’s “temporary, fleeting” nature? Kathleen A. Farmer argues for this reading by noting how frequently the phrase *re’ut ruah* “striving after wind” (ESV) stands as a virtual equivalent to *hebel* (Eccl 1:14; 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4, 16; 6:9).<sup>44</sup> Specifically, the use of *ruah* “wind” suggests to her that the material referent of “vapor” or “breath” serves as a pointer to the ephemeral that should color our understanding of *hebel* in each instance.<sup>45</sup> She fails to consider enough, however, that the parallel with *hebel* is not simply *ruah* “wind” but the phrase *re’ut ruah*, the significance of which will be addressed below.

Daniel C. Fredericks also views “temporary” as the principle sense of *hebel*. He identifies a number of conceptual and lexical parallels between Ecclesiastes and other biblical wisdom material related to life’s brevity,<sup>46</sup> and he then overviews how

the concept of time plays a central role in Qoheleth's queries.<sup>47</sup> For example, each of the three poetic sections (1:4-11; 3:1-8; 12:2-7) address the unchanging cycles of "every matter under heaven" (3:1) so that it can be said, "There is nothing new under the sun" (1:9). Following a repetitive course are not only inanimate natural phenomena like the sun, wind, and water (1:5-7) but also humans, both generationally and individually, in their movement through life to its end (1:4; 2:12, 18; 12:2-7). The fleeting nature of human existence climaxing in death itself (2:16; 3:2-3; 5:15-16; 6:3-6; 7:1-4, 15, 17; 7:26; 8:8, 13; 9:3-6, 10; 12:7) calls for every person to discern carefully the perfect timing of one's activity, be it planting or plucking, weeping or laughing, loving or hating (3:1-8). With such truths in mind, Fredericks renders the overarching motto of 1:2: "Breath of breaths,' said Qoheleth, 'Breath of breaths. Everything is temporary!'"<sup>48</sup>

No one can question Qoheleth's interest in the temporal sphere. A number of arguments, however, suggest that his use of the time motif (one of many in the book)<sup>49</sup> served less to stress life's brevity and more to identify the *enigma* of life's repetitive nature and of each generation's relative insignificance in the scope of history.<sup>50</sup>

First, Qoheleth is emphatic that the sustained flipping and emptying of the hourglass is merely one means by which God creates unanswerable questions that in turn generate God-dependence. After observing God's call on mankind to live wisely in all seasons of life (3:1-10), Qoheleth clarified the point of his temporal observations (3:11): "God has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end." Each individual has a sense of infinity within yet lacks an ultimate grasp of creation's history from start to finish. "You do not know the work of God who makes everything" (11:5). While the past is rarely remembered (1:11; 2:16; 9:5, 15), God chooses to recycle what has been (3:15). Yet he does so in a way that the present is not fully understood (6:12; 9:1, 12) and the

future remains unknown (2:19; 3:22; 6:12; 7:14; 8:7; 10:14; 11:2, 6). "I saw all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun. However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out" (8:17). The Lord alone holds the keys to this cursed world, and even one's ability to eat, drink, and find joy in toil is fully dependent on God (3:12-13; cf. 2:26; 5:19; 6:2).<sup>51</sup> In the Apostle Paul's words, "What do you have that you did not receive?" (1 Cor 4:7).

Why would God orchestrate an inscrutably repetitive world where everything from beginning to end is established and unchanging and where mankind lacks full understanding and stands unswervingly reliant on the Creator for everything? "God has done it, so that people fear before him.... I said in my heart with regard to the children of man that God is testing them that they may see that they themselves are but beasts" (3:14, 19). Only those who recognize they are creatures can "Remember your Creator" (12:1), and only those who fear God (the wise) persevere through the present age in light of the future judgment (11:9; 12:13-14; cf. 3:17; 7:12, 18; 8:12-13).

Second, as highlighted in a number of the statements that parallel Qoheleth's *hebel*-conclusions, his judgments focus not on life's brevity but on the bitter lack of gain under the sun.<sup>52</sup> Human existence in this age is mysteriously and vexingly ungraspable and perplexing. For example, in 4:7-8 we read: "Again, I saw *hebel* under the sun: one person who has no other, either son or brother, yet there is no end to all his toil, and his eyes are never satisfied with riches, so that he never asks, 'For whom am I toiling and depriving myself of pleasure?' This also is *hebel* and an unhappy business." This text describes the workaholic businessman, who ever climbs the corporate ladder while never finding contentment or joy. The language of "no end," "never satisfied," and "never asks" all point to a reality that is anything but temporary.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, far from providing a word of encouragement, this *hebel*-situation is also an "unhappy business." Shouldn't one find comfort rather than

pain if the point was to stress the brevity of an unsatisfied life?<sup>54</sup>

Similarly, in 2:14-17 and 9:3, Qoheleth lamented over a troublesome fact—namely, that wise and fool alike are corrupt and die, passing from memory. Such weighty thoughts gave rise not only to the declaration of *hebel* but also to grief and to the hating of this life (2:15, 17). Likewise, in 2:18-23, the leaving of one's wealth to another who never worked for it is not simply *hebel* (2:19, 21, 23) but a "great evil" (2:21) that leads to a lifetime of "sorrow" and "vexation," "despair over all the toil of my labors under the sun" (2:20, 23). Finally, to have wealth, possessions, and honor and yet not be enabled to enjoy them is both *hebel* and "a grievous evil" (6:2). Rather than celebrating the fleeting nature of pain, Qoheleth is frustrated with realities in life that he cannot understand—realities that from the perspective of a human lifetime are far from transient.<sup>55</sup>

### **UNSEARCHABLE RICHES—LIFE'S "ENIGMAS" AS A GENERATOR FOR GODLINESS**

"Light is sweet [not meaningless or absurd], and it is pleasant for the eyes to see the sun. So if a person lives many years [far from brief], let him rejoice in them all [far from meaningless or absurd]; but let him remember that the days of darkness will be many [not few and fleeting]. All that comes is enigma (*hebel*)." (11:7-8)

When Qoheleth asserted that "all" in creation was *hebel* (1:2; 12:8), I believe he meant that nothing in the universe this side of eternity was fully understandable, whether bad or good. The point here is *not* that truth is "unknowable" or "unintelligible" but that reality is "unfathomable." "Oh, the depths of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! (Rom 11:33). These words of Paul echo Qoheleth's conclusions: "I saw all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun" (Eccl 8:17; cf. 11:5). Qoheleth's initial quest was to understand

the work of God in space and time, but the result was frustration, as more knowledge raised more questions. "I applied my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is but a striving after wind. For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow" (1:17-18).

Everything in this time-bound, curse-influenced creation bears a level of *enigma*, meaning that life "under the sun" is frustratingly perplexing, puzzling, or incomprehensible, though still with meaning and significance.<sup>56</sup> While able to know and understand some truths, realities like the repetitive character of life and nature (1:4-7, 9-10), the soul's inability to be satisfied (1:8), and the failure of every new generation to learn from the past (1:11) make existence in this present age "wearisome" at best (1:8; cf. 8:17; Ps. 73:16).

No one is free from this burden, whether rebel or remnant. Indeed, a relationship with the Creator only increases the questions. Nevertheless, it also offers warranted expectation of future salvation on the other side of judgment. This is what Qoheleth meant when he said, "there was nothing to be gained under the sun" (2:11) but "there is more gain in wisdom than in folly" (2:13). For in fearing God one is able to delight even amidst life's perplexities and to find persevering hope in eschatological justice, confident that the Creator is still on the throne and that he knows what he is doing. In Qoheleth's words, "God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is a time for every matter and for every work" (2:17). Similarly, it is those who fear God who will persevere, for "wisdom preserves the life of him who has it" (7:12; cf. 7:18). And again, "It will be well with those who fear God ... but it will not be well with the wicked" (8:12-13). Life's enigmas serve as generators of godliness, unsearchable riches for those enabled to use them rightly (2:26; 3:13; 5:19; 6:2). "Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth. Walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes. But know that for all these things God will bring

you into judgment.... Remember your Creator” (11:9; 12:1).

In what appears to be an intentional affirmation of Qoheleth’s *hebel*-judgments, the Apostle Paul stated these truths this way (Rom 8:20-21, NIV11): “The creation was subjected to frustration (*mataiotēs*) not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.”<sup>57</sup> In the present, we suffer, “groaning inwardly” and often not even knowing how to pray (8:23, 26); but all this painful, enigmatic experience is necessary in order to move us to glory (8:17; cf. Acts 14:22). And in that future day, the one in whom “there is no variation or shadow due to change” (Jas 1:17) will “wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.... No longer will there be anything accursed” (Rev 21:4; 22:3; cf. Isa 26:8).

### THE SEARCH FOR THE UNSEARCHABLE IN ECCLESIASTES

A yet unstated support for reading *hebel* as “enigma” needs now to be noted. It relates to the recurring phrase *re’ut ruah* (1:14; 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4, 6; 6:9) and the parallel *ra’yon ruah* (1:17; 4:16),<sup>58</sup> both of which are regularly appended to Qoheleth’s *hebel*-judgments, bearing the same contexts and referents. While Qoheleth retains two different phrases, it is difficult to distinguish them, so the English versions render them equivalently as “a striving after wind” (RSV, NASB, ESV), “a chasing after the wind” (NIV, NRSV, NIV11), “grasping for the wind” (NKJV), and “a pursuit of the wind” (HCSB).<sup>59</sup> Scholars agree that the forms *re’ut* and *ra’yon* derive from the Semitic root *r’h*, but there is question as to whether they are Hebrew meaning “shepherding, grazing” or borrowed from Aramaic meaning “desire, will; thought.”<sup>60</sup> In the former, “wind” is seen as an objective genitive, as in Proverbs 15:14 where “the

mouths of fools will shepherd/graze on [*yir’eh*] folly” or Hosea 12:1[2] where Ephraim’s attempt at international alliances is described as “herding/feeding on wind [*ro’eh ruah*] and pursuing the east wind.” Here Qoheleth’s point would be that in this enigmatic world, attempts to grasp or control God’s ways are as impossible as herding the wind.<sup>61</sup> If from Aramaic, “wind” is either viewed descriptively as “windy thoughts,” meaning unsubstantial, gain-less, ineffectual, or ungraspable mental activity,<sup>62</sup> or subjectively as “wind’s desire,” connoting random fleetingness.<sup>63</sup>

At least two factors should be kept in mind when assessing the meaning of these phrases: (1) the possibility of distinct though overlapping meanings and (2) the meaning and function of any other occurrences of the root *r’h* in the book. First, while the two phrases are similar and occur in comparable context, the fact that they are different may suggest related but different meanings. Help may be found in assessing the few texts where the phrases are *not* linked with *hebel* judgments. Each phrase is used alone once (1:17; 4:6), and in 2:22 the related phrase *ra’yon libbo* occurs.

### FRUITLESS THOUGHTS

We begin with 1:17-18: “I applied my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is but *ra’yon ruah*. For in much wisdom is much vexation (*ka’as*), and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow (*mak’ob*).” According to Qoheleth, one’s growth in wisdom is always accompanied by torment and pain, likely due to increased questions that arise with more knowledge. Because the whole of this experience is equated to *ra’yon ruah*, the phrase could easily mean either “shepherding of wind” (i.e., making sense of all God’s world is impossible) or “thoughts of wind” (i.e., mental wrestlings are ineffective at putting together all of God’s world).

Support for the latter option is suggested by the parallel use of *ra’yon libbo* in 2:22-23, a text with a number of lexical parallels to 1:17-18. “What has a man from all the toil and *ra’yon* of heart

(*leb*) with which he toils beneath the sun? For all his days are full of sorrow (pl. of *mak'ob*) and his work is a vexation (*ka'as*). Even in the night his heart (*leb*) does not rest. This also is *hebel*." With *ra'yon ruah*, the sage appears to address internal mental wrestlings that disturb during the day and keep one awake at night. While the phrase could express "a shepherding of one's heart" (i.e., trying to get one's mind under control), the description parallels closely the use of the Aramaic *ra'yon leb* in Daniel 2:30, where the king's perplexing and mysterious dreams of the night are referred to as *ra'yon libbak* "thoughts of your mind."<sup>64</sup> I suggest, therefore, that *ra'yon ruah* in Ecclesiastes 1:17 and 4:16 means "windy thoughts" or "disturbing thoughts that are ineffectual, bearing no gain."<sup>65</sup> The close alignment with enigma is clear. "When I applied my heart to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done on earth, how neither day nor night do one's eyes see sleep, then I saw all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun. However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out. Even though a wise man claim to know, he cannot find it out" (8:16-17).

#### **SHEPHERDING WIND & THE ONE SHEPHERD**

The more common parallel phrase to *hebel* in Ecclesiastes is *re'ut ruah*, occurring alone in only one of its seven uses (4:6): "Better is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil and *re'ut ruah*." The contrast of one portion of "calm" (i.e., wealth earned peacefully and without strain) with a double portion of toil and *re'ut ruah* suggests that the latter grouping points to frustrating, laborious activity. While a meaning comparable to *ra'yon ruah* "thought of wind" is possible here, the formal distinction of *re'ut ruah* makes plausible a difference in meaning—namely, "a shepherding of wind," which on every account would be a straining, fruitless task. This interpretation of *re'ut ruah* is rendered more likely in light of the way the connection with the Hebrew root *r'h* "shepherding, grazing" would contribute to the overarching mes-

sage of the book. This moves us to our second issue that must be addressed when assessing the meaning of the phrases accompanying *hebel*—namely, other occurrences of *r'h* in Ecclesiastes.

Besides the nine combined instances of *reut* (1:14; 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4, 6; 6:9) and *ra'yon* (1:17; 4:16) in the book, the only other occurrence of *r'h* is in 12:11 where the words of the wise are said to be "given by one Shepherd [*ro'eh 'ehad*]."<sup>66</sup> While no other scholar of whom I am aware has connected the sustained refrain *re'ut ruah* with the mention of shepherd in the epilogue, I hope to show how this link is an important part of the book's artistry and lasting message.

Most English versions render the substantival participle *ro'eh* with the capitalized "Shepherd," pointing to the translators's identification of this shepherd with Yahweh, Israel's one God (e.g., RSV, NIV, NASB, ESV, HSCB but not NRSV, NIV11). While affirming the likelihood of this reading, R. N. Whybray could find no clear reason why the "shepherd" epithet in relation to God or the emphasis on his "oneness" would be used in this context.<sup>67</sup> In light of this dilemma, Michael V. Fox argued that *ro'eh 'ehad* in 12:11 pointed not to Yahweh but to "a herdsman," with the adjective '*ehad* serving as an indefinite article rather than as the number "one." Fox set forth his case as follows: (1) The epithet "shepherd" is never used by itself for God and always points to him as provider and protector, roles not relevant in this context; (2) the specific teachings of the sages are never said to be given directly from God; (3) it is not the words of wisdom but the "goads" and "nails" that are "given"; and (4) the emphatic use of '*ehad* as "one" would make the second half of verse 11 "a theological declaration of monotheism divorced from its context."<sup>68</sup>

While a number of commentators follow Fox (e.g., Seow, Longman, Krüger, Ogden [2<sup>nd</sup> ed.]), the case for identifying *ro'eh* with Yahweh is stronger than some believe. First, the rarity with which '*ehad* functions as an indefinite article along with the fact that alleged instances are almost solely

limited to the Former Prophets gives initial caution to such a use in the compact epilogue of 12:9-14.<sup>69</sup> Furthermore, the definitive presence of *'ehad* most naturally points to a “singular identification” and not a general, indefinite rendering “a shepherd.”<sup>70</sup>

Second, if there is anything that the sorrowing, broken, and perplexed person needs, it is someone who is both willing and able to help, whether through provision or protection, service or guardianship. To say that the “shepherd” metaphor is not relevant in Ecclesiastes is to miss both the problem and the solution raised in this book.

Third, “shepherd” was a common divine epithet in the ancient world, and it is used of Yahweh elsewhere by Jacob (Gen 48:15; 49:24), by David (Ps 23:1), and with respect to the remnant of future Israel (Ps 80:1[2]; Jer 31:10). The Lord is also portrayed as a caring shepherd who watches over the welfare of his flock, his chosen people (Isa 40:11; Ps 28:9). The imagery is applied to his leading them out of danger’s way in Egypt and settling them safely in the Promised Land (Ps 78:52-55; cf. Exod 15:13, 17), and it is also used for the second exodus, the great redemption of the righteous remnant from exile (Isa 40:11; 49:9-13; Jer 23:1-8; 31:8-14).<sup>71</sup>

The implication in all of these texts is that the reason Yahweh is an able and faithful provider and protector of his own is because he is also the true leader of the universe, from whom, through whom, and to whom all things exist (cf. Rom 11:36; Col 1:16-17). For Qoheleth, all observable reality is considered to be “the work of God,” all of which has been made crooked by divine decree (Eccl 1:15; 7:13; cf. Gen 3:17; Rom 8:20).<sup>72</sup> “He has made everything” for which there is a season (Eccl 3:1, 11; 11:5). He gives life (5:18; 8:15; 9:9); he gives mankind its “unhappy business” with which to be busy (1:13; 3:9); and he gives wisdom, knowledge, and joy to whom he pleases, withholding it from others (2:26). To some he gives wealth, possessions, and honor but not the power to delight in them, whereas he enables others to eat, drink, and

find pleasure, even in the toils of life (3:13; 5:19; 6:2). For Qoheleth, God is the “Creator” (12:1), who will judge all actions in his time (3:17; 11:19; cf. 12:14). As such, an assertion in the book’s epilogue that this is indeed the Shepherd-Leader of all is by no means foreign to the context.<sup>73</sup> Indeed, it is uniquely suited to stress his role both as leader and helper.

Fourth, the subjects of 12:11 are the “words of the wise” and the “collected sayings,” and therefore the most likely understood subject of the verb *nittenu* “they are given” (Niphal *qatal* 3mp *ntn*) in 12:11b are these wisdom compilations, not the “goads” or “nails.” Furthermore, throughout the book, God, the Creator of all (12:1), is portrayed as the great “giver” (1:13; 2:26; 3:10-11; 5:18-19) from whom even wisdom comes (2:26).<sup>74</sup> Elsewhere, Job states explicitly that, while wisdom is “hidden from the eyes of all living,” “God understands the way to it, and he knows its place.... He saw it and declared it; he established it, and searched it out” (Job 28:20, 23, 27). Similarly, Solomon declared, “Yahweh gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding” (Prov 2:6), and personified wisdom asserted itself to be linked with God at the beginning of his work (8:22; cf. vv. 22-31). With these truths, Scripture teaches a close association between the wise words of the sages and the divine source of that wisdom (see 1 Kgs 3:12, 28). All these factors suggest that indeed the “one Shepherd” is God who gives words to the wise.

Fifth, a climactic “theological declaration of monotheism” is neither distracting nor divorced from the context but is directly linked to Qoheleth’s purpose through the book. A number of scholars have noted the close tie between Deuteronomy and the wisdom of Ecclesiastes, making it not far fetched that 12:11 alludes to *yhwh 'ehad* in Deuteronomy 6:4.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, as an aged man, this sage had grown to appreciate mankind’s God-wrought inability to grasp fully the Creator’s universal purposes, for it was through a recognition of these limitations that God-dependence would

lead to joy in this age and in the age to come. Far from being a “protest against God,”<sup>76</sup> Qoheleth’s declarations of universal enigma (“all is *hebel!*”) push readers to look through their questions to the *one* who alone governs all things. In the end, the only people that will be preserved are those who fear God (7:12, 18; 8:12-13; 11:8)—the one, sole architect and builder of this broken yet beautiful world (3:11 with 1:15 and 7:13). And this is exactly the point of the book’s final verses: “The end of the matter; 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).

We live in a crooked world that cannot with any level of human effort be made straight (1:15; 7:13). It is cursed, making the kindnesses of God sometime difficult to visualize. “How is he working good in this?” Consider all the various things that mark our lives: unstable jobs, orphans, judicial corruption, blown tires, broken legs, sex-trafficking, leaky faucets, divine sovereignty vs. human responsibility, failed adoptions, monthly bills, envy, project deadlines, rainy vacations, broken marriages, chronic back pain, pride, pornography, slippery roads, severed relationships, selfishness, racism, bee stings, abortion, and the ever present death of loved ones (or ourselves). This is our world.

We cry, “Why us? Why her? Why this hard? Why this way? Why this long?” Yet, like Job, we hear no answer. We gain no clarity—only more vexation. Our growth in wisdom only raises more questions, as our attempts to comprehend fully what God is doing or why he is doing it always reach dead ends, at least at some level.

All is indeed *hebel*. Both our creatureliness and the curse make life an enigma, as puzzling and frustrating as trying to guide the sea-breezes onto a different course. But while *re’ut ruah* “a shepherding of wind” is impossible for us, there is *ro’eh ’ehad* “one Shepherd” who oversees and orchestrates all, including the wind’s courses (1:6). What

literary artistry the wise sage used to bring us to God. In him we can trust, for as the one Shepherd of all, he is both able and willing to protect and provide for all who fear him. Though we are not in control, he is; and even though life continues to be puzzling, we can receive life as a gift and find joy, resting in the arms of him who makes all puzzles for our good and his glory.

## CONCLUSION

Ecclesiastes shows up in the first half of the Writings, the third main division of Jesus’ Bible (Luke 24:44).<sup>77</sup> Following the context of sustained darkness highlighted in the history and prophetic commentary of the Prophets, the loyal remnant of Yahweh needed clarity on how to maintain their faith, even amidst life’s sufferings and perplexities. The final form of the Writings gave voice and guidance to this faithful few, still in “slavery” (Ezra 9:8-9), who remained resolute in their confidence that Yahweh was on the throne and would one day right all wrongs through a royal redeemer.<sup>78</sup> Specifically, following the Messiah-oriented narrative preface in Ruth, the rest of the Former Writings (Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Lamentations) are devoted to clarifying *how those hoping in God’s kingdom were to live*, having lives characterized by wisdom, waiting, and worship.

Into this context, Ecclesiastes gives its voice: “Ultimate enigma, says the Preacher, ultimate enigma! All is an enigma.” That life is unsatisfying, fleeting, and troublesome creates high levels of puzzlement, mystery, and even vexation for the believer and non-believer alike. “Consider the work of God: who can make straight what he has made crooked?” (7:13). “I saw all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun” (8:17). Far too often the bright purposes and kindnesses of God are dimmed from vision behind cloudy skies, whether due to ignorance (3:11; 11:5), injustice and oppression (4:1), discontentment (4:8; 6:2), financial loss (5:13), unexpected trial (9:12;

11:2), persistent battle with sin (9:3), the sheer monotony of life's repetitions (1:4-11), the fleeting nature of wisdom, skill, and wealth (2:21; 5:16), or the fact that one's life is simply forgotten after death (2:14-16). The curse has created a world where rebel and remnant alike experience both birth *and* death, love *and* hate, peace *and* war (3:2, 8). This is the nature of life "under the sun." How is one to respond under these all-pervasive enigmas?

Some stay oppressed, striving helplessly under life's conundrums and remaining tormented and unsatisfied. Others, however, hear Qoheleth's cry of "enigma" as a rallying call to battle their innate tendencies toward self-reliance and to see it replaced with radical God-dependence.<sup>79</sup> Stated differently, God uses the very crooked, perplexing, and inscrutable nature of this world as the means for breaking humanity's pride and passion to control in order to replace them with reverent fear of God. "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; cf. 3:18).

While all Qoheleth's queries proved to him that "there was nothing to be gained under the sun" (2:11), even in this cursed world he asserted "there is more gain in wisdom than in folly, as there is more gain in light than in darkness" (2:13). Why? It is because those who fear God today are enabled to enjoy this world as a gift of the Creator and therefore as a channel for worship (2:24-25; 6:1-2; 11:8; 12:1). It is also because those who walk in wisdom today, living in light of the future judgment, will escape the wrath that will one day fall on the wicked (3:17; 7:12, 18-19; 8:12-13; cf. 12:13-14). The fear of God leads to the approval of God, which frees you and me to delight in today as we hope for tomorrow. "Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do" (9:7; cf. 2:26; 7:26). "Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth. Walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of

your eyes. But know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment.... Remember your Creator" (11:9; 12:1).

Every bit of God's workings in this cursed world includes levels of unsearchableness—"riches and wisdom and knowledge" vast and deep and "judgments and ... ways" that are beyond finding out (Rom 11:33-36). "Who has known the mind of the Lord?" (11:34). Qoheleth's call is to turn from striving against God's providence toward trusting the God who is in control and who is both willing and able to help all who fear him. This is the goal of Ecclesiastes: that believers feeling the weight of the curse and the burden of life's enigmas would turn their eyes toward God, resting in his purposes and delighting whenever possible in his beautiful, disfigured world. In this alone will one find lasting gain unto eternity.<sup>80</sup>

Our incapacity to shepherd or control reality should humble us in a way that generates a righteous fear of the one who has been effectively shepherding all things for all time. And because he is the Shepherd—the provider and protector of all who fear him, we can rest confidently that "behind a frowning providence he hides a smiling face."

Those living during the initial restoration would have readily affirmed Qoheleth's assessment of life's enigmas (*hebel*) and of the believing remnant's inability to "shepherd" reality (*re'ut ruah*; Eccl. 1:14; 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4, 6; 6:9). They would have also been comforted in the reminder that their God was the *ro'eh 'ehad* "one Shepherd" of the universe, both faithful and able to provide and to protect (12:11). Finally, they would have increased their hope in the coming Messiah and his global, new covenant kingdom, for the call to trust Yahweh as Shepherd would have reminded them of the promised *ro'eh 'ehad* in the line of David (Ezek. 34:23; 37:24; cf. 2 Sam. 5:2), through whom God would feed his flock in justice (34:15-16, 31) and by him establish peace for his people (34:25-29).

Jesus picked up on this imagery in John 10:16, when he spoke of sheep beyond ethnic Israel

who would enjoy the guidance and peace he alone brings: “I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, *one shepherd*” (cf. John 11:52; Rev. 5:9). What encouragement and security is here given to all those who are trusting the good shepherd, because faith itself is proof of being his sheep and because none who are part of the flock will be lost (John 10:26–30): “You do not believe because you are not part of my flock. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand. I and the Father are one” (cf. 6:37, 44, 64–65; 8:47; 12:37–40).

Far from a book of pessimism or fatalism, Ecclesiastes is a hopeful book that addresses head-on the realities of life in this crooked age and does so in a way that nurtures hope for the next—hope that gains sharp clarity in the person and work of Jesus. In this world filled with enigmas, may we be bold enough to preach such good news!

*God moves in a mysterious way  
His wonders to perform;  
He plants his footsteps in the sea,  
And rides upon the storm.*

*Deep in unfathomable mines  
Of never-failing skill,  
He treasures up his bright designs  
And works his sovereign will.*

*Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take,  
The clouds ye so much dread  
Are big with mercy, and shall break  
In blessings on your head.*

*Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,  
But trust him for his grace;  
Behind a frowning providence  
He hides a smiling face.*

*His purposes will ripen fast,  
Unfolding every hour;  
The bud may have a bitter taste,  
But sweet will be the flower.*

*Blind unbelief is sure to err,  
And scan his work in vain:  
God is his own interpreter,  
And He will make it plain.<sup>81</sup>*

~William Cowper (1731–1800)~

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>In preparation for the writing of this essay, God in Christ has graciously manifest his faithfulness to me through friends and family. I wish to thank my former colleague Dr. Ardel Caneday and my student Jesse Scheumann for their help on this paper. I have learned much from both of them regarding the message of Ecclesiastes, and our conversations and their writings have greatly influenced the final form of this essay. I also want to thank my wife and children, for in our journey together through life’s enigmas they have maintained a steady satisfaction in God’s worth, for which I am humbled and grateful to our great Shepherd.

<sup>2</sup>James L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes* (Old Testament Library; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), 23. Cf. Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (London: SCM, 1979), 584, 588.

<sup>3</sup>The English title Ecclesiastes is derived from the Greek *Ekklēsiastes* (via the Latin Vulgate *Liber Ecclesiastes*), which is the Greek translation of the Hebrew *qohelet* (Qoheleth), the title given to the main speaker of the book and the appellative I will use to refer to him throughout this work. The term Qoheleth is a Qal fs participle meaning “one who assembles” and is best understood as an official title that may have later doubled as a proper name (see James L. Crenshaw, “Ecclesiastes, Book of,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* [ed. David Noel Freedman; New York: Doubleday, 1992] 2:271–72). While most scholars, liberal and conservative alike, now favor a late date for Ecclesiastes, I am still persuaded that Qoheleth was most likely King Solomon and written toward the end of his life. For arguments to this end, see Gleason L. Archer,

*A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, (rev. ed.; Chicago: Moody, 1994), 528-37; Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs* (New American Commentary; Nashville: Broadman, 1993), 254-67; Daniel C. Fredericks, "Ecclesiastes," in *Ecclesiastes & The Song of Songs* (ed. Daniel C. Fredericks and Daniel J. Estes; Apollos Old Testament Commentary; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2010), 31-36, cf. 58-61 and idem, *Qohelet's Language* (Ancient Near Eastern Texts and Studies 3; Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1988).

<sup>4</sup>A little known fact likely of interest to readers of this journal is that before receiving his Ph.D. from Vanderbilt University in 1964, James L. Crenshaw received his B.D. in 1960 from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. In the world of Old Testament wisdom studies, Crenshaw's scholarship is highly revered, but many of his present theological views would not align with *The Baptist Faith and Message* 2000.

<sup>5</sup>E.g., R. B. Y. Scott, *Proverbs-Ecclesiastes* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965), 192.

<sup>6</sup>Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes* (New International Commentary on the Old Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 32-36; cf. Tremper Longman III and Raymond B. Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 284-87. Longman (*The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 36) agrees with Crenshaw's assertion that Israel's "skeptics" like Qoheleth "denied God's goodness if not his very existence, and they portrayed men and women as powerless to acquire essential truth" (Crenshaw, "Birth of Skepticism in Ancient Israel," in *The Divine Helmsman: Studies on God's Control of Human Events* [ed. J. L. Crenshaw and S. Sandmel; New York: KTAV, 1980], 15).

<sup>7</sup>Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 38. Douglas Stuart affirms this "foil" interpretation in his well-used, evangelical introduction to biblical interpretation (*How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, [2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993], 214): "[Qoheleth's perspective] is the secular, fatalistic wisdom that a practical atheism produces. When one relegates God to a position way out there away from us, irrelevant to

our daily lives, then Ecclesiastes is the result."

<sup>8</sup>For example, in the last of nine sermons on the book of Ecclesiastes, Kevin DeYoung, Senior Pastor at University Reformed Church in Lansing, MI, summarized his view of the unorthodox Qoheleth in this way: "He is searching, confused, contradictory, cynical, and his conclusion is very clear.... 'Vanity of vanities, all is vanity'.... Life under the sun is purposeless, meaningless, empty, and pointless.... Qoheleth is a tricky figure to understand.... Here is someone who is just frankly confused. He gets some stuff right, and he also gets some stuff wrong. He has strengths and weakness.... Good at seeing through the superficialities of life; good at seeing the vanity and contradictions of our existence; but bad at finding meaning and redemption." Kevin DeYoung, "The End of the Matter," [cited 24 September 2011]. Online: [http://www.universityreformedchurch.org/teachin/sermons.html?sermon\\_id=84](http://www.universityreformedchurch.org/teachin/sermons.html?sermon_id=84). Like Longman before him, DeYoung sees the final verses as a corrective from father to son on a better way of looking at life—a way directed by God and not apart from him. Similarly, in an attempt to reconcile some potential conclusions drawn from Qoheleth's teaching, John Piper, Pastor for Preaching and Vision at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, MN, has asserted: "The writer of Ecclesiastes is speaking the words of a despairing man, not a man of faith.... This is bleak theology in Ecclesiastes, not admirable theology." John Piper, "What Would You Say to Someone Who Uses Ecclesiastes to Say That Abortion is a Better Alternative than the Life Awaiting Some Babies," [cited 9 September 2011]. Online: <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/ask-pastor-john/what-would-you-say-to-someone-who-uses-ecclesiastes-to-say-that-abortion-is-a-better-alternative-than-the-life-awaiting-some-babies>. In personal dialog regarding this statement, Pastor John did note that he holds his views on Ecclesiastes lightly, for he understands this book less than any other in the Bible.

<sup>9</sup>R. N. Whybray, "Qoheleth, Preacher of Joy," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 23 (1982): 87-98; cf. Agustinus Gianto, "The Theme of Enjoyment in Qohelet," *Biblica* 73 (1992): 528-32; Nor-

bert Lohfink, "Qoheleth 5:17-19—Revelation by Joy," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* [CBQ] 52 (1990): 625-35; Douglas Wilson, *Joy at the End of the Tether: The Inscrutable Wisdom of Ecclesiastes* (Moscow, ID: Canon, 1999).

<sup>10</sup>Ardel B. Caneday, "Qoheleth: Enigmatic Pessimist or Godly Sage?" *Grace Theological Journal* 7, no. 1 (1986): 21-56; Robert V. McCabe, "The Message of Ecclesiastes," *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* (1996): 85-112, and page 87 for the title "godly sage."

<sup>11</sup>Fredericks, "Ecclesiastes," 40-41; cf. idem, *Coping with Transience: Ecclesiastes on Brevity in Life* (The Biblical Seminary 18; Sheffield: JSOT, 1993), 95. Similarly, in Whybray's later commentary (*Ecclesiastes* [New Century Bible Commentary [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989], 24-28), he departs from the title "Preacher of Joy" to speak of Qoheleth instead as a "realist": "Qoheleth's religious faith was all the stronger for his refusal to shut his eyes to the bad things in life and for his unflinching realism.... It is only the person who has taken full account of the vanities of this world and faced up to them who is free to receive the divine gift of joy in simple things.... Whether he was a pessimist or an optimist ... will remain a matter of opinion; what is certain is that he was a realist" (24-25, 28).

<sup>12</sup>For an overview of the history of interpretation, see Svend Holm-Nielsen, "On the Interpretation of Qoheleth in Early Christianity." *Vetus Testamentum* 24 (1974) 168-77; Roland E. Murphy, "Qoheleth Interpreted: The Bearing of the Past on the Present," *Vetus Testamentum* 32 (1982): 331-37; Craig A. Bartholomew, *Reading Ecclesiastes: Old Testament Exegesis and Hermeneutical Theory* (Analecta Biblica 39; Rome: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1998), 1-205; idem, *Ecclesiastes*, (Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 21-43; Eric S. Christianson, *Ecclesiastes through the Centuries* (Blackwell Bible Commentaries; Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007); Tremper Longman III, "Ecclesiastes 3: History of Interpretation," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008), 140-49.

<sup>13</sup>Some helpful studies by two who do see "contradic-

tions" in the book but who see them being handled quite differently are Michael V. Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions* (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, Supplement Series 71, BLS 18 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1989)); idem, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 1-26; Bartholomew, *Reading Ecclesiastes*, 237-54.

<sup>14</sup>Adapted from Addison G. Wright, "The Riddle of the Sphinx: The Structure of the Book of Qoheleth," *CBQ* 30 (1968): 322-25; cf. idem, "The Riddle of the Sphinx Revisited: Numerical Patterns in the Book of Qoheleth," *CBQ* 42 (1980): 38-51; idem, "Additional Numerical Patterns in Qoheleth," *CBQ* 45 (1983): 32-43. Wright observes that Ecclesiastes contains exactly 222 poetic verses, with the argument shifting directly in the middle: 111 occurring from 1:1-6:9 and 111 from 6:10-12:14. See also Caneday, "Qoheleth: Enigmatic Pessimist or Godly Sage?," 31-34; James M. Hamilton Jr., *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 313-14, 319. For a helpful and unfavorable critique of Wright's numerology, see Choon-Leong Seow, *Ecclesiastes* (Anchor Bible; New York: Doubleday, 1997), 44-46.

<sup>15</sup>Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *HALOT Study Edition* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 237. The initial aspirated "h" followed by the spirant "v" sound suggests that the word is probably onomatopoeic, which means it is spoken by the exhalation of "breath" that the word itself denotes (see K. Seybold, "hebel," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* [TDOT] [ed. G. Johannes Botterweck et al.; trans. John T. Willis et al.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973] 3:314; Fredericks, *Coping with Transience*, 12). Qoheleth may use it poetically to express a sigh over the frustratingly enigmatic, ineffectual, or ungraspable nature of human life in this cursed world. For *hebel* in Ecclesiastes, see 1:2 (5 times), 14; 2:1, 11, 15, 17, 19, 21, 23, 26; 3:19; 4:4, 7, 8, 16; 5:7, 10; 6:2, 4, 9, 11, 12; 7:6, 15; 8:10, 14 (2 times); 9:9 (2 times); 11:8, 10; 12:8 (3 times). While some argue that the *hakkol* at the beginning of 9:2 should be read as *hebel* and perhaps conclude 9:1 (cf. Septuagint [LXX] and Vulgate), the

Masoretic Text [MT] is perfectly clear as it stands (so Dominique Barthélemy, et al., ed., *Preliminary and Interim Report on the Hebrew Old Testament Text Project: Volume 3: Poetical Books* [Stuttgart: United Bible Society, 1977], 586; contrast Michael V. Fox, “The Meaning of *Hebel* for Qohelet,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* [JBL] 105 [1986]: 424, n.31). It is also possible that the Hebrew phrase *kol yeme hebleka* in 9:9 is secondary, seeing as it is absent in many Hebrew manuscripts and the Latin Vulgate (see Barthélemy, *Preliminary and Interim Report*, 3:588). This latter possibility would render the number of *hebel* judgments in Ecclesiastes at thirty-seven, a likely total in light of the artistic and apparently intentional numerology at work in the volume (e.g., thirty-seven multiplied by three is 111, matching the exact number of verses in each half of the book). For more on the intriguing use of numbers in Ecclesiastes, see the three articles by A. G. Wright or the synthesis by J. M. Hamilton listed in footnote 14.

<sup>16</sup>Daniel C. Fredericks, “הֶבֶל,” in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* [NIDOTTE] (ed. Willem A. VanGemeren; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 1:1005.

<sup>17</sup>The idiomatic phrase *hebel hebalim* “breath of breaths” expresses the superlative and may be translated “ultimate breath” or “utterly breath.” For a more nuanced translation of *hebel* within Ecclesiastes, see below. For similar uses of the superlative see *qodes qadasim* “holy of holies” in Exodus 29:37, *seme hassamayim* “the heaven of heavens” in 1 Kings 8:27; and *sir has-sirim* “Song of Songs” in Song 1:1.

<sup>18</sup>For more on *hebel* outside of Ecclesiastes, see the commentaries along with Seybold, “*hebhel*,” 3:313-20; Fredericks, “הֶבֶל,” 1:1005-06; and Gordon H. Johnston, “הֶבֶל,” NIDOTTE (ed. Willem A. VanGemeren; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 1:1003-05.

<sup>19</sup>Fox, “The Meaning of *Hebel* for Qohelet,” 415.

<sup>20</sup>See footnote 15 above.

<sup>21</sup>So all major English translations. Derek Kidner asserts that Qoheleth’s use of *hebel* signals that the “sum total” of life is “zero ... pointless ... utter futility” (*The Message of Ecclesiastes* [The Bible Speaks Today; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1976], 22). See also Robert

Davidson, *Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon* (Daily Study Bible; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1986), 8-9; Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 61-65.

<sup>22</sup>Fox, “The Meaning of *Hebel* for Qohelet,” 409-27; idem, *Qohelet and His Contradictions*, 29-46; idem, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up*, 30-31; idem, *Ecclesiastes* (Jewish Publication Society Bible Commentary; Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 2004), xix. Following Fox’s appropriation of “absurd,” Garrett defines *hebel* as “an active violation of what ought to be the moral order ... an offense to reason” (*Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 283).

<sup>23</sup>Kathleen A. Farmer (*Who Knows What is Good? A Commentary on the Books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*, ITC [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991], 145) asserts that *hebel* refers to “lack of permanence rather than lack of worth or value. A breath, after all, is of considerable value to the one who breathes it. However, it is not something one can hang on to for long. It is air like, fleeting, transitory, and elusive rather than meaningless.” The most sustained case for this reading has been made by Daniel C. Fredericks, *Coping with Transience*, 11-32; idem, “Ecclesiastes,” 23-31, 70. Within this category would also likely fall C. S. Knopf’s proposal “ceaseless change” (“The Optimism of Qoheleth,” *JBL* 49 [1930]: 196).

<sup>24</sup>Building off arguments by W. E. Staples, who renders *hebel* as “mystery” (“The ‘Vanity’ of Ecclesiastes,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 2 [1943]: 95-104; idem, “Vanity of Vanities,” *CJT* 1 [1955]: 141-56), Graham S. Ogden has strongly argued for the translation of “enigma,” meaning “human life, in its many facets, is ... not fully within our power to comprehend” (*Qoheleth* [2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Readings: A New Biblical Commentary; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2007], 32, cf. 21-26; idem, “‘Vanity’ It Certainly Is Not,” *The Bible Translator* 38, no. 3 [1987]: 301-07). He is followed by Bartholomew (*Reading Ecclesiastes*, 166, n.109; idem, *Ecclesiastes*, 106-07) and, in a highly convincing essay, by McCabe (“The Message of Ecclesiastes,” 85-112). Roland Murphy believes *hebel* means “‘absurd’ in the sense of incomprehensible,” but he translates with “vanity” as a catch-word (*Ecclesiastes*, Word [Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1992], lix). Simi-

larly, Seow (*Ecclesiastes*, 59-60, 102; cf. 47) translates with “vanity” but holds Qoheleth “does not mean that everything is meaningless or insignificant, but that everything is beyond human apprehension and comprehension.... What is *hebel* cannot be grasped—neither physically nor intellectually. It cannot be controlled.” So too Iain Provan concludes: “Qoheleth has in mind ... the elusive nature of reality, that is, the way in which it resists our attempts to capture it and contain it, to grasp hold of it and control it” (*Ecclesiastes/Song of Songs* [New International Version Application Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001], 52). Douglas Wilson’s proposal “inscrutable repetitiveness” also likely falls into this category (*Joy at the End of the Tether*, 18).

<sup>25</sup>Douglas B. Miller, *Symbol and Rhetoric in Ecclesiastes: The Place of Hebel in Qoheleth’s Work* (Academia Biblica 2; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002), 8.

<sup>26</sup>Scott, *Proverbs-Ecclesiastes*, as observed by Miller, *Symbol and Rhetoric in Ecclesiastes*, 8. Most scholars who take a multi-sense approach to *hebel* are less broad. For example, Michael A. Eaton states that Qoheleth’s use of *hebel* includes the ideas of brevity, unreliability, and futility: “All is untrustworthy, unsubstantial; no endeavour will in itself bring permanent satisfaction; the greatest joys are fleeting” (*Ecclesiastes*, [Tyndale Old Testament Commentary (TOTC); Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1976], 56). Similarly, Crenshaw (*Ecclesiastes*, 57), Whybray (*Ecclesiastes*, 36), and Thomas Krüger (*Qoheleth*, [Hermeneia; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2004], 42, cf. 3) all argue that *hebel* generally means “futility” but sometimes “fleeting.”

<sup>27</sup>Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up*, 35-36. Of the thirty-eight occurrences of *hebel* in *Ecclesiastes*, all but the following are included in statements of judgment: 6:4, 11, 12; 7:15; 9:9; 11:10.

<sup>28</sup>See D. P. Simpson, *Cassell’s Latin Dictionary* (New York: Macmillan, 1968), 630.

<sup>29</sup>Michael V. Fox synthesizes Qoheleth’s perspective as follows: “Qoheleth is not a ‘person of faith,’” and “‘all is absurd’ is ultimately a protest against God” (*A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up*, 34, 49).

<sup>30</sup>Fredericks, *Coping with Transience*, 28. While absence of evidence is not evidence of absence, the fact that *Ecclesiastes* does not contain the “contextual markers” does call into question the reading of “meaninglessness” or the like.

<sup>31</sup>So Fredericks, “Ecclesiastes,” 48.

<sup>32</sup>Douglas Wilson has rightfully asserted (*Joy at the End of the Tether*, 15-16): “If Solomon were arguing the absolute meaninglessness of absolutely everything, then why should we trust his argument? It too is under the sun. How could anything, or any word, *mean* utter meaninglessness? Whenever anyone announces that there is no such thing as truth, a listener should always wonder if the speaker believes his expression to be *true*. Solomon is a wiser man than to fall into the idiocy of modern existential relativism. So vanity in this book does not mean final and ultimate absurdity; something else is in view.” Cf. Fredericks, “Ecclesiastes,” 48-49.

<sup>33</sup>So Fredericks, “Ecclesiastes,” 50. As will be shown, Fox’s identification of Qoheleth’s *hebel* statements with the existentialism of Albert Camus seems fully unjustified (*A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up*, 8-11).

<sup>34</sup>The Hebrew root *ytr* occurs only in *Ecclesiastes*, ten times as the noun *yitron* (1:3; 2:11, 13[2 times]; 3:9; 5:9[8], 16[15]; 7:12; 10:10, 11), one time as the noun *motar* (3:19), and seven times as the participle *yoter* (6:8, 11; 7:11), which is sometimes used as an adverb (2:15; 7:16; 12:9, 12). The root appears mean “gain” or “advantage,” in the sense of the profit that is left over after a commercial enterprise, though never in *Ecclesiastes* with a material sense. For a helpful overview of this term in *Ecclesiastes*, see Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 27-30.

<sup>35</sup>In addition to the LXX’s uses of *ponēros* in *Ecclesiastes*, the MT uses the adjective *ra’* in 4:3 (*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 humanity’s struggle to understand reality. In the words of Graham S. Ogden, “Throughout Qoheleth, *ra’* describes any painful or traumatic

situation, rather one which is morally corrupt or evil" (*Qoheleth*, 23). Against this, Longman prefers to translate all uses as "[moral] evil" that Qoheleth attributed to God. Because Longman believes that Qoheleth bears an "acerbic attitude" toward God, he thinks that "evil is a translation more in keeping with Qoheleth's subtle criticism of God throughout the book" (*The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 80). Cf. David W. Baker, "רעב," *NIDOTTE* (ed. Willem A. VanGemeren; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 3:1154-58.

<sup>36</sup>For an overview of how Genesis 1-3 shapes the backdrop to Qoheleth's understanding of life "under the sun," see Charles C. Forman, "Kohleleth's Use of Genesis," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 5 (1960): 256-63; Roy B. Zuck, "God and Man in Ecclesiastes," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 148 (1991): 46-56; D. M. Clemens, "The Law of Sin and Death: Ecclesiastes and Genesis 1-3," *Themelios* 19 (1994): 5-8; cf. Walter Zimmerli, who asserted that Old Testament wisdom is shaped "within the framework of a theology of creation" ("The Place and Limit of Wisdom in the Framework of Old Testament Theology," *Scottish Journal of Theology* [1964]: 148).

<sup>37</sup>The prepositional phrase "under the sun" occurs twenty-nine 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). It does not suggest that Qoheleth engages in "natural theology," nor does it portray a world absent of God so as to contrast it with a more heavenly perspective. The latter view has been developed by Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 44-45, who asserts that Ecclesiastes "defends the life of faith in a generous God by pointing to the grimness of the alternative.... The Preacher's point is that what is to be seen with sheer pessimism 'under the sun' may be seen differently in the light of faith in the generosity of God." Similarly, Longman contends that "under the sun," "under heaven," and "on earth" indicate an exclusion of the God of Scripture from all Qoheleth's considerations (*The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 66): "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." To take "under the sun," "under heaven,"

and "on earth" in this way misreads 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" or "on the earth." Such is clear in Ecclesiastes 1:13-14, which read, "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." Never does Qoheleth use the phrase "under the sun" or parallel phrase to bracket out God and his providential role from his inquiry. The phrases circumscribe the realm of all that Qoheleth observed in contrast to that realm over which God's reign known to opposition. For more on this, see Caneday, "Qoheleth," 26; H. Carl Shank, "Qoheleth's World and Life View as Seen in His Recurring Phrases," *Westminster Theological Journal* 37 (1974): 67.

<sup>38</sup>So too Caneday, "Qoheleth," 28-31. He writes of Qoheleth (30): "He 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."

<sup>39</sup>R. L. Schultz ("Ecclesiastes," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* [ed. T. Desmond Alexander et al.; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000], 214) has insightfully suggested that Qoheleth's encouragement to "eat, drink, and enjoy your work" refers directly to the fulfillment of the covenant promises of national blessing, as described in 1 Kings 4:20: "Judah and Israel were as many as the sand by the sea. They ate and drank and were happy."

<sup>40</sup>Qoheleth does not deny that mankind can know truth. His frustration is that we cannot know *all* truth. Our wisdom and knowledge is finite, not omniscient like the Creator's. On the limits of human wisdom, see Ecclesiastes 7:23-24; 8:17.

<sup>41</sup>David defined the problem of God's goodness as follows: "[Yahweh] does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities"

(Ps 103:10). Ezra put it this way: “You, our God, have punished us less than our iniquities deserved” (Ezra 9:13). How is such mercy justified?

<sup>42</sup>Garrett’s view is similar (*Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 278): “The Teacher tells his readers how to live in the world as it really is instead of living in a world of false hope. In short, Ecclesiastes urges its readers to recognize that they are mortal. They must abandon all illusions of self-importance, face death and life squarely, and accept with fear and trembling their dependence on God.”

<sup>43</sup>Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 54.

<sup>44</sup>Fox writes (*A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up*, 45): “It is difficult to distinguish the contextual meaning of *reut-ruah* from that of *hebel*, since in all but two of the nine times that the former occurs it is appended to a *hebel*-judgment and has precisely the same contexts and referents.... In the context there is no sharp and consistent difference.”

<sup>45</sup>Farmer, *Who Knows What is Good?* 143-46.

<sup>46</sup>Fredericks, *Coping with Transience*, esp. 11-32; idem, “Ecclesiastes,” 23-30. Along with the use *hebel* and “shadow” in Ecclesiastes 6:12 and Psalm 144:3-4 (cf. Ps. 39:5), he parallels phrases like “a few days” (Eccl. 2:3; 5:17; 6:12) with Job 14:2, 5 (also with “shadow”) and 16:22 and links Qoheleth’s frequent use of “wind,” as in the phrase “striving after wind” (1:14; 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4, 16; 6:9) with uses of wind as transient outside the book (e.g., Isa 57:13; Job 7:6-7).

<sup>47</sup>Cf. Richard L. Schulz, “A Sense of Timing: A Neglected Aspect of Qoheleth’s Wisdom,” in *Seeking Out the Wisdom of the Ancients* (ed. R. L. Troxel et al.; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns), 257-67.

<sup>48</sup>Fredericks, “Ecclesiastes,” 65.

<sup>49</sup>Douglas B. Miller has synthesized the three main spheres of Qoheleth’s wrestlings as “insubstantiality, transience, and foulness” (*Symbol and Rhetoric in Ecclesiastes*, 15; cf. idem, “Qoheleth’s Symbolic Use of *Hebel*,” *JBL* 117 [1998]: 437-54). Miller helpfully connects these to Qoheleth’s use of *hebel* but fails to see the common thread in each is their creation of life’s enigmas (cf. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 106). For a more developed assessment of Miller’s proposal, see the article by A. B. Caneday in this issue of *SBJT*.

<sup>50</sup>Douglas Wilson defines *hebel* as “inscrutable repetitiveness,” addressing the painful, even unexplainable cyclical nature of all life (*Joy at the End of the Tether*, 18): “You washed the dishes last night, and there they are again. You changed the oil in your car three months ago, and now you are doing it *again*. All is vanity. This shirt was clean yesterday.” While Wilson is correct that the Qoheleth was vexed by the inexplainable nature of the cycles of life, wrestling with issues of time was but one of the “inscrutables” with which Qoheleth struggled.

<sup>51</sup>In contrast to the majority of translations, Ecclesiastes 2:24 reads not “There is nothing better” but “There is no good in man that he should eat and drink and see his soul good in his toil; also this I see that it is from the hand of God.” The Hebrew *min*-comparative is found in 3:22 but a different preposition is used in 2:24; 3:12; and 8:15.

<sup>52</sup>For a similar overview of the following texts, see Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 22-24; idem, “Vanity” It Certainly Is Not,” 302-04; Miller, *Symbol and Rhetoric in Ecclesiastes*, 12-13.

<sup>53</sup>For more on this theme, see Robert K. Johnston, “‘Confessions of a Workaholic’: A Reappraisal of Qoheleth,” *CBQ* 38 (1976): 14-28.

<sup>54</sup>In his interpretation of Ecclesiastes 4:8, Fredericks places the *hebel*-judgment (a positive statement of brevity) up against the statement of tragic pain (“Ecclesiastes,” 135). However, because the same reality is portrayed first as *hebel* and then as an “unhappy business,” it seems likely that the two designations are working with rather than against one another. It is noteworthy that when *hebel* is followed by “striving after wind” Fredericks does see both phrases working together, the latter clarifying the former (28).

<sup>55</sup>In fairness to this position, one of the *hebel* texts that initially seems to favor a reading of “temporary” is Ecclesiastes 6:12, which Fredericks parallels with Psalm 144:3-4 (*ibid.*, 23). Fredericks views the phrases “the few days,” “his *hebel* life,” “like a shadow,” and “after him” to be “‘magnifiers’ of the transience of experiences in life and of life itself” (164). In light of the lexical similarities between

this verse and Psalm 144:3-4, a rendering of *hebel* in Ecclesiastes 6:12 as anything but “fleeting” may be hard pressed (so Miller, *Symbol and Rhetoric in Ecclesiastes*, 6). In response, apart from the alleged parallel, it is noteworthy that a rendering as “enigma” makes good sense in 6:12, especially in light of the unanswered questions that bookend the statement: “Who knows?” and “Who can tell?” Furthermore, the parallel text in 8:13 suggests that Qoheleth may in fact be using “shadow” not as a marker of transience but as something one cannot get away from when living “under the sun” (that is, in the light of the sun, shadows are always present). The text reads, “It will not be well with the wicked, neither will he prolong his days like a shadow, because he does not fear before God.” While in this age “a sinner does evil a hundred times and prolongs his life” (8:12), in the future God will render judgment upon the wicked in such a way that he will *not* “prolong his days like a shadow” (8:13). If “shadow” means “fleeting” in 8:13, it renders “prolong his days” nonsensical. However, if for Qoheleth “shadow” here expresses an ever-present companion that one cannot separate from in this life, the text makes sense: God’s future judgment will *end* the life of the wicked under the sun—all shadows disappearing. When 6:12 is read in this light, *hebel* makes more sense as *enigma* rather than *transient*. I paraphrase: “For *who knows* what is good for man while he lives the few days of his *enigmatic* life, which he performs like a shadow (that will not let go)! For *who can tell* man what will be after him under the sun?” In this broken, twisted age under the sun, mankind cannot get away from his ever-increasing number of unanswered (and unanswerable) questions. Why me? Why this hard? Why this long? God rarely clarifies such matters, thus graciously putting us in a position to receive his help, for he “opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble” (1 Pet 5:5; cf. 2 Cor. 1:8-9; 12:9).

<sup>56</sup>In his excellent article (“The Message of Ecclesiastes,” 92), Robert V. McCabe tags *hebel* “frustrating enigma.” The addition of “frustrating,” however, seems superfluous, for “enigma” is itself the source or provocation of frustration. Fox helpfully distin-

guishes that which is incomprehensible from that which is absurd as follows (*A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up*, 34): “Incomprehensible” indicates that the meaning of a phenomenon is opaque to human intellect but allows for, and may ever suggest, that it is actually meaningful and significant. To call something ‘absurd,’ on the other hand, is to claim some knowledge about its quality: the fact that it is contrary to reason—perhaps only to human reason, but that is the only reason we have access to, unless one appeals to revelation.”

<sup>57</sup>The NIV11 rendering of *mataiotēs* as “frustration” (so too NIV) is better than the more common “futility” found in other versions (NASB, NRSV, ESV, HCSB, NKJV). If Paul’s point was that life is “futile,” “in vain,” or “for nothing” he would have likely chose *eikē*, as in “unless you believed *in vain*” (1 Cor 15:2; cf. Rom. 13:4), or *kenos*, as in “his grace toward me was not *in vain*” or “our preaching is *in vain*” (1 Cor 15:10, 14).

<sup>58</sup>The closely related *ra’yon libbo* “striving of his heart” occurs in 2:22.

<sup>59</sup>The KJV’s rendering “vexation of spirit” is likely due to a mistaken identification of *re’ut* and *ra’yon* with the root *r’* “badness” rather than *r’h* “shepherding, pursuit” or “desire, will, thought.”

<sup>60</sup>BDB, 944-46; HALOT, 1265-66; CDCH, 426. The Aramaic form *re’ut* means “will, desire” (of a king or God) in Ezra 5:17 and 7:18, whereas the plural of the Aramaic *ra’yon* denotes frustrating, perplexing, or incomprehensible “thoughts” throughout Daniel (2:29-30; 4:16; 5:6, 10; 7:28).

<sup>61</sup>So Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 24: “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. From this perspective we see it as a delightful idiomatic phrase for attempting the impossible.” Garrett prefers “a chasing after the wind” and asserts: “You can never catch it; but if you do catch it, you do not have anything anyway” (*Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 289).

<sup>62</sup>Fox prefers this reading (*A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up*, 42-45; idem, *Ecclesiastes*, xx).

<sup>63</sup>So Fredericks, “Ecclesiastes,” 53: “I translate *re’ut*

*ruah* ... as ‘the wind’s desire’ or ‘the whim of the wind’, connoting the brevity of life and its experiences, which are like the unpredictable wind’s desire. The wind periodically changes from north to south, east to west, downward, upward, around, and even temporarily becomes absolutely still.”

<sup>64</sup>As observed by Fox (*A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up*, 45-46), the term *rayon* is frequent in Daniel, always referring to “a confused, disturbing thought, either in a dream (2:29, 30) or in response to a dream (4:16; 5:6, 10; 7:28).”

<sup>65</sup>Cf. *ibid.*

<sup>66</sup>I am not including the feminine substantival adjective *ra’ a* “evil,” for it derives from the root *r’*.

<sup>67</sup>Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 172. Longman writes, “To put stress on the oneness of God ... seems totally out of place since this issue has not been raised in the book” (*Ecclesiastes*, 279).

<sup>68</sup>Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions*, 325-26; cf. *idem*, “Frame-Narrative and Composition in the Book of Qohelet,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 48 (1977): 102-03; *idem*, *Ecclesiastes*, 84.

<sup>69</sup>See E. Kautzsch and A. E. Cowley, eds., *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1910), §125b; Paul Joüon and T. Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew* (rev. ed.; Subsidia Biblica 27; Rome: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 2006), §137u-v. Cf. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 368.

<sup>70</sup>So Fredericks, “Ecclesiastes,” 248.

<sup>71</sup>Cf. Sirach 18:13. See G. Wallis, “רָעָה,” in *TDOT* (ed. G. Johannes Botterweck et al.; trans. David E. Green; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004); Louis Jonker, “רָעָה,” in *NIDOTTE* (ed. Willem VanGemeren; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 3:1138-43. Cornelius, “רָעָה/רָעָה,” in *NIDOTTE* (ed. Willem VanGemeren; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 3:1143-44.

<sup>72</sup>For a developed discussion of God’s oversight over both natural and moral evil, yet in a way that he never sins, see John Piper, “Is God Less Glorious Because He Ordained That Evil Be? Jonathan Edwards on the Divine Decrees,” in *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* (rev. and exp.; Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2003), 335-52. Disappointedly, this appendix was removed from the 2011 edition; however, an ear-

lier version of this essay can still be found at <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/conference-messages/is-god-less-glorious-because-he-ordained-that-evil-be>.

<sup>73</sup>G. Wallis observes that in both ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt, the notion of the gods being guardian shepherds of the universe in general and of all people in particular was very common (“רָעָה,” 13:548-49).

<sup>74</sup>Fox, who is followed by Longman, has strongly argued that the epilogue and body stand at odds, the latter correcting the former (“Frame-Narrative and Composition in the Book of Qoheleth,” 96-106; cf. Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 15-20, 29-40, 274-84; G. T. Sheppard, “The Epilogue to Qohelet as Theological Commentary,” *CBQ* 39 [1977]: 182-89; G. H. Wilson, “‘The Words of the Wise’: The Intent and Significance of Qoheleth 12:9-14,” *JBL* [1984]: 175-92). In contrast, I believe a strong case can be made for viewing the epilogue and body as unified in theology and viewpoint. On this, see Andrew G. Shead, “Reading Ecclesiastes ‘Epilogically,’” *Tydale Bulletin* 48 (1997): 67-91; Bartholomew, *Reading Ecclesiastes*, 139-71; *idem*, *Ecclesiastes*, 362-73; Fredericks, “Ecclesiastes,” 243-52.

<sup>75</sup>See Wilson, “The Words of the Wise,” 175-92; Schultz, “Ecclesiastes,” 211-15; Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 368, n.45.

<sup>76</sup>So Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up*, 49.

<sup>77</sup>For examples of the three-fold division Law, Prophets, Writings outside Scripture, see the prologue to Ben Sirah and 4QMMT C.10 in the Dead Sea Scrolls. The canonical arrangement of the Old Testament that I follow comes from the most ancient complete listing of the Jewish canonical books, which dates to around the time when the New Testament was being formed (*Baba Bathra* 14b; ca. A.D. 50). For arguments favoring this approach, see R. T. Beckwith, “The Canon of Scripture,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 31-32; *idem*, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984); Stephen G. Dempster, “From Many Texts to One: The Formation of the Hebrew Bible,” in *The World of the Arameans:*

*Studies in Honour of Paul-Eugene Dion* (ed. M. Daviau and M. Weigl; Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement 324; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2001) 19-56; cf. idem, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Theology of the Hebrew Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 51).

<sup>78</sup>For the development of this theme, see Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty*, 191-227; Jason S. DeRouchie, ed., *What the Old Testament Authors Really Cared About* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, forthcoming in 2012). To read Ecclesiastes in light of its final form placement in the Writings does not dissuade the fact that I believe Solomon to most likely be the author of this material (see note 3). My attempt here is to encourage reading the Old Testament as one intentionally crafted whole as it now comes to us, not simply as books but as a single book that serves as a foundation for the fulfillment found in Christ and the New Testament.

<sup>79</sup>We pray, "Lord, enable us to hear and learn from you, just as you have promised make happen in the New Covenant" (see John 6:44-45; Isa 54:13; Jer 31:34; cf. Deut 29:4; Rom 11:8).

<sup>80</sup>Similarly, Caneday states of Qoheleth, "He directs the reader's focus away from an attempt to understand the providence and toward enjoyment of life as a gift of God" ("Qoheleth," 33).

<sup>81</sup>William Cowper, "Conflict: Light Shining Out of Darkness," in *The Poetical Works of William Cowper* (ed. William Michael Rossetti; London: William Collins, Sons and Co., n.d.), 292. This hymn now goes by the title, "God Moves in Mysterious Ways" and was one of the last poems Cowper ever wrote. For a brief biographical sketch of this tormented man and his work, see John Piper, *The Hidden Smile of God: The Fruit of Affliction in the Lives of John Bunyan, William Cowper, and David Brainerd* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001), 81-119; the above poem is on pp. 83-84.