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***The Words of the Wise Are like Goads***

Engaging Qohelet in the 21st Century

*edited by*

MARK J. BODA, TREMPER LONGMAN III, AND CRISTIAN G. RATA

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## *The Meaning of הבל in Qohelet: An Intertextual Suggestion*

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No one seriously doubts the importance of הבל for understanding Qohelet; the word's 38 occurrences in the book make its importance clear.<sup>1</sup> What scholars do doubt, however, is the word's meaning in Qohelet. In this essay, I contribute to the conversation by proposing that הבל is an intertextual reference to Abel in Gen 4 that is intended to cause the reader to reflect on the life of Abel and the discontinuity between what Abel experienced and what he should have experienced. In order to reach this conclusion, I proceed as follows: in the first section, I outline a brief history of the interpretation of הבל in order to help readers gain their bearings in the vast ocean of scholarship on this enigmatic term; in the second section, I outline the intertextual method employed and apply this method to Qohelet's use of Genesis; in the third section, I examine the narrative of Cain and Abel to demonstrate how Qohelet uses the life of Abel as a launching point for his own treatise.

### *הבל: A Brief History of Interpretation*

The meaning of הבל outside Qohelet is rarely debated because the immediate context usually makes its meaning obvious.<sup>2</sup> However, this is not generally the case in the book of Qohelet. Because of the word's ambiguity, the history of interpretation of הבל is quite varied.<sup>3</sup> The Septuagint (LXX) uses the word *ματαιότης* ("transitory," "breath," "emptiness," "vanity") to translate every occurrence of הבל

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*Author's note:* I would like to thank N. Blake Hearson for first suggesting to me that there may be a relationship between the Abel of Gen 4 and Qohelet's use of הבל. I also thank the editors of this volume for their insightful suggestions for improving this piece.

1. Qohelet 1:2 (5×); 1:14; 2:1, 11, 15, 17, 19, 21, 23, 26; 3:19; 4:4, 7, 8, 16; 5:6[ET 7], 9[ET 10]; 6:2, 4, 9, 11, 12; 7:6, 15; 8:10, 14 (2×); 9:9 (2×); 11:8, 10; 12:8 (3×). The use of הבל in Qohelet constitutes over half of its number of occurrences in the Hebrew Bible.

2. Its range of meaning outside the book includes words and ideas such as "breath" (Ps 39:6), "vapor/mist" (Prov 21:6), and "worthless/useless" (Isa 30:7).

3. On the history of interpretation of Qohelet, including הבל, see also C. Bartholomew, *Reading Ecclesiastes: Old Testament Exegesis and Hermeneutical Theory* (AnBib 139; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1998) 31–205.

in Qohelet. The range of meanings for *ματαιοτης* is broad, which in turn limits its usefulness for determining the meaning of *הבל* in Qohelet. However, it is noteworthy that, outside Qohelet, the LXX translates *הבל* with a variety of other terms that have more-restricted ranges of meaning, such as *κενος* (“empty,” “void,” “vain”; Job 7:16), *καταιγης* (“blast of wind”; Isa 57:13), *ειδολα* (“idol”; Jer 16:19), and *ματην* (“in vain”; Ps 38:7[ET 39:6; Heb. 39:7]).<sup>4</sup>

The targum translates three (1:2 [2×]; 2:17) of the occurrences of *הבל* with *הבל* (“vapor,” “breath”). The translation in 1:2 reflects the targum’s interpretation of Qohelet as being written by Solomon as he considered the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem.<sup>5</sup> Everything for which he had labored was thus “vapor,” in that it did not last. The targum translates the rest of the occurrences of *הבל* with *הבלל* (“vanity”).

*Midrash Rabbah* understands *הבל* as “breath” but indicates that Qohelet uses it to indicate insubstantiality. The midrash states that Solomon uses the phrase *הבל הבלים* “without explaining it and its exposition was given by his father David. David said, *Man is like breath* (Ps. CXLIV, 4).”<sup>6</sup> The text goes on to state that: “It may be likened to a man who sets on the fire seven pots one on top of the other, and the steam from the topmost one has no substance in it, [and such is man].”<sup>7</sup> This interpretation thus uses the nonmetaphorical meaning of *הבל*, “breath,” but expands its range of meaning to the metaphorical idea of “insubstantiality.”

The most influential translation is Jerome’s use of *vanitas*,<sup>8</sup> the range of which is considerably more restricted than either *הבל* or *ματαιοτης*.<sup>9</sup> This has left an indelible mark on the translation and interpretation of *הבל* that has proven to be of questionable value for interpreting the book. Many modern versions (for example, the ESV, NKJV, NAB, NASB, NRSV) follow Jerome by translating *הבל* with the English term “vanity,” which likewise has a narrower range of meaning than *הבל* and is inherently negative.<sup>10</sup>

4. See J. J. Lavoie, “*Habel habalim hakol habel*: Historie de l’interprétation d’une formule celebre et enjeu culturels,” *Science et Esprit* 53 (2006) 222–23.

5. Note T. Longman (*The Book of Ecclesiastes* [NICOT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998] 3), who observes that the targum tends “to use the book of Ecclesiastes to fill in gaps in the life of Solomon. . . . Thus, Ecclesiastes became the witness to his return to orthodoxy at the end of his life.”

6. A. Cohen, trans., *Midrash Rabbah*, vol. 7: *Ecclesiastes* (3rd ed.; New York: Soncino, 1983) 4.

7. *Ibid.*, 5.

8. C. Bartholomew (*Ecclesiastes* [Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009] 28) states that, not only was Jerome’s use of *vanitas* to translate *הבל* profoundly influential, but his commentary “became the standard interpretation” of the book until the Reformers.

9. See Lavoie, “*Habel habalim*,” 227–28.

10. See D. Fredericks and D. J. Estes, *Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs* (Apollos Old Testament Commentary 16; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity; Nottingham: Apollos, 2010) 46–47.

Jerome's use of *vanitas* to translate הַבַּל is supported by the *contemptus mundi* approach he uses to interpret Qohelet, arguing that "all is vanity" means that the earthly realm ("all") lacks value ("is vanity").<sup>11</sup> Christianson points out that Jerome qualifies his statement by excluding spiritual realities from vanity and stating that earthly realities, as God's creation, are inherently good but lack value in comparison to God.<sup>12</sup> Jerome's model is helpful by encouraging people to value God most; however, it does not satisfactorily explain what Qohelet means when he says, "All is vanity." Qohelet does not argue that the entire earthly realm lacks value. He offers exceptions to the "all"—working, eating, drinking, and one's lover (2:24; 9:9)—and attaches value to them.<sup>13</sup> He only qualifies the exceptions with an admonition to enjoy within God's parameters (12:13–14).

With qualification, Jerome's *contemptus mundi* reading dominated Qohelet scholarship for roughly the next one thousand years.<sup>14</sup> For example, Ettlinger points out that Gregory of Agrigentum nuances the *contemptus mundi* reading by stating that "nothing is totally useless."<sup>15</sup> However, Bonaventure's modifications turn Jerome's reading on its head by arguing that "the person who despises the world, despises God."<sup>16</sup> By calling into question the validity of *contemptus mundi* reading, Bonaventure paves the way for Luther to argue that הַבַּל refers to humanity's vanity (demonstrated by the human inability to be content with God's gifts) rather than to the gifts themselves (that is, creation).<sup>17</sup> Despite the argument over what exactly Qohelet refers to as "vanity," the term remained the dominant translation for הַבַּל until recently.<sup>18</sup>

Scholars have now begun to move away from Jerome's influential translation, instead posing a plethora of interpretations for הַבַּל. C. L. Seow argues that

11. E. S. Christianson (*Ecclesiastes through the Centuries* [Blackwell Bible Commentaries; Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007] 100–101) notes that Origen is likely the originator of the *vanitas* reading but that Jerome popularized it.

12. Ibid, 100–101. See also K. Farmer, *Who Knows What Is Good? A Commentary on the Books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes* (International Theological Commentary; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991) 144.

13. Note that Qohelet thinks that *lasting* value remains elusive (see below).

14. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 31.

15. G. H. Ettlinger, "The Form and Method of the Commentary on Ecclesiastes by Gregory of Agrigentum," in *Papers of the Ninth International Conference on Patristic Studies* (ed. E. A. Livingstone; Studia Patristica 18/1; Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian, 1985) 320. Christianson (*Ecclesiastes through the Centuries*, 102) notes that Augustine and John Chrysostom, as well as Gregory of Agrigentum, closely followed Jerome. See also E. Christianson's essay in this volume.

16. St. Bonaventure, *St. Bonaventure's Commentary on Ecclesiastes* (ed. and trans. R. J. Karis and C. Murray; Works of St. Bonaventure 7; Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute, 2005) 77.

17. M. Luther, *Notes on Ecclesiastes* (ed. and trans. J. Pelikan; Luther's Works 15; St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1972) 10–11.

18. On הַבַּל as "vanity," see Christianson, *Ecclesiastes through the Centuries*, 98–141.

הבל means “beyond mortal grasp.”<sup>19</sup> He arrives at this meaning through rigorous examination of the usage of הבל in Qohelet, the rest of the OT, and rabbinic literature; he also uses comparative linguistics to examine parallel words and phrases in relevant ancient Near Eastern literature. Seow states that Qohelet uses the word in its traditional sense—to mean “breath” or “vapor,” that is, “not lasting.”<sup>20</sup> He argues that Qohelet has expanded הבל to include everything in life that, like vapor, cannot be grasped.

Bartholomew takes an approach similar to Seow when he argues that הבל should be translated “enigmatic.”<sup>21</sup> He notes that, in the framing statements in 1:2 and 12:8, הבל must be translated consistently. However, he agrees with Douglas Miller (see below) that Qohelet uses הבל as a live metaphor, the meaning of which is controlled by the near context. This makes it imperative that the reader be attuned to various nuances that the word may carry.<sup>22</sup> Bartholomew’s proposal takes seriously the importance of the framing statements, as well as the frequent occurrence of הבל at important junctions in the text. Furthermore, he offers readers a translation that does not immediately color their perception of the book. Something that is enigmatic is not necessarily negative. However, his rendering of הבל does not do justice to the dominant meaning of the word—“breath or vapor.”

Like Bartholomew, Graham Ogden thinks that הבל should be translated “enigma” or “mystery.”<sup>23</sup> He rightly argues that the primary problem with הבל is that verbal consistency has been favored over contextual consistency by most commentators and translators, which should not be the case. The usage of הבל in other contexts (verbal consistency) does not necessarily dictate the meaning of its usage in Qohelet (contextual consistency). Based on an examination of select passages in which Qohelet uses הבל, Ogden concludes that he is describing situations that are beyond human understanding—that is, enigmatic.

Michael V. Fox rejects previous attempts to translate הבל as being unable to convey its full meaning, opting for the word “absurd” instead.<sup>24</sup> He borrows this terminology from Camus’ work *The Myth of Sisyphus*, where “absurd” indicates the absence of a rational relationship between (legitimate) expectations and outcomes, a sentiment that, according to Fox, Qohelet shares. Fox thus assesses הבל as an entirely negative term, an assessment that is consistent with his view that Qohelet represents a crisis in Israel’s wisdom tradition. This view is problematic,

19. C. L. Seow, “Beyond Mortal Grasp: The Usage of *Hebel* in Ecclesiastes,” *ABR* 48 (2000) 1–16.

20. *Ibid.*, 3–7.

21. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 106.

22. *Ibid.*

23. G. Ogden, “Vanity It Certainly Is Not,” *The Bible Translator* 38 (1987) 301–7.

24. M. V. Fox, “The Meaning of *Hebel* for Qoheleth,” *JBL* 105 (1986) 409–27. See also J. Hobbins’s article in this volume, in which he suggests that הבל should be translated as “crock.”



however. His presupposition of a crisis in Israel's sapiential tradition is somewhat circular. In order for Qohelet to be seen as pessimistic, הבל must be read as "absurd," but, for there to be a crisis in the wisdom tradition, Qohelet must be viewed as a pessimist. Also problematic for Fox's thesis is that it relies more heavily on twentieth-century literature than ancient Near Eastern literature for its support.

Douglas Miller understands הבל as a symbol that encompasses three referents.<sup>25</sup> He divides understandings of הבל into three categories: an abstract sense, multiple senses, and a single metaphor. After pointing out various flaws in each of these schemas, he suggests a new way forward: Qohelet uses הבל as a symbol to indicate one or more of three referents: insubstantiality, transience, and foulness. Miller supports his thesis with (1) evidence that Qohelet is a skillful narrator who makes significant use of various literary devices throughout Qohelet, as well as (2) evidence from the use of הבל outside Qohelet. In the present essay, I rely on Miller's work but modify his approach to argue that הבל refers back to various aspects of Abel's life. However, to show that Qohelet uses הבל to refer to Abel, I must first demonstrate the intertextual relationship between Gen 1–4 and Qohelet.

### *Echoes of Genesis in Qohelet*

To demonstrate the relationship between Genesis and Qohelet, I must: (1) briefly outline the methodology used to determine exactly what qualifies as an "echo"; and (2) systematically work through echoes of Genesis in Qohelet.<sup>26</sup> In the latter section, I defend the designation of each particular text as an echo and—most importantly—comment on the reason that Qohelet echoes each of these texts. Does Qohelet echo Genesis to reinforce it, overturn it, and/or offer a fresh interpretation of it?<sup>27</sup> This aspect of the essay is most helpful in clarifying the larger questions related to Qohelet, such as its view of God, creation, and humanity.

25. D. Miller, "Qohelet's Symbolic Use of הבל," *JBL* 117 (1998) 437–54. See also his book *Symbol and Rhetoric in Ecclesiastes: The Place of Hebel in Qohelet's Work* (Leiden: Brill, 2002).

26. Many scholars have recognized the link between Genesis and Qohelet, but a full treatment of their intertextual relationship has not yet been developed. See, for example, A. Nehur, *Notes sur Qohelet* (Paris: Minuit, 1951); J. Chopineau, *Hevel en Hebreu biblique: Contribution à l'étude des rapports entre sémantique et l'exégèse de l'Ancien Testament* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Strasbourg, 1971); idem, "Une image de l'homme: Sur Ecclésiaste 1/2," *ETR* 53 (1978) 366–70; E. Dor-Shav, "Ecclesiastes, Fleeting and Timeless: Part 1," *JBQ* 36 (2008) 211–21; R. Antic, "Cain, Abel, Seth, and the Meaning of Human Life as Portrayed in the Books of Genesis and Ecclesiastes," *AUSS* 44 (2006) 203–11.

Note especially H. W. Hertzberg (*Der Prediger* [KAT 17/4; Gütersloh: Mohn, 1963] 230), who states, "Es ist kein Zweifel: das Buch Qoh ist geschrieben mit Gn 1–4 vor den Augen seines Verfassers; die Lebensanschauung Qoh's ist an der Schöpfungsgeschichte gebildet" (italics original).

27. M. Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985) 282–83, 291.

### Methodology

Van Wolde accuses biblical exegetes of using the discipline of intertextuality in biblical exegesis merely to “supply labels” rather than as an overarching interpretive method.<sup>28</sup> Her criticism is especially valid given the method’s understanding of “text.” It assumes a “new notion of what text is” to the effect that it becomes a “network of traces” in which the determiner of meaning is no longer the author but the reader.<sup>29</sup> This notion of “text” makes many interpreters reluctant to adopt intertextuality as their guiding method. Nevertheless, the interpreter must use every tool at her disposal to discern the author’s intending meaning.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, although I am cognizant of van Wolde’s criticism, I use intertextuality but refuse to adopt its definition of text.<sup>31</sup>

In discussing Qohelet’s use of Genesis, I employ the term *echo* to indicate Qohelet’s use of words, phrases, and themes that the author of Genesis previously used.<sup>32</sup> For a section of Qohelet to qualify as an echo of Genesis, it must meet the following criteria: (1) There must be a correspondence of theme (*topoi*) between the text in Qohelet and its proposed parallel in Genesis.<sup>33</sup> (2) There must be a correspondence of at least one word between the text in question in Qohelet (the *traditio*) and the proposed parallel in Genesis (the *traditum*).<sup>34</sup> Taken together, these criteria form the methodological boundaries in the search for echoes of Genesis in Qohelet. However, the first boundary may be breached in the rare situation in which a theme is discussed using a confluence of words that are not identical but have lexical similarities and/or overlapping ranges of meaning.<sup>35</sup> For example, Qohelet discusses *work* at great length, a concept that is introduced in Gen 2 and

28. E. van Wolde, “Trendy Intertextuality?” in *Intertextuality in Biblical Writings: Essays in Honour of Bas van Iersel* (ed. Sipke Draisma; Kampen: Kok, 1989) 43.

29. W. S. Vorster, “Intertextuality and Redaktionsgeschichte,” in *ibid.*, 20–21.

30. See K. J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998) 201–80.

31. See the recent discussion by G. D. Miller (“Intertextuality in Old Testament Research,” *Currents in Biblical Research* 9 [2011] 283–309), in which he argues for a new label to distinguish between various forms of “intertextuality.” Also note the recent study by R. Schultz (“Intertextuality, Canon, and ‘Undecidability’: Understanding Isaiah’s ‘New Heavens and New Earth’ [Isaiah 65:17–25],” *BBR* 20 [2010] 19–38), in which he argues for a modified intertextual approach that seeks to combine the fruits of intertextuality with respect for the authority of the biblical text.

32. Discussion of the authorship of Genesis and Qohelet is beyond the scope of this article. On Genesis, see J. Wellhausen (*Die Composition des Hexateuch und der historischen Bücher des Alten Testaments* [3rd ed.; Berlin: Reimer, 1899]) for the classical formulation of the Documentary Hypothesis. For a more recent view on Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, see J. Sailhammer (*The Meaning of the Pentateuch: Revelation, Composition, and Interpretation* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009]). On Qohelet, see Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 43–54; and Fredericks, *Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs*, 31–36.

33. *Ibid.*

34. Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation*, 285.

35. See, for example, Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 119.

complicated by Adam's sin in Gen 3. Qohelet develops both the meaningful and frustrating aspects of work found in Genesis, but he uses the term **עמל** ("work, toil") instead of **עבד** ("work, tend"), the term used by Genesis (see below for further explanation and justification).

Like most of the OT, Qohelet lacks obvious textual features to mark borrowing, such as quotation marks or an introductory formula.<sup>36</sup> This makes the first criterion essential for safeguarding against a purely subjective quest for echoes of Genesis.<sup>37</sup> The second criterion is also essential because common vocabulary may indicate intentional borrowing, reliance on a common source, or the use of stock phrases. It ensures that interpreters do not commit the error of relying too heavily on similar vocabulary between two passages that do not relate to each other thematically.<sup>38</sup>

### *Echoing Genesis*

#### *"Paradise Retried"*

After bringing to mind the short life of Abel, Qohelet looks to the Garden of Eden as he attempts to recreate paradise. In a brief article, Arian Vorheij demonstrates that Qohelet's description of his garden in Qoh 2:4–6 draws heavily on the language used in Genesis to describe creation in general and the Garden of Eden in particular.<sup>39</sup> Note the terminology used in Qoh 2:4–6:

הגדלתי מעשי בניתי לי בתים נטתי לי כרמים  
עשיתי לי גנות ופרדסים ונטעתי בהם עץ כל פרי  
עשיתי לי ברכות מים להשקות מהם יער צומח עצים

I made great works for myself. I built for myself houses; I planted for myself vineyards. I made for myself gardens and parks, and I planted in them trees of every kind. I made for myself ponds of water from which to water the forest of growing trees.<sup>40</sup>

In the space of three verses (Qoh 2:4–6), Qohelet uses eight terms also found in Gen 1–2 to describe the garden he made for himself.<sup>41</sup> Qohelet plants (**נטע**) for

36. R. Schultz, *The Search for Quotation: Verbal Parallels in the Prophets* (JSOTSup 180; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999) 218–19.

37. *Ibid.*, 19.

38. J. Crenshaw, "Method in Determining Wisdom Influence upon 'Historical' Literature," *JBL* 88 (1969) 133.

39. A. Verheij, "Paradise Retried: On Qohelet 2:4–6," *JSOT* 50 (1991) 113–15.

40. All translations, unless otherwise noted, are my own.

41. C. L. Seow (*Ecclesiastes: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [AB 18C; New York: Doubleday, 1997] 150) states that this section is meant to show the "legendary success" that "calls to mind the activities and fabulous wealth of Solomon in 1 Kings 3–11." Many other commentators have made this same observation, and this goal is certainly one function of this passage. Similarly, Bartholomew (*Ecclesiastes*, 132) demonstrates its similarities with ancient

himself a vineyard in 2:4 and plants (ונטעתי) fruit trees (עץ כל פרי) in his garden in 2:5. Qohelet's use of נטע echoes the use of the word in Gen 2:8, where God "planted a garden in Eden." Qohelet makes for himself gardens (גנות) in 2:5, a statement that echoes God's garden in Gen 2:8, 9, 10, 15, and 16. The עץ כל פרי ("trees of every kind of fruit") that Qohelet plants in his gardens is another phrase that echoes verses in Genesis (1:11, 12, 29; 2:9, 16) that describe both the Garden of Eden and the general state of creation. Qohelet waters (להשקות) his gardens and vineyards with a system of pools that echoes the river that waters (להשקות) Eden (Gen 2:10). Finally, Qohelet states in 2:4, 5 that he made (עשיתי) for himself gardens and pools. His use of the term עשה echoes Gen 2:2, which uses the term twice to state that God completed all the work he "made" (עשה) and that he rested from the work he "made" (עשה).

Vorheij cogently sums up the matter: "Taken separately, these words are not remarkable: for the most part they are indeed very common in Biblical Hebrew. It is their combined occurrence here and in Genesis that establishes a firm link between the texts."<sup>42</sup> The question remains, however: for what purpose does Qohelet echo the account of the Garden of Eden? Vorheij argues that he does so in order to demonstrate that his work had the opposite effect of God's work. Rather than creating good (Gen 1:31), Qohelet's efforts produce only worthlessness.<sup>43</sup> Yet, could it be that Qohelet picks up on the language of the Garden of Eden to hint at the fact that human efforts at replicating God's works are ultimately transient (הבל), as opposed to God's efforts, which last forever?<sup>44</sup> Qohelet says as much in 2:11: "Then I turned to all the works that my hands worked, and to all the toil that I toiled to do it, and behold it was all *hebel*, and striving for wind, and there was no lasting advantage under the sun." Could Qohelet also be hinting at the great divide between humans as they were created (perfect) and humans as they became (imperfect): "God made humanity upright, but they have sought many schemes" (Qoh 7:29 Esv)?

Qohelet echoes the language of the Garden of Eden in order to discuss the failure of human efforts to achieve anything of lasting value. Though God created a perfect garden in which humans and God communicated directly, humans have "sought many schemes" (Qoh 7:29). Though God's creation was perfect, human efforts are merely fleeting, faltering attempts at imitation. By drawing a parallel between his own efforts and those of God in Gen 2, Qohelet paints a vivid picture of the failure of human effort to imitate God's works.

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Near Eastern royal inscriptions. This aspect of the text is not explored here because my task is to demonstrate Qohelet's reliance on Genesis.

42. *Ibid.*, 114.

43. *Ibid.*, 114–15. See also Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 32.

44. Compare with Bartholomew's (*Ecclesiastes*, 133–34) assessment.

*Ashes to Ashes, Dust to Dust*

Genesis asserts in two places—the creation narrative (Gen 2:7) and the fall narrative (Gen 3:19)—that God made humanity out of the dust. Likewise, Qohelet states in two places (3:20, 12:7) that people (and animals, in the first instance) are formed from dust and will return to dust when they die.<sup>45</sup> These two texts in Qohelet echo both the account of creation (Gen 2:7) and the curse (Gen 3:19), though the connection with the curse is more obvious. Genesis 2:7 records the creation of Adam from the dust of the ground and, since it is from the dust (**עפר**) that God makes Adam, the term plays a prominent role in the passage. Likewise, the term is crucial for both Qoh 3:20 and 12:7. Thematically, the Qohelet passages are linked with Gen 2:7 in that they deal with creation—humans (and beasts) are “from dust.” The echo becomes clearer when one also examines Gen 3:19, which has a greater correspondence of words and also deals with the death of humans, which is probably Qohelet’s primary concern.<sup>46</sup>

In addition to the use of the term **עפר** (“dust”) in both Qoh 3:20 and 12:7 to describe the material from which humans (and beasts) are made and to which they will return, there are a number of other words shared between the two passages in Qohelet and Gen 3:19. Note the correspondence of terms in these passages:

כי עפר אתה ואל עפר תשוב (Gen 3:19b)

“For dust you are, and to dust you will return.”

הכל מן העפר והכל שב אל העפר (Qoh 3:20b)

“Both are from the dust, and both will return to the dust.”

וישב העפר על הארץ כשהיה (Qoh 12:7)

“And the dust returns upon the earth as it was.”

Qohelet repeats the words **שוב** (“return”), **עפר** (“dust”), and **אל** (“to”). Note also that Qohelet has rearranged the repeated words. For example, **שוב** (“return”) comes at the end of Gen 3:19b, at the beginning of Qoh 12:7, and third from last in Qoh 3:20b. This rearrangement is notable because, as Fishbane points out, “[O]f particular aid and importance in this judgement is the dense occurrence in one text of terms, often thoroughly reorganized and transposed, found elsewhere in a natural, uncomplicated form.”<sup>47</sup> This “dense occurrence of terms” in Qohelet (a repetition of half of the words from the Genesis passage) along with their rearrangement and

45. Longman (*Ecclesiastes*, 273) states that Qohelet’s allusion to Genesis represents a “reversal of creation.”

46. Dor-Shav, “Ecclesiastes, Fleeting and Timeless: Part I.”

47. Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation*, 291.

the obvious thematic correspondence make it likely that Qohelet is echoing texts in Gen 2 and 3.

Again the question remains: to what end does Qohelet employ the earlier text? As noted previously, Qohelet uses this “dust” language in 3:20 to support his argument that humans and animals are alike in their fate, which is death.<sup>48</sup> He uses the language again in ch. 12 as a conclusion to both the well-known poem of death and dying and the body of the book: “and the dust returns upon the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to the God who gave it.” Qohelet’s last statement thus sums up his view of human life—it begins in dust and ends in dust—and perhaps answers the question posed in 3:21: “Who knows if the spirit of humans goes upward and the spirit of animals goes downward to the earth?” He thus echoes the texts in Genesis to affirm them and support his own argument: (1) God created humanity, (2) humans die, and (3) work is toilsome, even if it is enjoyable. By echoing Gen 2:7, Qohelet reminds his readers once again that God is the Creator: it is he who formed them from the dust. However, death is inescapable, which provides the impetus to enjoy the gifts of God while one still lives. By echoing Gen 3:19, Qohelet also subtly reminds his readers that the curse has greatly affected the ability to take pleasure in one’s work. Although Qohelet still values enjoyment in work (for example, Qoh 2:24, 3:13), he notes throughout the book that work is indeed difficult (for example, Qoh 2:11, 18).

#### *The Quest for Eden*

Another way that Qohelet echoes Genesis is Qohelet’s desire to return to a life-style similar to the Garden of Eden. In Gen 2:15, God created the man (הָאָדָם) and placed him in the Garden of Eden to “work it and keep it” (לְעִבְדָּהּ וּלְשָׁמְרָהּ).<sup>49</sup> The man (הָאָדָם) is then given free rein to eat (אָכַל) from any tree in the garden, except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen 2:16). God then decides that it is not good (לֹא טוֹב) for a man to be alone, and so he creates a woman (אִשָּׁה) for him. All in all, life is good in the garden; people have plenty of food to eat, work to do, and company to keep. In the so-called *carpe diem* passages (Qoh 2:24–26; 3:10–15, 16–22; 5:18–20[ET 17–19]; 8:10–15; 9:7–10; 11:7–10), Qohelet encourages his readers to live life in a similar manner.

Bartholomew states that these six *carpe diem* passages are “the vision evoked with Eden in Gen. 2 and in the promises to the Israelites about the good land of Israel” and that they present “an alternative vision set in contradictory juxtaposition to the conclusion of *hebel* that Qohelet’s epistemology leads him to.”<sup>50</sup> If

48. Longman (*Ecclesiastes*, 130) points out that Qohelet here departs from traditional OT teaching by ignoring the special relationship that God afforded humans when he created them in his image, which makes them distinct from animals.

49. Contra Longman (*ibid.*, 106–10) and J. L. Crenshaw (*Ecclesiastes* [OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987] 89), who argue that Qohelet expresses resignation, not hope in the *carpe diem* passages.

50. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 152.

Table 1

Qohelet	2:24–26	3:10–15	3:16–22	5:18–20[17–19]	9:7–10	11:7–10
הָאָדָם	×	×	×	×		×
טוֹב	×	×	×	×	×	×
אִשָּׁה					×	
אָכַל	×	×		×	×	

Bartholomew is right that Qohelet relies on the Eden of Gen 1–2 for his vision of life, there must be both linguistic and thematic elements that connect these texts.

Four of the six *carpe diem* passages have some variation of the construction: X איִן טוֹב הָאָדָם שׁ (“there is nothing better for the man than X”). The wording varies with regard to the relative pronoun שׁ, the intervening terms, and the definite article on אָדָם. In some passages, an inseparable preposition is attached to אָדָם (“man”), and some appearances of אָדָם simply have the definite article. Nevertheless, אָדָם (“man”) is definite in every passage, which is notable because אָדָם (“man”) is also definite in each of its occurrences in Gen 2. In the final two passages, Qohelet has switched from offering advice to giving commands, so the “better-than” wording disappears altogether.<sup>51</sup> Despite the variance in the wording of these passages, they are similar enough thematically and lexically to be considered a unit. Furthermore, these passages show considerable similarity to Gen 2:15–25.<sup>52</sup> Table 1 marks the correspondence of key terms between the *carpe diem* passages in Qohelet and Gen 2:15–25.<sup>53</sup>

Every *carpe diem* passage repeats the term טוֹב (“good”), five of the six passages employ אָדָם (“man”) in a definite form, four of the six use אָכַל (“eat”), and one of the six refers to one’s אִשָּׁה (“woman/wife”). In addition to these terms, it is notable that each passage (except 11:7–10) repeats the injunction to find enjoyment in one’s work. Qohelet uses the terms עֲמַל (“toil”) and עֲשֵׂה (“work, make, do”) whereas Genesis uses עָבַד (“tend”), so this is not a verbal parallel. Nevertheless,

51. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 162.

52. Following B. Isaksson (*Studies in the Language of Qoheleth* [Studia Semitica Upsaliensia 10; Uppsala: Uppsala University Press, 1987] 79), Longman (*Ecclesiastes*, 119) also observes that Qoh 3:11 contains “rather significant allusions to Genesis 1.” I do not explore the relationship between those texts here because my focus is on the relationship between the *carpe diem* passages and the Garden of Eden.

53. It should be noted that there is also a correspondence of the term אֱלֹהִים between the Qohelet passages and the Genesis passage. The Genesis text, however uses the name יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים. The name יְהוָה does not occur in Qohelet, which prefers to refer to God strictly as אֱלֹהִים. My argument for Qohelet’s use of Genesis stands without recourse to this particular instance of echoing. I have therefore omitted the repetition of אֱלֹהִים due to the complexity of the argument surrounding the Divine Name.



the terms overlap in their ranges of meaning. Qohelet argues that people should enjoy their work, even though it is toilsome. In this way, he echoes both the positive (Gen 2:15) and negative (Gen 3:19) aspects of work in Genesis.

Qohelet's reliance on Genesis in the *carpe diem* passages is also demonstrated by the thematic echoes between the two texts. God deems his creation good (טוב) with the exception of the man's lack of companionship, which God quickly rectifies. The man is placed in the garden and (presumably) enjoys eating, working, and communing with his wife. These (plus drinking) are the precise elements that Qohelet advocates enjoying in the post-sin, death-ridden life.<sup>54</sup> By singling out these particular aspects of life, Qohelet clearly echoes Genesis, as Bartholomew states, in order to present readers with an "alternative vision" that is to be sought out in the face of death. Qohelet argues that the only good to be found in life is in capturing a small part of Eden—enjoyment in the fleeting gifts of God. The lexical and thematic similarities between the *carpe diem* passages and Gen 2:15–25, therefore, appear to be deliberate allusions to Gen 2:15–25.

The final piece of this intertextual puzzle is Qohelet's use of הבל to echo the Cain and Abel narrative in Gen 4. However, it is beneficial for us to look briefly at the Cain and Abel narrative before I delve into Qohelet's use of it.

### *Cain and Abel: Unexpected Outcomes*

The Cain and Abel narrative in Gen 4 presents readers with a conundrum. In the beginning chapters of the Hebrew Bible, one finds a story that seems to overturn much of what the rest of the Hebrew Bible teaches: if a person obeys Yahweh, the person will be blessed.<sup>55</sup> Until this point in Genesis, disobedience resulted in curses.<sup>56</sup> Adam and Eve suffered the consequences of their sins—death, separation from God, pain, strenuous work (Gen 3:14–19). However, the pattern of sin-punishment does not hold true for the Cain and Abel narrative.

Abel offers an acceptable sacrifice to Yahweh; Cain does not.<sup>57</sup> When Cain becomes angry because of Yahweh's rejection of his sacrifice, Yahweh warns him that sin is ready to devour him but that he must overtake it instead.<sup>58</sup> Cain fails to do this, murdering his brother instead. Yahweh curses Cain: "Now you are cursed

54. G. Ogden, *Qoheleth* (Readings: A New Biblical Commentary; 2nd ed.; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2007) 52–53.

55. See, for example, Deut 7:11–15; 30:11–20; Ps 1, among many examples.

56. Concerning Adam and Eve, W. Brueggemann (*Genesis* [Interpretation; Atlanta: John Knox, 1982] 48–49) states, "What had been a story of trust and obedience (chapter 2) now becomes an account of *crime and punishment* (3:1–7)."

57. There are several suggestions about the reason that Abel's offer was accepted while Cain's was rejected. See the major commentaries for discussion.

58. D. W. Cotter (*Genesis* [Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003] 42–43) interestingly points out that Yahweh speaks directly to Cain, rather than to Abel or his parents, which constitutes Yahweh's first attempt to prevent sin.



from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you work the ground, it shall no longer yield to you its strength. You shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth" (Gen 4:11–12). Cain protests that the punishment is too severe, so Yahweh mitigates it, placing on him a sign of protection (4:13–15). Cain's life is prolonged, he has many descendants, and he builds a city (4:17).<sup>59</sup> The righteous Abel (Matt 23:35) suffers the consequences of disobedience: his life is cut short, leaving him with no children, no heritage, no material wealth. The one-to-one relationship between disobedience and curses, obedience and blessing, has been reversed.<sup>60</sup>

### Hebel of Hebels

Qohelet 1:2 loudly proclaims that everything is הֶבֶל, a refrain that is repeated throughout the book. The first appearance of this word in the Hebrew Bible comes at the beginning of Genesis in the Cain and Abel (הֶבֶל) narrative. It is no secret that names often reveal some aspect of a person's character in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>61</sup> For example, Cain was "gotten" by Eve, and Abraham is the "father of a multitude" (Gen 17:5). The same holds true for Abel: the nonmetaphorical meaning of his name (הֶבֶל) is "breath" or "vapor," which is, by its nature, ephemeral and transient.<sup>62</sup> Jacques Ellul states that Abel was so named for this very reason: though he is the righteous character in the narrative, his life is cut short by Cain.<sup>63</sup> Abel is thus the embodiment of transience. Joseph Blenkinsopp also argues that Abel's name presupposes his murder at the hands of his brother, indicating that Abel is "breath" or ephemeral—a theme that Qohelet develops by commenting on the transience of all humans (for example, Qoh 3:19–20).<sup>64</sup> This echoing continues throughout the book. By using הֶבֶל as the *leitmotif* of the book, Qohelet expands the theme of transience introduced in Gen 4 to include everything in life. Not only

59. This is not meant to imply that Cain received *no* punishment but that the punishment was not as severe as would be expected or deserved. J. McKeown (*Genesis* [Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008] 42) states, "Cain's complaint is not dismissed, and he is reassured that whoever kills him will suffer sevenfold vengeance. Yahweh places a mysterious sign or mark on Cain to protect his life," but, "[w]hereas blessing had fostered harmony, cursing breeds separation and alienation."

60. On retributive justice in the OT, see J. G. Gammie, "Theology of Retribution in the Book of Deuteronomy," *CBQ* 32 (1970) 1–12; K. Koch, "Gibt es ein Vergeltungsdogma im Alten Testament?" *ZTK* 52 (1955) 1–42; and Bernd Janowski, "Die Tat kehrt zum Täter zurück: offene Fragen im Umkreis des 'Tun-Ergehen-Zusammenhangs,'" *ZTK* 91 (1994) 247–71.

61. Longman (*Ecclesiastes*, 177) states this concept more forcefully: "In the OT, naming captures the essential nature of a person or thing."

62. K. Seybold, "Hebel," *TDOT* 3.315. See also *HALOT*, 236–37. *Hebel* is used in its literal sense in Job 7:16; Isa 57:13; Pss 62:10, 144:4.

63. J. Ellul, *Reason for Being* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990) 50.

64. J. Blenkinsopp, *Creation, Un-Creation, Re-Creation: A Discursive Commentary on Genesis 1–11* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2011) 84–85.

is Abel transient, but everyone and everything in life is subject to the reversal of fortunes that he experienced.<sup>65</sup>

However, perhaps more is at work in Qohelet than simply the matter of transience. Miller proposed that **הבל** is a symbol with multiple referents, and thus it seems to me that Qohelet uses **הבל**, not only to refer to the transience of life, but as a symbol to discuss how a number of situations in life are “Abel-like” or contain an aspect of “Abel-ness.” Each situation that Qohelet deems **הבל** is in some way related to the reversal found in Abel’s story. Instead of explicitly stating his assessment of a situation, he calls it **הבל** and leaves it to the reader to decide to which aspect of Abel he is referring: Abel’s transience, the lack of congruence between his actions and rewards, the injustice he suffers, or his inability to attain lasting value.

Qohelet states in 1:14 that he has seen all the works done under the sun and that they are all **הבל** and a pursuit of wind. By making **הבל** parallel with pursuing wind, Qohelet points to the inability of all people, like Abel, to grasp anything with lasting value, which like wind is ungraspable.<sup>66</sup> The obedient *should* experience tangible blessings that add value to one’s life. For Qohelet, however, the one-to-one correspondence between actions and rewards has disappeared, and the attainment of lasting value through one’s actions is like attempting to grasp wind. In 2:15, Qohelet laments that the wise and foolish are alike in their end—death. No one escapes Abel’s fate, the culmination of the curse.<sup>67</sup> This is also Abel-like in another regard. Not only is life transient, but also the relationship between one’s actions and one’s rewards is incomprehensible. Fool or wise: both are subject to the same fate.

Qohelet states in 3:19 that “man has no advantage over the beasts, for all are *hebel*.” This passage discusses the similarity between humans and animals—namely, they share the same breath (**רוח**) and the same fate, which is death. In this way, Qohelet elaborates on the theme of transience introduced in Gen 4. As Abel was transient, so is everything else—human and animal alike. Similarly, the “Royal Experiment”<sup>68</sup> of ch. 2 finds that everything in life is ephemeral (**הבל**), lacking

65. See D. C. Fredericks, *Coping with Transience: Ecclesiastes on the Brevity in Life* (Biblical Seminar 18; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993) 1–32. Note also R. Alter (*The Wisdom Books: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes: A Translation with Commentary* [New York: Norton, 2010] 346), who prefers the word “breath” because “*Hevel*, ‘breath’ or ‘vapor,’ is something utterly insubstantial and transient, and in this book suggests futility, ephemerality, and also as Fox argues, the absurdity of existence.”

66. However, Longman (*Ecclesiastes*, 81–82) argues that this parallelism “reinforces the conclusion that life is *hebel*, meaningless.” Fredericks (*Ecclesiastes*, 53–54) interprets **רוח רצה** as a subjective, possessive genitive, “the wind’s desire,” which he states, points to life’s unpredictability and transience. See also P. Leithart (*Solomon among the Postmoderns* [Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2008] 26), who notes that the wind is uncontrollable.

67. W. H. U. Anderson, “The Curse of Work in Qoheleth: An Exposé of Genesis 3:17–19 in Ecclesiastes,” *EvQ* 70 (1998) 99–113.

68. T. Krüger, *Qoheleth: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004) 45

any lasting value (יִתְרוֹן), and that humanity's only recourse is to enjoy the gifts of God—eating, drinking, and pleasurable toil, which are themselves also transient (Qoh 2:24–25).

Another aspect of Abel-ness that Qohelet discusses is the disconnect between hard work and the fruits of one's labor. For example, he states in 4:4, "I myself saw all the toil and all the skill of work, that this is from the envy of a man of his fellow. This also is *hebel* and a pursuit of wind." Qohelet indicates that labor and work, the effort to acquire, result from envy.<sup>69</sup> Instead of obedience to Yahweh that results in material blessing, people rely on their own ingenuity and hard work, thus reversing the order of the world. Blessing appears to come from one's own hand, not Yahweh's. This passage also echoes the envy that Cain felt as a result of Yahweh's accepting Abel's offering while rejecting his own, which resulted in Cain's acquisition of wealth and progeny while Abel suffered from lack of both.<sup>70</sup>

Qohelet goes on to discuss the Abel-ness of the person who has no children in 4:8, "For whom am I laboring and depriving myself from the good? This also is *hebel* and an evil task." Qohelet works tirelessly to establish wealth and honor, yet he does not receive the blessing of descendants to inherit his wealth.<sup>71</sup> This is a situation that should not exist, for wealth itself represents blessing from Yahweh, a "normal reward for righteous living."<sup>72</sup> However, Yahweh has withheld from him the further blessing of progeny. Qohelet indicates that the person who has obtained the blessing of wealth should also experience the blessing of children. The former without the latter is an "evil" thing.

Finally, Qohelet states in 8:14 that "there is *hebel* that is done upon the earth: that there are righteous to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked, and there are wicked to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous. I said that this also is *hebel*." This passage is the most explicit reference in Qohelet to the reversal of the expected order of life. As in the Cain and Abel narrative, so in the rest of life—sometimes the disobedient receive blessing while the obedient receive curses.<sup>73</sup> Life often lacks congruency between actions and results, which, given the intertextual connections established between Gen 1–3 and Qohelet, is perhaps what Qohelet asks his readers to remember when he says "*Hebel* of *hebels*, everything is *hebel*."

69. Longman (*Ecclesiastes*, 137) rightly points out that the term קִנְיָה is inherently negative and that this text in no way advocates capitalism, as some have tried to argue. See also Bartholomew (*Ecclesiastes*, 187–88) and Fredericks (*Ecclesiastes*, 132), who make similar observations.

70. Antic, "Cain, Abel, Seth," 205.

71. The phrase "שֶׁ אָחִיד וְאֵין שֶׁנִּי" indicates that the man was completely alone. See Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 140.

72. R. Ellis, "Amos Economics," *Review and Expositor* 107 (2010) 463–79. See also Deut 7:11–15.

73. Longman (*Ecclesiastes*, 131) makes a similar observation about Qoh 3:22 but argues that Qohelet is uncertain whether there will ever be justice.

*The End of the Matter*

I noted at the outset of this article that interpreters have had great difficulty agreeing upon the meaning of **הבל** in Qohelet. Whether one settles on “vanity,” “vapor,” “breath,” “meaningless,” “absurd,” “ephemeral,” or any of a number of other possibilities, problems of meaning and significance remain. In an effort to address the difficulties inherent in these translations, I propose an intertextual reading of Qohelet that calls for a new understanding of **הבל**. Pointing to lexical and thematic similarities between Qohelet and Genesis, I have demonstrated that Qohelet echoes Genesis in at least three aspects: (1) Qohelet relies on the language used to describe the Garden of Eden to describe his own building projects; (2) Qohelet borrows the “dust” (**עפר**) imagery from Genesis to describe the origin and destination of people; and (3) Qohelet adopts Genesis’s depiction of life in the Garden of Eden to project his own idea of the good in life after Eden. Consequently, these three aspects of intertextuality, as well as an examination of Qohelet lend considerable weight to the proposal that Qohelet picks up on the inconsistencies of Abel’s (**הבל**) life and uses **הבל** as a thematic word to describe the “Abel-ness” of all things.