

# Introduction

## *The Path of Moral Philosophy and Beyond*

[The Writings of the Hebrew Bible provide] precepts for the conduct of human life.

Josephus<sup>1</sup>

Isn't it greatness to have been the first, perhaps the only, to have taught us how to live on this earth without any conditions other than those of life itself?<sup>2</sup>

### **Divrei Qohelet: *The Book's Title and Plot***

While Jewish tradition designates Solomon as the author of Qohelet, the book speaks of a surrogate, if you will: Qohelet, the "Collector." At a simple literary level, this pseudonym points to both the form or style of his book and also to its content; and in fact the Collector could serve as a pen name for all such "authors" of proverb collections, from those anonymous ones of the ancient world to Ben Franklin and Bartlett. What has he collected? Let the anonymous presenter explain:

These are the words/things (*debarim*) of Qohelet.

Qoh 1:1

By the end of the book we learn that the simple collector of fragments has carried the enterprise to more weighty proportions: he also collects the words of others as well as his own, and he, further, gathers students to pore over and discuss them, through this process perhaps becoming a sage in his own right. Thus, a simple word collection such as a telephone

<sup>1</sup> Flavius Josephus, *The Life. Against Apion* (Cambridge, MA: Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1976), 2: 40.

<sup>2</sup> Geoffrey Hartman, *A Scholar's Tale* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 177. The quotation, as recalled by Henri Peyre, is Eric Auerbach's appraisal of Montaigne's importance.

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book has before our very eyes become almost an essay on human experience. Small wonder that Montaigne, the inventor of the essay genre, held Qohelet in such high esteem.<sup>3</sup>

These fragments bespeak a fragmented existence, shards of personal experience and observation: *debarim*, “things” of life, things of speech. Their collection under a single rubric, here called a doublet, reveals a double project that defines the book’s plot, the conversion of Qohelet from being a collector of pleasure and power “things” to a collector of words.<sup>4</sup> One of his literary challenges will be to bring the pieces into some kind of unified meaning while remaining true to their existential fragmentation. An important question, if posed historically, is unrecoverable: did Qohelet begin as a mere collector – a hobbyist or raconteur – and only later develop a full-blown national business? Or perhaps it was the concluding wisdom enterprise that led to his dedicated hobby of collecting. The evidence of the book itself points to a cycle, for “the end is in the beginning.” By the time we get to the fuller wisdom project at the end of the book, we return to the opening words with a deeper understanding: the fragmentary word/things and action/things of his life are also “words of reproof,” Qohelet has a moral message to impart.<sup>5</sup>

These observations are confirmed by a second linguistic doublet,<sup>6</sup> the author’s name. Just as there are two kinds of *debarim*, there are two Qohelets. First of all, since Qohelet is not a proper name, one cannot say that “this book was written by Qohelet.” This point is even stressed at the end, where it is affirmed, in the closing summary: “Vanity of Vanity said THE Qohelet.” Thus, it is not a real name but rather a pen name or pseudonym pointing to an activity or profession. The root word itself has a meaning in biblical Hebrew: to gather together or collect. Thus, Solomon, as recorded in 1 Kings, gathered the congregation together for a public reading of the law. So too, in the last chapter of our book, Qohelet, here also referred to as the Convoker, is seen as gathering together or convoking scholars and students, and this group sets itself the task of collecting and studying proverbs and other fragments of traditional and popular wisdom. This sage, by gathering the research staff

<sup>3</sup> See Eric S. Christianson, *Ecclesiastes through the Centuries* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 44–46.

<sup>4</sup> For the concept of doublet, see Appendix 6, “Doublets.”

<sup>5</sup> For *debarim* as words of reproof, see T. A. Perry, *Dialogues with Kohelet: The Book of Ecclesiastes: Translation and Commentary* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1993), 177.

<sup>6</sup> Just as the literary figure of hendiadys brings two related words into a single concept, a doublet or bifurcated figure takes a single word in two related but distinct directions. See Appendix 6, “Doublets.”

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and setting up a curriculum of proverb study and collection, went on to found a school, and these activities are both referred to in his name “Collector.”

These two doublets – the pen-name and his “things” – forecast the book’s main plot: the personal progression of the pseudo-author from being a collector of power-things to a collector of word-things, as Maurice Blanchot might put it.<sup>7</sup> This is not a mere shift in interest; it records a spiritual transformation. Some might prefer to call it just growing up or getting a life. Additionally, Qohelet’s autobiography from the very start is doubled with a moral agenda. If we miss this dual (literary and spiritual) perspective of the Book of Qohelet, we will have missed a great deal.

André Neher, in his great and much neglected essay on Qohelet, focuses on the perennial problem of the book’s “contradictions” in a rather innovative way. While still clinging to the usual notion of their troublesome incongruity, he evokes the multiplicity of Qohelet’s voices, their complexity as rich as the human existence they both reflect and inspire. Two very different and pervasive moods hold the critic’s attention in particular: on the one hand, Qohelet’s clear and reasonable directions on how to live one’s life; on the other, a meditation that “transcends rational categories and uncovers the mystery of the world’s suffering.” Let Neher himself set the terms:

In Qohelet two contradictory ethics confront one another. The first, a reasonable wisdom; the second, a perplexing un-reason. The one, comfortably installed in the golden mean; the other, prowling at the outskirts and provoking an uneasy questioning or cynical irony or disabused pessimism. Prudence and adventure have concluded a pact in Qohelet and walk together.<sup>8</sup>

It is fair to say that critical attention has been coopted by the second of these, by what has been viewed as the work’s irony and pessimism. It is also the case that the first, Qohelet’s ethical teaching, is typically either misunderstood or neglected altogether, so that even Neher can speak of

<sup>7</sup> Blanchot states it in reverse, speaking of a “guarantee which forbids a man of words from becoming a man of power” *L’Écriture du désastre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980), 21.

<sup>8</sup> André Neher, *Notes sur Qohélet* (Paris: Les Éditions de minuit, 1951), 12. His phrase “prowling at the outskirts” (“rôdant aux extrêmes”) corresponds nicely to Qohelet’s project of the Outside (“le dehors,” see Chapter 7. The contrast between prudence and adventure seems an allusion to Guillaume Apollinaire’s “quarrel between Classical Order and Adventure” in his famous poem “La Jolie rousse,” in *Oeuvres Poétiques: “Calligrammes”* (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1956), 313–14.

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it as merely “comfortable” or, worse, “viscous and unctuous like a bourgeois catechism.”<sup>9</sup>

### Hebel: *The Book’s Motto and Refrain*

One’s translation and understanding of *hebel* will largely determine one’s understanding of the book as a whole. This cannot be emphasized enough!<sup>10</sup>

**Caveat Lector:** Qohelet is a poetic text, at the center of which and throughout is the polysemic word *hebel*, whose *peshat* or literal meaning “breath” is subject to many different interpretations. In my analysis four levels are especially prominent: vanity-*hebel*, transience-*hebel*, disaster-*hebel*, and word-*hebel*. Often these areas are distinct. For instance, “vanity-*hebel*” typically refers to human behavior; whereas transience-*hebel* characterizes the entire cosmos but with special emphasis on the nonhuman realm. In all instances of interpretation, however, the *hebel* designation is attached in order to remind one of the *peshat* or literal meaning that traverses them all: life/wind-breath.

#### Hebel #1: *Vanity Living*

My goal in Part I is to relocate Qohelet’s pessimism within a spiritual (i.e., *real-life*) perspective, mainly by asking whether these two tendencies are in real contradiction or rather, quite the opposite, mutually supportive. For if, to take up Neher’s image, ethics and spiritual exploration walk together, they must be walking in the same direction. The first order of business is to provide a full and clear description of Qohelet’s ethical impulse toward moderation. Like many moralists, both ancient and modern (Epicurus...), Qohelet’s ethical meditation arises from a consideration of human suffering, asking what its causes are and how it can be understood and neutralized, perhaps even transformed.

Now it is a prevalent opinion, held by even the best of critics, that King Qohelet, most notably in the “royal fiction” of 1:12–2:26, holds life to be “completely meaningless and absurd.”<sup>11</sup> As a corrective to this view, I am

<sup>9</sup> Neher, *Notes*, 15. For research on the possibility of a dialogic reading of Qohelet, see my *Dialogues with Kohelet*.

<sup>10</sup> Mark R. Sneed, *The Politics of Pessimism in Ecclesiastes: A Social-Science Perspective* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), 155.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Krüger, *Qoheleth, a Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 206.

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reminded of Montaigne's critique of the thesis that our lives are ruled by chance:

It is small wonder that chance has such power over us since we [choose to] live by chance."<sup>12</sup>

Here too, Qohelet argues, much of the *hebel*-vanity of our lives is not a given but rather a human invention and pursuit. Quite distinct from the *hebel* out there in the cosmos (we shall, in Part II, refer to it as transience), which God seems to place there for our confusion and distress but also for the adventurous of heart, there is the *hebel* that humans create, with the things and actions and attitudes that *are* within our moral control to change and regulate.

Qohelet's How-To-Live book is, in the first instance, a manual for achieving such a transformation. His method is an interwoven series of dense meditations on the concept and experience of *hebel*, "breath," often viewed as something unsubstantial and fleeting, thus interpreted as "vanity." Applied to human pursuits, it is frequently parsed by its companion, "chasing the wind," suggesting that our actions are reflexive. Just as the wind turns only upon itself (1:6), the pursuit of emptiness produces an empty person:

They have gone after vanity (*hebel*) and have become vanity (*yehebalu*).

Jer 2:5; also 2 Kgs 17:15

Using Qohelet's own terms, the obvious meaning is that they have become vanity *because* they pursued it. When, through analysis and experience, we become aware of the "vanity" of our lives, the smart first move is to shrink the tumor, to withdraw from the bad *hebel* and limit the damage, to "just say no." In Qohelet's view this first level of *hebel* perception can be turned to enormous profit by being smart, modifying unhealthy behaviors and attitudes by following those simple precepts that make up a goodly portion of the book and that place it squarely in the perennial tradition of moral guidance. For, beyond just living, there is the wisdom goal of living well or wisely.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Montaigne, *Les Essais*, 337 (II:1).

<sup>13</sup> "Life is a gift of the immortal gods, but living well is the gift of philosophy." Seneca, *Letters*, Letter 90, start; also Plato, *Crito* 48: "Not life itself but the good life is chiefly to be desired." Krüger (*Qoheleth, A Commentary*, 46) thus views 1:3–4:12 as a "discursive laying of the foundation of ethics," the latter term being defined as a "theory of the human conduct of life." The focus on *bene vivere* is the adverb, not so much what you do but *how* you do it. "It is in the *manner* in which one is present, in which one lives, that there is ethics" Emmanuel Levinas, *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée* (Paris: Vrin, 2004), 144. See Appendix 3, "*Vivere* and *bene vivere*."

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We have missed this central concern of the Book of Qohelet by jumping too readily into the theological morass that blames God and things out there for our unhappiness. Qohelet in fact believes just the opposite: that pursuit of vanity is not only unproductive but sinful, offering his own curriculum vitae as an example *not* to follow, and perspectivizing his entire book through a prism both autobiographical and confessional.<sup>14</sup> Once the issue of collection is clarified, the confessional purpose cannot be limited to 1:12–2:26 but rather extends throughout the entire book and gives it its own kind of unity. Such a confessional perspective, both literary and spiritual, opens up neglected possibilities for interpretation.

### Hebel #2: *Cosmic Hebel*

At a second and broader level, one that moves from personal *hebel* to universal transience, a brief prolegomenon is needed, what one might call the truth criterion.<sup>15</sup> This means looking intently and seeing not what you or your readership would like to see but what in fact is there.<sup>16</sup> This criterion is put forth in the Hebrew Bible as the absolute basis of jurisprudence and is called *mishpat*. In modern times it forms the bedrock of scientific inquiry and, like *mishpat*, is to be totally independent from the incursions of self-interest, power, and politics. In both courts of law and the laboratory, the truth is pursued. Critical thinking is a spin-off of the scientific method and requires the same level of probity.

Michael V. Fox has argued that Qohelet's new path was to extend this approach to epistemology, which he characterizes as use of the independent rational intellect as the sole instrument of investigation.<sup>17</sup> He loosely terms this approach empirical, meaning that the foundation of

<sup>14</sup> Hugo Grotius spied the repentance theme, attaching it to the ascription of Qohelet to King Solomon. See summary in Krüger, *Qoheleth, A Commentary*, 34, and Chapter 1. See also André Barucq, *Ecclesiaste* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1968), 29, who refers to Qohelet's various "confessions in the first person," and one can surely trust the Catholic clergy to detect the liturgical genre.

<sup>15</sup> "The sole function of philosophy is to discover the truth about things divine and things human" Seneca, *Letters*, Letter 90 (II, 395).

<sup>16</sup> The criterion of truth is nicely put by Isaiah (42:3): "to bring forth judgment unto truth ('emet). See Chapter 10, "Mortal Remains: Writing Fragments...."

<sup>17</sup> Michael V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 76. Also his "The Epistemology of the Book of Proverbs," *JBL* 126 (2007): 669–84. Peter Machinist has further analyzed Qohelet's pursuit of explicit conceptualization and abstraction, notably in his attempt to define the limits of human understanding; see his "Fate, *migreh*, and Reason: Some Reflection of Qohelet and Biblical Thought," in *Solving Riddles and Untying Knots*, ed. Z. Zevit et al. (Winnona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 159–75.

knowledge is experience. I view this correct thesis as a major advance in Qohelet studies and would like to give it my own slight push forward. I think that, like scientific and judicial inquiry, Qohelet's method can be extended in many directions. Qohelet's additional innovation is to take his experiential method and apply it to experience itself, and in its most daily manifestations. It is small wonder that the founder of essayistic inquiry – Montaigne – was a devoted admirer of Qohelet, his favorite biblical book, and that his final and crowning essay is entitled “De l'Expérience,” meaning both personal experience and the experimental or truth method that brings it to the light of day.

In my reading, Qohelet's analysis of our human condition focuses on two existential areas where the truth criterion must be applied. The first is nicely described by Thomas Krüger:<sup>18</sup>

Human beings and all that they do are transitory and “fleeting.” And all the convictions and wishes that do not do justice to this transitoriness of humankind are untenable and “futile.” This in no way means that life is completely “meaningless” and “absurd,” as the king holds in 1:12–2:26.

Krüger, in one sentence, turns traditional suppositions on their head, arguing that the absurd is not transience itself but rather the failure to be honest about it. Rami Shapiro is forthright about life's messiness and the need to take it as given:

This is what I mean by being present to the moment. Nothing magical or extraordinary, just life as it is – often messy and rarely scripted. The more I empty myself of self and of the quest for surety, permanence, and control for permanence that defines the self, the more I am at home in the chaos of my life... And in this there is a grace – an ease of doing – that we cannot imagine as long as we seek to control and manipulate things to meet our ends.<sup>19</sup>

In addition to *hebel*-transience, the truth of human life involves opposites that constitute stable structures – usually binary ones – regulating knowledge and behavior: no day without night, no life without death. Does this mean that night and death are good (or bad)? Thoreau would say that they are better than that: they are true, they are integral to the reality we are given. This is what Qohelet sought to give: “words of truth” (12:10). And what are they? Roland Murphy goes to the point in a single sentence: “‘Truth’ [*emet*] is meant in the profound sense of capturing

<sup>18</sup> Krüger, *Qoheleth, A Commentary*, 206.

<sup>19</sup> Rami Shapiro, *The Way of Solomon: Finding Joy and Contentment in the Wisdom of Ecclesiastes* (San Francisco: Harper, 2000), 117.

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reality.”<sup>20</sup> The implications of this criterion are vast. For one thing, it blows away the usual overconcern with Qohelet’s contradictions. As Montaigne says, if my subject is change and transience, I change with it. If reality is contradictory, then my writing must exemplify that reality. If human knowledge is limited, shall I try to seem all-knowing?

### Hebel #3: *The Hebel of Dis-aster*

As already stated, since the Book of Qohelet loosely but persistently gathers itself around the concept of *hebel*, this study will have four focal points, one dealing with each of Qohelet’s evolving senses of *hebel*: as sinful vanity (Part I); as universal transience (Part II); as the great void that is the source and wellspring of creativity and all new beginnings (Parts III and IV).<sup>21</sup> Part IV attempts to draw these fragments together and reconstruct Qohelet’s practical theory of joyous living, both in the here and now “under the sun” and also in the “Outside” or somewhere else, and on the relation between these two forms of behavior and awareness. He consequently offers two solutions: a practical guide to living wisely in this world, and a metaphysical meditation from *beyond* the sun (also a *hebel* perspective!) as a source of renewal and creativity (Part IV).

To clarify and access these dimensions of *hebel*, it is crucial, at the start, to uncover Qohelet’s perspective on his own life experiences and failures. Let me therefore try to restate and expand a bit on these various aspects. Part I deals with those human passions and behaviors that cause unhappiness. It proposes mainly a negative morality, focusing on the need for control and excision. Since its focus is personal and experiential – King Qohelet offers himself as the prime example of negative or *hebel* behavior – his autobiographical *and confessional* perspective provides the lens through which the morality is explained and justified. Part II advances to the *hebel* in the social and especially the natural world out there, both beyond individual control. Its main characteristics are unpredictability

<sup>20</sup> Roland E. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, Word Biblical Commentary 23A (Dallas: Word Books, 1992), 125. This important point – that Qohelet’s goal is the truth or description of reality – is the motivating impetus of Fox’s important rereading of Qohelet, *A Time to Tear Down*, especially pp. 3–4, on the necessity – not the problem – of Qohelet’s contradictions. On the view of Qohelet’s contradictions as a deliberate pedagogical device for encouraging strong readings, see Perry, *Dialogues with Qohelet*, pp. x–xii.

<sup>21</sup> In an exegetical tradition traceable back to Origen, medieval commentators viewed Solomon’s three books as guides to the three spiritual states: The Book of Proverbs taught humans how to live virtuously, Qohelet taught how to despise the world as transient, and Canticles focused on the love of God (see summary in Beryl Smalley, cited in Krüger, *Qoheleth, A Commentary*, 34). My proposal is to view all three stages as forming the backbone of the Book of Qohelet, unified by the focus on the *evolving* sense of *hebel* and by the “empty” (but how resonant!) words that bring them forth.

and transience, both suspect and typically judged to be negative (e.g., absurdity, vanity, etc.). However, Qohelet offers much positive advice on avoiding negative consequences, and the surprise is that the correctives are modeled and available in the natural universe itself.

Part III adventurously pushes Qohelet's negative method to its philosophical extremes, no longer focused on either a quietism of the passions or their moderation but rather on a withdrawal from the world of things to a no-thing universe or great void, to an almost ontological Outside that opens up risky but joyous possibilities for living and creativity. Put differently, if indeed our Book of Qohelet is, insistently, a meditation on the world "under the sun" or "under the heavens," we attempt to imagine what that could possibly be. Critics respond that, of course, this refers to our own little globe, especially our social world. This is undoubtedly true, but with the perspective of an invitation to rise above things, to consider our lives from a totally different space – different because it is a *non-place*, a *hebel*-place, if you will. Italo Calvino imagined such a journey for his character Astolfo, in search of a cure for a demented Orlando:

On the white fields of the Moon, Astolfo meets the poet... He thinks: "If he lives in the very middle of the Moon ... he will tell us if it is true that It contains the universal rime book of words, if this is the world full of sense, the opposite of the senseless Earth."

"No, the Moon is a desert" – such was the poet's response... "[But] from this arid sphere all poems and all discourse originate. And every voyage through forests, battles, treasures, banquets, bedrooms bring us back here, to the center of an empty horizon."

"Storia di Astolfo sulla luna"

With our progressive vanity-withdrawals and refocusing, we have, with Qohelet and in Calvino's language, gone to the moon and, with Blanchot's and the rabbis' help, well "outside" or beyond. With this, Qohelet invites us to the vanity or void of outside (celestial? prophetic?) perspectives, in order to reconsider and perhaps refocus the origin and value of our primary discourse and desires.

Hebel #4: *Word-Hebel, the Souffle Poétique, Singing in Truth*<sup>22</sup>

Here we return to the traditional "vanity" aura or interpretation of *hebel*, but now with deep irony. If things are vanity, what of the airy words that reproduce them? Are they not, as Montaigne (ironically) remarked, the

<sup>22</sup> For Qohelet's use of *hebel* as a structuring *terminus technicus*, see Norbert Lohfink, *Qoheleth: A Continental Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress), 2003, xiv. See Appendix 1, "Hebel Repetition as a *Terminus Technicus*."

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very notion of “vanity of vanity”? Indeed, are they *all* tiring (1:8), forever turning upon themselves into books without end (12:12)? Or perhaps, rather, a breath of breaths, ones that carry thinking and breathe life into the world. Words that penetrate thick skulls and drive them to betterment (12:11).

When it comes to translating *hebel*, its polysemy is further complicated by the changing life engagements of the speaker’s voice. The crucial factor here is the speaker’s moral perspectivism, his (and the human being’s) constant evaluation of things by the terms “good” and especially “bad.” Since the speaker’s dominant voice is post-transformational, his “hebel” judgment is likely to be Janus-like, designating both the abandonment of “vanity” things and also his awareness of new life-possibilities resulting from these judgments and experiences. So too the wind that circulates in the universe: judged to be both vanity as a pursuit and the very image of transience, but also as life-sustaining, the very breath of life. I have decided to cleave to the *peshat hebel/breath* in most cases and leave the interpretation to the reader, now aware of these expanded hermeneutic possibilities of *hebel*.<sup>23</sup>

Qohelet’s deepening concept of *hebel* thus involves a progression from (1) sins of excess to (2) an awareness of universal transience, both yielding to a removal and bracketing as preconditions for the ongoing (3) creation and re-creation of the world through fresh thinking and wise words and discourse. And, at every stage, Qohelet plants the notion that these “evil” (1:13) *hebels* are given by God for our enjoyment and growth. The essential message of Qohelet, no different from Thoreau’s *Walden*, is one of joy and self-renewal.<sup>24</sup> This underlying message becomes most visible when the dominant *hebel* motif is directed away from its popular negative *interpretation* of “vanity” and returned to its basic *peshat* or simple meaning of “life-breath”; whereupon the entire work can now be read as a paean: To Life!<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> For further discussion see Appendix 3, “Quotationals.” For an unusually focused discussion of the neglected importance of Qohelet’s *hebel*, its polysemy and nonjudgmental status previous to the interpretive accretions that have muddied the waters of understanding, Kathleen A. Farmer’s introduction is especially to be recommended (Kathleen A. Farmer, *Who Knows What Is Good? Proverbs and Ecclesiastes* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991], especially pp. 143–46).

<sup>24</sup> Sherman Paul, *The Shores of America: Thoreau’s Inward Exploration* (Urbana: Illinois University Press, 1958), ch. 7. Quoted in Robert Sayre, ed., *New Essays on “Walden”* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 91.

<sup>25</sup> See especially Chapter 8 and Appendix 3, “To Lives!”