

TECHNICAL PAPERS FOR THE BIBLE TRANSLATOR

*Published twice yearly
(January and July)
by the United Bible
Societies*
Vol. 38, No. 3, July 1987

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“VANITY” IT CERTAINLY IS NOT

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A. Introduction

Older English translations of the book of Ecclesiastes concluded that “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity”; GNB informs us that “It is useless, useless . . . life is useless . . .”, while NIV determines that life is “meaningless”. This negative cast to the book is almost entirely dependent on the way in which one understands and translates the term *hebel*.

B. Translating a Text

Within the fundamental priorities which guide the translator, priority 1, according to Nida and Taber, is “the priority of contextual consistency over verbal consistency”. In explaining what is meant by this rubric, Nida says, “the choice of the right word in the receptor language to translate a word in the source language texts depends more on the context than upon a fixed system of verbal consistency, i.e., always translating one word in the source language by a corresponding word in the receptor language”.¹ Or to quote James Barr, “word meanings have to be investigated by asking what is specific about the word”,² that is, what does the actual usage of a word tell us about its meaning? That this and many other principles from the discipline of linguistics have been largely ignored by biblical scholars is a complaint voiced recently by Sawyer.³

C. Translating *HEBEL* in Ecclesiastes

When we turn to the book of Ecclesiastes and ask how well this principle of contextual meaning has been applied, we find a situation which raises profound questions. In all English language translations with which I am familiar, and I presume in most non-English translations as well, it appears that this fundamental law has been overlooked in the case of the word *hebel*. The result has been that because of the term’s frequency and centrality, the meaning assigned to

¹ Nida, Eugene A., and Charles R. Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation*. Leiden: Brill 1974, 15-22.

² Barr, James, *The Semantics of Biblical Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 1961, 171.

³ Sawyer, John F., “A Change of Emphasis in the Study of the Prophets”, *Israel’s Prophetic Traditions*, ed. R. Coggins, A. Phillips, M. Knibb. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1982, 233-249.

hebel throughout has given the entire book a distorted image and a falsely skewed meaning.

The word in question, *hebel*, according to standard Hebrew dictionaries (*BDB*, Koehler) means, "vapour, breath". From passages such as Deut 32.21, Is 30.7, 49.4, 57.13, Jer 10.15, Pss 62.10, 78.33, and many others, we discover substantial evidence in support of such a rendering. *Hebel* is used to describe the emptiness which the prophets perceived in idol worship, in fruitless human activity, and the like. Prophets, sages, and poets, all used the term with much the same sense. Translators then can be forgiven to some extent for assuming that when Ecclesiastes used the term, it was with the same intent. Yet in making this assumption, we have fallen into the trap of assuming verbal consistency, and have not examined *hebel* and its meaning in the specific context of Ecclesiastes. Translators are not alone in this failure. R. Davidson⁴ offers a prime example of one who assumes that Ecclesiastes selects the term *hebel* because of its meaning elsewhere in the OT. He argues in circular fashion, having already concluded that the author believes life to be empty. Thus he can determine that *hebel* was a term appropriate to Ecclesiastes' purposes.

The word *hebel* occurs thirty-eight times⁵ in Ecclesiastes, most often as a simple term, but also in compound form in 1.2 and 12.8. In terms of frequency, we should also note that more than half of all the OT occurrences of the word are to be located in this book. It is, furthermore, the most often used term in the entire book. Its importance as a key concept in Ecclesiastes is thus easily established, not only on this kind of statistical basis, but also, and perhaps more significantly, because of the function which it serves throughout the book. By this is meant that due weight needs be given to the fact that *hebel* serves as a summarizing term in the concluding choruses which climax many thought units in the book (e.g., 2.11, 17, 23 etc.). It follows logically from these facts that the meaning we assign to *hebel* inevitably will profoundly affect our reading of the book and our assessment of its overall theological significance.

There are three factors which must form part of any equation by which we hope to solve the problem of *hebel*'s meaning in Ecclesiastes. They are: (i) the painful scenarios described and to which the *hebel*-phrase is added; (ii) the parallel and complementary phrases associated with the *hebel*-phrase; (iii) the calls to enjoyment which punctuate the book at key points.

Rather than proceed with an exhaustive examination of each instance of *hebel*'s use, our method will be to select several representative examples, and from them draw conclusions which may be applied to the remaining cases.

(i) Situations which are described as *hebel*

(a) 2.12-17 In the section 2.12-17, we witness the *hebel*-phrase in its position as a concluding device. It summarizes the sage's response to a situation in which his research into wisdom, into madness and folly, presented him with a dilemma.

⁴ Davidson, Robert, *The Courage to Doubt*. London: SCM Press 1983, 187-189.

⁵ The number of times the word *hebel* appears in Ecclesiastes is dependent upon the doubtfulness of the MT at 9.9 (*hebl'kâ*) and the emendation of *hkl* at 9.2 to *hbl* as in the LXX. If we retain the MT in both instances we have a total of 38 occurrences of *hebel*.

Verse 13 is an affirmation about the unchanging value of wisdom: wisdom *always* is more commendable than folly, and should be pursued. However, whether one is wise or foolish, death intrudes to bring life to its end (vv. 14-15). The demonstrative *zeh* in v. 15 refers to the entire situation described, the priority of wisdom in a context of universal death. Ecclesiastes continues in the same vein in v. 16, referring in v. 17 to his deep pain in face of the enigma of the indiscriminate way in which death invades the life of wise and fool alike. It is exactly this fact—death’s lack of discrimination between wise and fool—that evokes the *hebel*-response.

(b) 3.16-19 Our author presents for reflection a life situation—corruption and evil are found in places which ought to exhibit exemplary justice and righteousness. The situation portrayed is, like so many illustrations in wisdom writing, a very general one. It might refer to the legal system, the royal household, the religious world. It is unnecessary to seek a more specific reference, for Ecclesiastes’ intention is to have his readers ponder a common social problem. Having drawn attention to the problem, what is his response to this observation of a pervasive evil? Initially, in v.17, he offers the reader an orthodox theological response, saying that God will at some point in time bring judgment to bear; he will, for certain and at the appropriate time, step in and “clean out the pus” from society. Then notice that our author uses exactly the same introductory phrase in v. 18, “I said in my heart (to myself) . . .” to set alongside v. 17 a second yet equally valid response to the scenario of v. 16. This time he says the pervasiveness of evil serves as a form of divine testing—God simply wants to show us that we human beings, with all our alleged sophistication and learning, are actually no better than animals; we, like them, will die (cf. Ps 49). What Ecclesiastes offers us is an observation, followed by two differing responses to that situation. As a means of evaluating this difficulty, Ecclesiastes uses the term *hebel* (v. 19), for we all turn to dust at death (v. 20).

The specific socio-theological problem presented here is a very basic one. In seeking a solution, one might find recourse to a just God, to affirm one’s religious beliefs yet more strongly (v. 17). However, as our author points out, this problem does not have only one solution. There is yet another theological way of approaching the problem, one which agrees to leave the question open. This is because God’s time, God’s moment of dealing justly with a situation, does not come quickly enough. Those trapped by human injustice die without seeing God’s justice done. It is this complexity, the lack of simple solution, which Ecclesiastes describes by means of the term *hebel*.

Our question then is, what does the term *hebel* connote, in such a setting? Does it mean that life is vacuous, meaningless? Does the fact that there are no ready-made answers for such a problem lead to the conclusion that therefore life is without meaning? If God’s justice does intervene to restore a situation, as v. 17 suggests, then life can hardly be described as “vain”. If one dies before seeing the divine justice work itself out (v. 18), does that emasculate life of its meaning? Surely not! What certain human problems force us to admit is that, from the perspective of faith, we are sometimes at a loss to know how that divine justice

will work itself out. The word *hebel* is Ecclesiastes' chosen vehicle for expressing such an enigmatic situation. That there are many unanswered questions with which the person of faith must live, is a fact; but life does not thereby become "useless" or "meaningless".

(c) **6.1-2** A theological problem of no small proportions is presented in the very brief case-study of 6.2. The author in 6.1 prefaces his description with his own feelings about the nature of the situation—it is *ra'*. Generally in Ecclesiastes *ra'* describes a painful or traumatic situation, not one that is morally corrupt or evil.

Briefly, we are told of a person to whom God has given all manner of material benefits. In the traditional view of Deuteronomy (e.g., 7.12-15; 28.1-14) these benefits are concrete evidence of divine blessing and approval. Unfortunately, as Ecclesiastes describes here, this rich person has missed out on the ability to enjoy what God has given, although there is some side benefit in that others are able to derive some pleasure from the man's wealth. To sum up this situation, Ecclesiastes calls on the word *hebel*. How appropriate is it then to suggest that this divine gift, even though not appreciated and enjoyed, makes life "meaningless" or "useless"? True, we may not have an adequate answer for the situation described, but insofar as material things are important to sustain life, and as these are divine gifts to us, they cannot be given such a negative value. What Ecclesiastes wants the reader to recognize is that here is yet another anomalous situation, an enigma. This he describes by the term *hebel*.

(d) **4.7-8** A *hebel*-situation is the assessment which brackets the problem presented in these two verses. We see a lonely workaholic, constantly amassing material riches, climbing the corporate ladder, but for what purpose? He works so frantically that he does not have the sense to stop and ask about the purpose of his work and life. Such a scenario Ecclesiastes calls *hebel*. Does he mean that such a life is devoid of value and empty? No. Such a person does have material reward from work, what he calls "portion" (*hēleq*) in 2.10 etc. What the term *hebel* can portray is Ecclesiastes' own inability to comprehend the man and his failure to ask basic questions about the purpose of work.

(e) **8.14** Similar to the earlier example in 3.16-18, this one also draws attention to the anomaly in human society. Good things happen to bad people; bad things happen to good people. Though not universal, this situation is sufficiently frequent to raise a very serious theological problem. But it is a problem which we cannot solve. Why does God, a just God, allow these kinds of things to happen? We do not know. Yet the fact that human experience knows this problem to be real, cannot possibly imply that life therefore ceases to have meaning. In describing this scenario as *hebel*, Ecclesiastes is pointing to its anomalous nature.

(ii) Parallel and Complementary Phrases

Several parallel phrases are employed in conjunction with *hebel*. It appears that their purpose is to add emphasis to the *hebel*-phrase itself by complementing the thought it carries. The most frequent of these phrases is, "a striving after wind" (*r'ûth rûah*), but we also note "a sore affliction" (*hōli ra'*), and "an unhappy business" (*inyān ra'*).

(a) *r'ûth rûah*—“a striving after wind” (RSV); “chasing the wind” (GNB).

The root *r'h* portrays the work of the shepherd in pastoring the flock. In the phrase before us here, Ecclesiastes describes the *hebel*-scenario in this alternate way as “shepherding the wind”. That is to say, he is attempting to bring the wind under control so as to make it blow in a certain direction, to guide it and set its course. It is a delightful idiomatic phrase for “attempting the impossible”.

In the opening poem (1.4-11), Ecclesiastes drew a contrast between the order of creation and the frailty of humanity. The image in the phrase “shepherding the wind” which we note to be so frequent in this book (2.11, 17, 26 etc.), smiles at the human struggle to determine and control the environment, God’s breath (*rûah*). To set such an image alongside the *hebel*-phrase is the author’s way of underlining the fact that a *hebel*-situation is one which defies our control. Thus it supports the sense of frustration we feel in face of certain problems and difficulties. It does not suggest that life is without meaning or value.

(b) *hōlî ra'*, “a sore affliction” (RSV); “it’s all wrong” (GNB).

An “evil”, that is to say, depressing situation (6.1) is further portrayed as a “sore affliction” (6.2). It is one which evokes much heart-searching. Why should a situation such as that mentioned in 6.2 be allowed to come about? That God’s hand is in it, is the author’s view, and it is perhaps this fact more than any other which produces the pain. The GNB translation, “it’s all wrong”, is inappropriate unless seen as the cry of despair from one who seeks desperately but unsuccessfully to comprehend the situation. The “sore affliction” describes the pain the sage feels as he struggles to find an answer to the anomaly present in the situation portrayed.

(c) *'inyân ra'*, “an unhappy business” (RSV); “a miserable way to live” (GNB).

This phrase complements the *hebel*-description of the sad soul frantically searching for wealth, all the while ignoring the question of the purpose of his actions. That attitude, which one finds in a large number of individuals, is beyond Ecclesiastes’ power to comprehend, and he here describes it as one which causes him much grief and soul-searching.

What we have been looking at to date are some representative scenarios in which various social and individual problems have been brought before the readers’ attention. The author’s purpose is to invite reflection. Wisdom literature is essentially for instructing the younger student, and here we encounter the old sage, using a case-study method, to call the youth to ponder deeply some of the more problematic circumstances of human experience. Each of the cases brought before the youth are essentially beyond even this old sage’s ability to resolve. The tensions which result from these very real human and theological problems are what Ecclesiastes depicts by the term *hebel*.

It is evident, from the kinds of examples we have seen here, that life is not meaningless and vain simply because there exist numerous insoluble problems, or situations which are beyond our power to comprehend. The word *hebel* is one which Ecclesiastes has brought forward to describe these enigmatic circumstances. They are enigmatic, because the human intellect is limited and cannot

fully comprehend the mysteries of God's created order (cf. 8.16-17). However, to admit, as Ecclesiastes does, that life has these difficulties, is a long way from suggesting that life is "vanity".

(iii) Ecclesiastes' Call to Enjoyment

There is yet a third factor which must play a role in our search for a solution to the problem of Ecclesiastes' use of the term *hebel*. It lies in the reiterated calls to enjoyment.

Despite past difficulties in establishing the structure of the book as a whole, I have argued elsewhere⁶ that it is possible to approach this question from the viewpoint of certain recurrent features—the programmatic question (1.3; 2.22; 3.9; 5.16; 6.8, 11 etc.), the perusal of various life situations which follow that question and lead to a negative response to it (2.11 etc.), and the positive advice which climaxes this search for meaning in 2.24, 3.12, 22, 5.17(18), 8.15, 9.7-10 etc. It is in this latter advice where we encounter the 'enjoyment' theme. The reiteration of question-answer-response in fixed forms allows us to conclude that the first eight chapters of Ecclesiastes' treatise focus on the question in 1.3, but in such a manner as to reach their high point not in the negative assessment of certain problems, but in the positive call to the youth of Israel to enjoy the life and work which God has given. This advice we note again in 9.7-10, in expanded form in the closing discourse material. Thus, at climactic moments in the book we encounter this call to "enjoy". We ought perhaps to recognize at this point that these calls are not an encouragement to hedonistic pleasure seeking, but an honest attempt to affirm that life is God-given, and the only and appropriate faith-stance toward life is to accept it as divinely given.

It is very difficult in light of the above evidence to conclude that Ecclesiastes presents a negative face to the world. Its author is essentially an optimist, facing the reality of human life with its countless unanswered questions, and going forward in faith to affirm that despite his limited ability to explain all that happens, he remains committed to trusting in divine justice and goodness.

It is evident from the above that Ecclesiastes has employed the term *hebel* in a novel way. (Were there the time, we could explore other terms, such as *yitrôn*, which appear to have nuances or meanings which may not accord with usages in other OT documents, for close examination of Ecclesiastes' work reveals him to be a most creative writer.) We need to exercise great care in translating this document, for only as we recognize the unique manner in which certain words are used can we arrive at an acceptable rendering of this author's deepest thought.

The view propounded in this paper accords with an as yet minority view of the term *hebel* and its meaning. However, the evidence stands in support of its thesis, at least as an option to be considered by translators. As early as 20 years

⁶ Ogden, Graham S, "Qoheleth's Use of the 'Nothing is Better'-Form". *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 98, 1978, 339-350.

ago, Edwin Good⁷ pointed out that *hebel* carried a distinctive meaning in Ecclesiastes, concluding that it serves to point to life's incongruities. His suggested translation was “irony”. T. Polk⁸ subsequently developed Good's thesis of the ironic mode, reaching the same conclusion that Ecclesiastes is a matter of irony whose realistic appraisal of life has the one purpose of “bringing us to the fear of God that we may all experience joy in a life that is not at our disposal”.

Our translations of Ecclesiastes will do greater justice to the author's intention if we render the term *hebel* by words such as “enigma”, or “mystery”, and the compound forms in 1.2 and 12.8 as something approaching “everything (about life) is exceedingly enigmatic,” or, “there are so many unanswered questions”!

⁷ Good, Edwin, *Irony in the Old Testament*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press 1965, 176-183.

⁸ Polk, Timothy, “The Wisdom of Irony”. *Studia Biblica et Theologica* 6, 1976, 3-17.

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“RIGHTEOUSNESS”—SOME ISSUES IN OLD TESTAMENT TRANSLATION INTO ENGLISH

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1. Introduction

The words “righteousness”, “righteousness” and “justify” have been familiar to English Bible readers for centuries. (Catholic readers will be more familiar with “justice” and “just”.) In modern English usage, however, “righteousness” and “righteous” are no longer common words, other than in combinations such as “self-righteous” and “righteous indignation”. Further, “righteous(ness)”, when understood generally, would be linked with “conformity to the divine or moral law”.¹ “Justify” is commonly used in the sense of “to prove or show to be just, desirable, warranted or useful”.² Thus a sentence such as “this man went justified” (Luke 18:14, RSV; similarly NIV) is almost certainly to be misinterpreted by a reader unfamiliar with obsolete meanings of “justify”. At the same time talk of “social justice” and “human rights” has brought “justice” and “right” into a setting broader than the law court.

¹ So, e.g., *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam 1981), where this is meaning “1”. Also listed is “4. A right relationship to God”, clearly only so understood by those familiar with theological terminology. To what extent is this true also for words used in bible translations into languages other than English?

² *Ibid.* Significantly the meaning “to pronounce free from guilt or blame” is described as “archaic”.