

More than a Puff of Air
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Ecc 1:2

(BHS)

(NRSV)

הָבֵל הָבֵלִים אָמַר קֹהֵלֶת
:הָבֵל הָבֵלִים הַכֹּל הָבֵל: Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher,
vanity of vanities! All is vanity.

Of course this vocabulary is simple—the same word is repeated five times. *Hebel hebelim*, says *Qohelet*, *hebel hebelim*, all is *hebel*. Pronounce *hebel*, “hevel” (rhymes with “level”). *Qohelet* is probably one who speaks in assembly. I call him the Professor. Ferguson calls him the Pundit.

NIV glosses *hebel*, “meaningless.” The NASB note renders, “futility.” NCV reads, “useless.” NKJV note suggests, “absurdity.” Amplified has, “vapor of vapors,” and puts in parenthesis, “emptiness, falsity, vainglory.” Ricker glosses, “pointless.” Ogden, “enigmatic.” Farmer, “breath-like.” (Email me for the bibliography).

A *hebel* is a puff of air: “A *hebel* will take them away” (Isa 57:13). It exists only for a brief time, and has little or no substance. “Egypt’s help is *hebel*” (Isa 30:7). “The customs of the peoples are *hebel*” (Jer 10:3). “Surely all mankind stands as a mere *hebel*” (Psa 39:5). “Man is like a *hebel*, his days like a passing shadow” (Psa 144:4). “How then will you comfort me with *hebel*” (Job 21:34). “Beauty is *hebel*” (Prov 31:30). The opposite of *hebel* is *’olam*, “eternity.”

There is one person in the Bible who exemplifies *hebel hebelim*. In fact, his name is the exact word. Can you guess who that is? Hevel lived a righteous life before God and offered a pleasing sacrifice. But what did he get for it? He was murdered young, and the murderer went on to build a city. No wonder the

biblical author called him Hevel! The second man born in history sets the pattern, *hebel hebelim*, everyone is like Hevel (Gen 4:8).

Sometimes, *hebel* denotes idols. Israel's *hebelim* provoked God to anger (Deut 32:21; 1 Kings 16:13; etc.) "They went after *hebel* and became *hebel*" (2 Kings 17:15; Jer 2:5). False gods are *hebel* and those who worship them become *hebel*. Take anything at all in this world, and try to get out of it something more than what it can really be, and it will sour and be revealed as empty.

Go ahead and pour your life into your work. That is a good thing. But soon you will be done, and you will be forgotten there, and your *hebel* work will pass into *hebel*. But good deeds before God are *'olam*, with a lasting payoff.

Go ahead and pour yourself into relationships of all sorts. That is good, valuable, and necessary. But eventually everyone passes on. Some loved ones might suffer dementia and forget you even while living. In the end, looking for something more permanent from love is also *hebel*. But loving God is *'olam*, a never-ending beatitude.

Go ahead and get a good education. That too is *hebel*, however necessary in this life. But knowing God yields everlasting life.

You live in a *hebel* world. We all are prone to fixate on some aspect of it, hoping to find more than *hebel* in it—only to be disappointed. What *hebel* do you chase? From what people or things do you desire more than they can yield? Again and again, the *hebel* of this world disappoints us. Yet we keep chasing it, even though only the things of God are *'olam*.

The Old Greek translates *hebel* with *mataiotes*. Using this word, Paul says, “For the creation was subjected to *hebel*, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Rom 8:20 – 21).

Jesus came to this *hebel* world. He stretched his arms out on the cross, and took our *hebel* on to himself. He took our vain and empty lives and gave us his full and glorious life. He died *hebel*, but was raised *‘olam*. So now, as we follow him, we can transcend *hebel* as he did. He gives us abundant life today.

The creation is subject to *hebel*, says Paul, but only for a season. When Jesus returns, the *hebel hebelim* of this world will become *‘olam ‘olamim*. And we will live forever with him. It is to that hope we press on and can bear up in a *hebel* world for now. Amen, Come Lord Jesus!