

MEANINGLESS! MEANINGLESS! EVERYTHING IS MEANINGLESS!

(Danny Hays in *The Baker Illustrated Bible Handbook*)

The Hebrew word *hebel* is a critically important word in Ecclesiastes, occurring thirty-eight times. The importance of this word is stressed from the very beginning. After the heading, Ecclesiastes 1:2 provides an opening synopsis for most of the book. In Hebrew this verse has eight words, and five of these eight words are *hebel*. The New International Version translates the verse as follows:

“‘Meaningless! Meaningless!’ says the Teacher. ‘Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.’”

Hebel is a difficult word to translate into English. The King James Version, the English Standard Version, and the New Revised Standard Version render it as “vanity,” while the New International Version and the New Living Translation opt for “meaningless.” The Holman Christian Standard Bible translates it as “futile.”

The root meaning of *hebel* is related to breath or vapor, and the word can also be used to describe a mist. In this sense it refers to something that looks like it is there, but really isn’t. A low-lying cloud or mist looks like something firm from a distance, but as you draw close, it disappears, and you realize that it was just an illusion of sorts. The Teacher of Ecclesiastes tells us that, when viewed apart from God, the meaning of life is this way. You think you can see it and grasp it, but, like a cloud vapor, it disappears and leaves you with nothing.

A similar meaning is conveyed by the phrase “chasing after the wind.” This phrase is often added alongside of the concept of *hebel* to further enhance the nuance of meaninglessness or futility (1:14, 17; 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4, 6; 6:9).

The prophet Jeremiah also likes the term *hebel*. He uses it to refer to the emptiness and worthlessness of idolatry—that is, it looks like something is there (the stone idol), but in reality there isn’t really anything there (Jer. 2:5; 8:19; 10:3, 8, 15; 14:22; 16:19; 51:18). Thus Jeremiah proclaims that both the idol and the worshipers of idols are *hebel*.

