

## The Key Word in Ecclesiastes A Word Study on הֶבֶל (hevel, “futile”) NET Bible

The motto “Everything is futile!” is the theme of the book [of Ecclesiastes]. Its occurs at the beginning (1:2) and end of the book (12:8), forming an envelope structure (inclusio). Everything described in 1:2-12:8 is the supporting proof of the thesis of 1:2. With few exceptions (e.g., 2:24-26; 3:14-15; 11:9-12:1, 9), everything described in 1:2-12:8 is characterized as “futile” (הֶבֶל, hevel).

The term הֶבֶל (hevel, “futile”) is repeated five times within the eight words of verse 2 for emphasis. The noun הֶבֶל is the key word in Ecclesiastes. The root is used in two ways in the OT, literally and figuratively.

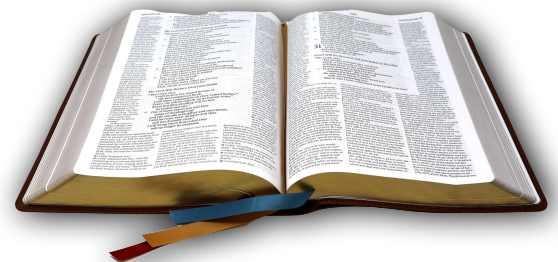
The literal, concrete sense is used in reference to the wind, man’s transitory breath, evanescent vapor (Isa 57:13; Pss 62:10; 144:4; Prov 21:6; Job 7:16). In this sense, it is often a synonym for “breath” or “wind” (Eccl 1:14; Isa 57:13; Jer 10:14). The literal sense lent itself to metaphorical senses: (1) breath/vapor/wind is nonphysical, evanescent, and lacks concrete substance thus, the connotation “unsubstantial” (Jer 10:15; 16:19; 51:18), “profitless” or “fruitless” (Ps 78:33; Prov 13:11), “worthless” (2 Kgs 17:15; Jer 2:5; 10:3), “pointless” (Prov 21:6), “futile” (Lam 4:17; Eccl 1:2, 14; 2:1, 14-15), (2) breath/vapor/wind is transitory and fleeting—thus, the connotation “fleeting” or “transitory” (Prov 31:30; Eccl 6:12; 7:15; 9:9; 11:10; Job 7:16) and (3) breath/vapor/wind cannot be seen thus, the idea of “obscure,” “dark,” “difficult to understand,” “enigmatic” (Eccl 11:10). See HALOT 236-37 s.v. הֶבֶל; BDB 210-11 s.v. הֶבֶל.

The metaphorical sense is used with the following synonyms: תֹהוּ (tohu, “empty, vanity”; Isa 49:4), רִיק (riq, “profitless, useless”; Isa 30:7; Eccl 6:11), and לֹא הוֹעִיל (lo’ ho’il, “worthless, profitless”; Is 30:6; 57:12; Jer 16:19). It is parallel to “few days” and “[days] which he passes like a shadow” (Eccl 6:12). It is used in reference to youth and vigor (11:10) and life (6:12; 7:15; 9:9), which are “transitory” or “fleeting.”

The most common parallels to הֶבֶל in Ecclesiastes are the phrases “chasing after the wind” (רָעוּת רוּחַ, r’ut ruakh) in 2:11, 17, 26; 7:14 and “what profit?” (מַה יִּתְרוֹן, mah yitron) or “no profit” (אֵין יִתְרוֹן, ’en yitron) in 2:11; 3:19; 6:9. It is used in reference to enigmas in life (6:2; 8:10, 14) and to the future which is obscure (11:8).

It is often used in antithesis to terms connoting value: טוֹב (tov, “good, benefit, advantage”) and יִתְרוֹן (yotron, “profit, advantage, gain”). Because the concrete picture of the “wind” lends itself to the figurative connotation “futile,” the motto “This is futile” (זֶה הֶבֶל, zeh hevel) is often used with the metaphor, “like striving after the wind” (רָעוּת רוּחַ, r’ut ruakh)—a graphic picture of an expenditure of effort in vain because no one can catch the wind by chasing it (e.g., 1:14, 17; 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4, 6, 16; 6:9).

Although it is the key word in Ecclesiastes, it should not be translated the same way in every place.



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(Michael S. Heiser)

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<sup>1</sup> This is taken from a book I highly recommend, *Brief Insights on Mastering Bible Study* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), pp.173-174.