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Hebel and the Context of Hellenistic Philosophy

Introduction

Hebel is the most central keyword in the book of Qohelet. Thus, as Sneed notes "… one's translation and understanding of hebel will largely determine one's understanding of the book as a whole. This cannot be emphasized enough!"[1] However, Sneed forgot to mention the reverse, probably more important state of affairs, that most likely one's understanding of the book as a whole will largely determine one's translation and understanding of hebel. Either way, pressed for a translation the interpreter of this complicated book is already forced to show much of his hand.

Of the 73 attestations of hebel in the Hebrew Bible, as much as 38 are found in Qohelet.[2] The importance of the word is highlighted not only through its frequency, but also through its location in central places in the composition. After the introductory verse 1:1, a cluster of hebels are thrown at the reader/hearer right at the beginning of the exposition, stressing also the evocative function of the word. Verse 1:2 appears again, in a slightly less intensive form, in 12:8, forming an inclusio with 1:2.[3]

This paper focuses on the possible connotations of hebel from the viewpoint of Hellenistic philosophy. This is an often-neglected aspect in the discussion of the best way to understand its meaning for Qohelet. Before turning to Hellenistic philosophy, I will present a brief overview of the use of hebel in the OT outside Qohelet and then some main lines how hebel has been understood in the book of Qohelet.

Points for discussion: Are the proposed connections to Hellenistic philosophy plausible? Can we find other possible connections? How much significance can we attach to the openness of hebel in 1:2 in comparison with the rest of the book?

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[1] M.Sneed, *The Politics of Pessimism in Ecclesiastes,* SBL, 2012, 155.

[2] As the numerical value of hbl is 37, some commentators, most notably Wright, have seen a correspondence between the numerical value and the occurrences of the word in the book, usually regarding 5:6 as secondary. See A.G.Wright, *Additional Numerical Patterns in Qohelet*, CBQ 45/1, 1983, 32-43 and C-L Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, AB 18C, 1997, 44-45, for a critique of Wright.

[3] 12:8 seems to have a double function in forming an inclusio with both 11:7 and 1:2.

1. Hebel in the Hebrew Bible outside Qohelet

Surveying the material, it appears that hebel occurs more frequently in later texts. Seybold has outlined four usages of hebel outside Qohelet.[4] 1. Significantly, hbl, Abel, features as the name of the second son of Adam and Eve in Gen 4. Considering the connections of Qoh to Gen[5], I consider it likely that the story of Abel (and Cain) in Gen 4 is reflected in the book of Qohelet, maybe as one of many allusions.[6] The name can most likely be connected to the idea of transitoriness and fleeting character of existence. 2. In statements expressing worthlessness. Hebel may have a strictly concrete meaning, as in Isa 57:13 or Prov 13:11, 21:6. More often, however, the figurative use passes over into abstract evaluation: “Man is like a breath, his days are like a passing shadow” (Ps 144:4). 3. Expressing the sentiments of the lamenter. Of particular interest are Pss 39:6-7 and 62:10-11, displaying also thematic similarities with Qohelet, cf. Qoh 6:12; transience, shadowlike existence and attachment to material possessions (passim). In what Seybold has identified as a lament context, hebel often takes the meaning of transience or fleetingness, this is certainly the case also in Qoh 6:12, 7:15, 9:9. 4. In the Deuteronomistic polemic against foreign Gods. In verses like Jer 2:5, 8:19, 1 Kings 16:13,26, 2 Kings 17:15, Dt 32:21, hebel found its place in religious polemic.

The usages that Seybold has identified cannot be grouped neatly in four distinct categories. Clearly, in the polemic against foreign Gods, the idea of worthlessness is also present. The idea of fleetingness also occurs strongly in all usages mentioned by Seybold.

Qohelet’s distinct use of hebel need not be dictated by the earlier use of the word in the Hebrew Bible. However, it forms a kind of semantic starting point, from which Qohelet develops his characteristic leitwort further. Schwienhorst-Schönberger, stressing the narrative aspect, concludes that the reader/hearer of 1:2, not yet knowing the directions Qohelet will take, will have entered the word with an understanding of it based on this context.[7] Schwienhorst-Schönberger’s focus on the narrative aspect and the preliminary understanding of the readers is illuminating. However, as I will argue in this paper, confining himself in this respect to the biblical material might be a too limited approach.

2. Interpreting hebel in Qohelet

Before turning to the Hellenistic philosophies, I will present a selective overview of different interpretations of hebel in Qohelet.

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[4] K.Seybold, TDOT 3, 1978, 315-318.

[5] See L. Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *“Nicht im Menschen gründet das Glück” (Koh 2:24). Kohelet im Spannungsfeld jüdischer Weisheit und Hellenistischer Philosophie*, HBS 2, Freiburg:Herder, 1996, and B.Maurer, *The Book of Ecclesiastes as a Derash of Gen 1-4.* PhD dissertation, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2007.

[6] For a stronger connection, with Abel, as a direct referent, for some of the occurrences of hebel in Qohelet, see e.g. R.Meeks, *The Meaning of Hebel in Ecclesiastes in Light of Qohelet’s Inner-Biblical Use of Genesis*. PhD dissertation, Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2014.

[7] Schwienhorst-Schönberger, 1996, 16-17.

Through its history of interpretation, hebel has, alongside its concrete meaning of breath or vapour, been understood in an abstract or metaphorical way.[8] The LXX uses a variety of terms to translate hebel; kenos Job 7:16, kataigis Isa 57:13, eidola Jer 16:19 and maten Ps 38:7, 39:7. However, in Qoh exclusively mataiotes, 'emptiness', 'transitory', 'vanity', 'breath', is used. The use of one word only may reflect the recognition of hebel as a leitwort for Qohelet. Theodotion, Symmachus and Aquila, on the other hand, translate as atmos, 'vapour', 'steam', leaving less room for a metaphorical interpretation.[9]

In the Vulgate, Jerome translated hebel with 'vanitas' ('vanity', 'emptiness', 'falsity', 'futility'). Vanitas lacks the connotations of temporality and the concrete imagery of breath. While early Jewish interpreters mainly understood hebel in its metaphorical sense of temporality or brevity, early Christian interpreters understood it primarily as a value judgement. 'Vanity' became the dominant interpretation for one and a half millennium and reduced the meaning of hebel predominantly to a lack of value.[10]

In the twentieth and twenty-first century we have a much wider variety and disagreement of interpretation.[11] One suggestion, that seems to arouse strong emotions for and against, is the translation of hebel as absurd. This solution is championed by Fox, followed e.g. by Michel ('sinnlos') and Schoors.[12] According to Fox, the absurd arises from the comparison or tension between reality and an expectation. However, the fact that hebel outside Qoh never is used in the sense of 'absurd', as Sneed notes[13], must count for something, even if Qohelet uses the word in his own distinctive way.

Comparing with the other occurrences in the Hebrew Bible, it is clear that Qohelet uses hebel in a highly idiosyncratic way. At the same time his use of the word seems to be marked by a high degree of ambiguity.[14] This ambiguity is not a result of ambivalence or haphazardness. It is mainly intentional, corresponding to the numerous ambiguities in the book at large. This ambiguity and Qohelet's enigmatic way of using hebel is the main reason for the existence of numerous interpretative models for understanding the word, as well as numerous different individual translations of hebel. According to Seybold, Qohelet uses the word in a way that shows that he is aware of all the possible meanings and connotations it has in the OT.[15]

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[8] For an overview, see G.Vruggink, *Hbl in Ecclesiastes: Abel as Symbol Referent*, 2016, 4-21, https://www.academia.edu/27815844/_%D7%94%D7%91%D7%9C_IN_ECCLESIASTES_ABEL_AS_SYMBOL_REFERENT

[9] R. Meeks, *Twentieth- and Twenty-first-century Readings of Hebel in Ecclesiastes,* CBR 14, 2016, 280.

[10] Meeks, 2016, 280-284.

[11] For a useful overview, see Meeks 2016.

[12] M.V.Fox, *The Meaning of Hebel for Qohelet*, JBL 105, 409-27. D.Michel, *Untersuchungen zur Eigenart des Buches Qohelet,* BZAW 183, Berlin: de Gruyter, 40-51. A.Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, HCOT, Leuven: Peeters, 2013.

[13] Sneed 2012, 163.

[14] See also D.Ingram, *Ambiguity in Ecclesiastes,* LHBOTS 431, London: T&T Clark, *2006*, 109.

[15] Seybold 1978, 318.

It is the assumption of this paper, that Qohelet uses hebel in a plurivalent way. Further, I will apply the idea of multiple allusions. That is, not only may hebel have different meanings in individual contexts, it may also allude to different ideas and meanings simultaneously.[16] Allusion will here be understood as an intentional and implicit reference.[17]

Universal or anthropological hebel?

According to Braun, comparing with the preceding literature, we can see a shift towards a more anthropological interpretation of hebel in Qohelet. The implied meaning of emptiness or nothingness (Nichtigkeit) is here no longer applied to the description of foreign Gods, but to the human condition. Braun nevertheless acknowledges also a cosmological meaning for hebel, reflecting the empiricism of the Hellenistic philosophical schools.[18]

It is important to notice the all-encompassing nature of hebel in 12:8, but particularly in 1:2. An important question concerns the interpretation of what 'ha-kol' in 1:2 signifies. Amir equates the determinative ha-kol with *to pan*, in Greek philosophy signifying universe.[19] Lohfink has critically examined Amir's thesis. Lohfink concluded, that ha-kol nowhere in the Hebrew Bible outside Qohelet has the meaning of an all-encompassing concept with a similar meaning to *to pan*. Lohfink then investigates all occurrences of ha-kol in Qoh and concludes that except for 1:2 and 12:8 it cannot function as an all-encompassing cosmological concept. According to Lohfink, all occurrences of hebel, except 1:2 and 12:8, clearly belong in the anthropological sphere. Hence the ha-kol hebel in 12:8 cannot be interpreted in any other way. Remains the case of 1:2. While Lohfink acknowledges the openness of 1:2, he sees the immediately following sentence '*mah jitron la-adam bekol amalo sheja'amol tahat hashamesh'* as pointing to an anthropological interpretation and thus as the most suitable also for 1:2.[20]

Schwienhorst-Schönberger also points out the openness of ha-kol hebel in 1:2. 1:3 seems to point in an anthropological direction, as does 1:4a, while 1:4b '*weha'arets le-olam omadet'* takes a cosmological turn. Before the cosmological poem in 1:4-11 there are yet no secure clues to the question on the object of ha-kol. Schwienhorst-Schönberger rejects, however, the interpretation of 1:2 as "everything is absurd".[21]

It is evident, that hebel in Qohelet is first and foremost connected to human action and experience. I think, however, that a cosmological connotation cannot

[16] Methodologically, this is close to the ideas expressed in D.Miller, *Symbol and Rhetoric in Ecclesiastes: The Place of Hebel in Qohelet's Work,* Academia Biblica 2, Atlanta: SBL, 2002.

[17] See W.Kynes, *My Psalm has turned into weeping: Job's Dialogue with the Psalms.* BZAW 473, Berlin: de Gruyter 2012, 30.

[18] R.Braun, *Kohelet und die frühhellenistische Popularphilosophie,* BZAW 130, Berlin: de Gruyter, 45-46.

[19] Y.Amir, *Doch ein griechischer Einfluss auf das Buch Kohelet?*, in *Studien zum antiken Judentum* (BEAT 2), Frankfurt 1985, 35-50.

[20] N.Lohfink, *Koh 1,2, "alles ist Windhauch" – universale oder anthropologische Aussage?* in R.Mosis and L.Ruppert (eds.), *Der Weg zum Menschen: zur philosophischen und theologischen Anthropologie für Alfons Deissler*, Freiberg: Herder, 1989, 201-216.

[21] Schwienhorst-Schönberger 1996, 16-17.

be completely excluded, particularly in 1:2. Even if hebel doesn't occur in 1:4-11, the centrally located cosmological poem shows that cosmological reflections were not irrelevant to Qohelet.

Hebel as humour

In Qohelet, as elsewhere, the connotations of hebel are predominantly negative. Qohelet himself is mostly considered a gloomy fellow. However, Qohelet's ironical capabilities have been largely acknowledged.[22] I think that also the outright humorous aspect of hebel should not be overlooked. An example of this could be Jarick's translation of ha-kol hebel as "everything is nothing"!, also noting the similarity in appearance in Hebrew between ha-kol and hebel.[23] Zimmerman offers 'flatulence' as a translation of hebel.[24]

Below I will suggest, that Qohelet utilizes the negative connotations of hebel combined with the different possible meanings of the word to create a humorous effect.

3. Hebel and Hellenistic philosophy

Considering how heavily the meaning and use of hebel in Qohelet is scrutinized, from many different angles, it is surprising how sparsely the word and its possible connotations to Hellenistic philosophy are analyzed, even in expositions presupposing a significant influence of Hellenistic thinking on the book. In the following, I will consider various central ideas and concepts in Hellenistic philosophy that might be contained in hebel as allusions.

Hebel and the literary genre of Qohelet

Before starting with individual ideas and concepts, we may briefly consider the overall structure and composition of the book. Defining the literary genre of Qohelet has proven to be a complex task. While many suggestions, like royal testament/fiction, collection of sayings etc., have some merit, they all seem to face the same problem, namely that they seem to be applicable only to parts of the book, but hardly to all the content of the book as a whole.[25]

In 1912 Levy drew attention to the resemblance between the text of Qohelet and the Cynic-Stoic *diatribe*. Later Lohfink and Schwienhorst-Schönberger have picked up and developed Levy's idea.[26] The diatribe as a literary genre is very elusive and hard to define more strictly. Characteristic features for the diatribe include a

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[22] For the humorous aspects of the book, see É.Levine, *The Humour in Qohelet*, ZAW 109, 1997, 71-83 and J.Jarick, *Ecclesiastes among the Comedians*, in K.Dell and W.Kynes (eds.), *Reading Ecclesiastes Intertextually*, London: T. & T. Clark 2014, 176-188.

[23] J.Jarick, *The Hebrew book of Changes: Reflections on Hakkol Hebel and Lakkol Z'man in Ecclesiastes*, JSOT 90 2000, 79-83.

[24] F.Zimmerman, *The Inner World of Qohelet: With Translation and Commentary*, New York: KTAV, 1973, 131.

[25] For a survey of the discussion on the literary genre of the book, see L.Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet*, HThKAT, 2004, 54-64.

[26] L.Levy, *Das Buch Qoheleth. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Sadduzäismus, Leipzig 1912,* 59*,* N.Lohfink, Kohelet, NEB, Würzburg, 2/1980, Schwienhorst-Schönberger 1996.

dialogical character, rhetorical speech, the emphasis of the I of the narrator, use of simile.[27] For our present purposes, we may specifically note two features of the diatribe. The first is the fluidity and diversity of different literary devices. That is, the diatribe can easily include, e.g., prose and poetry, narrative and direct speech merging into each other. The second, and more important feature, is the development of a specific central theme, usually announced at the beginning of the exposition. It is then presented in manifold contexts, highlighting different aspects and connotations of this particular theme. In the book of Qohelet, hebel functions exactly as such a key theme.

Hebel and tyfos

In his important book from 1912, Levy suggested that Qohelet's hebel was directly modeled on the Cynic *tyfos*. Levy renders tyfos as illusion, pointing to the inability to distinguish between the real and illusory value of things. Levy also points to the more literal meanings of tyfos; vapour, mist, impalpable, then figuratively vain, hollow, self-important. According to Levy, both the literal and figurative meaning of hebel, as Qohelet uses it, corresponds to tyfos and the way it was used by the Cynics. Levy further draws attention to the closely connected expression of hebel, re'ut ruah, which he likens to the kene doxa, the empty opinion, the closely connected expression of tyfos for the Cynics. Re'ut ruah Levy understands as 'desire of the spirit', 'imagination', rather than the more literal meaning 'chasing after the wind'. According to Levy, Qohelet took the programmatic pursuit of the Cynics, to expose the hollowness of traditional values, as the starting point for his philosophical reflections.[28] It should also be noted, that the Cynics didn't use tyfos primarily in the epistemological sense, but rather to underline the practical orientation in distinguishing between real and 'illusory' values.

Braun approves of Levy's suggestion and points also to the occurrence of tyfos in the popular Hellenistic culture. Braun further points to the saying *tyfon einai pan*, 'everything is mist' by the Cynic Monimos, according to Menander as reported by Diogenes Laertius VI.83.[29]

Hebel and the natural elements

Already Ibn Ezra, in his commentary on Qohelet, suggested that the opening cosmological poem in 1:4-11 reflected the Greek concept of natural elements. Qohelet's mention of the earth, sun, wind and sea correspond to the elements earth, fire, air and water as the basic components of the cosmos.

The notion of the four elements goes back to Empedocles. Of course Empedocles himself stood in a longer tradition, beginning with the Ionian natural philosophers. Famously, the supposed saying of Thales, "everything is water" is often seen as the beginning of all subsequent western philosophy.

Anaximenes posited air-vapour as the primal natural element. The Stoics divided the four elements in active; fire and air, and passive; earth and water. Drawing heavily on Heraclitus, fire occupied a special governing place in Stoic cosmology,

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[27] See Schwienhorst-Schönberger 1996, 247-248.

[28] Levy 1912, 12-13.

[29] Braun 1973, 45-46.

both as a craftsmanlike (pyr technikon) and an uncraftsmanlike element (pyr atechnikon).

The extent of knowledge of Greek thinking in 3rd century Judea is still an open question. Even if we take a very cautious stand on the matter, the teachings of the natural elements as basic components of the cosmos could be expected to be familiar even to a larger set of people, not only the superintellectuals of the day.

If Qohelet is alluding to teachings on natural elements already in 1:2, especially in the exclamation ha-kol hebel, it clearly has a polemical ring. At the outset of the book, the author pictures a caricature of a philosopher, possessed by his curious idea that everything could be explained through one single element. The idea is easy to ridicule, especially without any reference to the deeper concomitant philosophical presuppositions of the natural philosophers. The joke is made possible by the fact that hebel, in its literal meaning, could be identified as a natural element simultaneously with its more metaphorical meaning or meanings.

Is Qohelet applying here the literary device spoudaiogeloion, 'seriocomic', featuring especially in Cynic writings? Spoudaiogeloion is not a literary genre in itself, but certainly a typical feature of the diatribe. According to Dawson, it is a pervasive technique of making serious points in a humorous fashion, especially through the parody of serious literature and mythology. Incidentally, according to Diogenes Laertius 6.83, Monimos wrote *paignia* that were "mixed with hidden seriousness".[30]

It should also be noted, that Epicurus rejected the teaching of the natural elements as elementary and foundational components of the cosmos in toto, effectively replacing them with his atomistic theory.

If Qohelet alludes to the long Greek tradition of explaining cosmological reality with natural elements, it certainly cannot be central for the understanding of his use of hebel. Cosmological reflections play a certain role for Qohelet, but do not seem to be at the core of his exposition. The possible allusion to the natural elements would mainly work only in 1:2. Considering the openness of 1:2 from a narrative perspective as to the meaning of hebel, this could have been recognized by Qohelet's audience as a joke. We can also assume, that Monimos' 'tyfon pan einai' most certainly contained a scornful allusion to theories about natural elements.

Hebel and the question of void

Void, nothingness and emptiness have all been suggested as translations of hebel.[31] The existence or nonexistence of void was a dividing question between

[30] See D.Dawson *Cities of the Gods: Communist Utopias in Greek Thought*, Oxford University Press, 1992, 118-119.

the Stoics and the Epicureans. The Stoics denied the existence of void in the cosmos, everything is body and only bodies have being.

One of the basic assumptions of Epicurean physics was, that everything consists of either body or void. The void is not however ‘parasitic’ on body, but is able to coexist with body. The void is not non-being. However, it cannot be recognized by the senses, it is an ‘untouchable substance’ (anafes ousia).

Epicurus seems to have used ‘void’ (kenon), ‘space’ (khora) and ‘place’ (topos) more or less interchangeably. It has often been maintained, that he failed to distinguish between empty and occupied space. Epicurus seems to think however, that void can be occupied by body without ceasing to exist. It does so, not as ‘void’, but as ‘place’. The point seems to be that all void is potentially place and all place is potentially void. Any part of the universe is potentially void at any time.[32]

Gammie, exploring possible connections between Qohelet’s use of hebel and Stoic philosophy, refers to the Stoics teaching that there is an infinite void outside the cosmos and no void inside. However, he connects it to their catalogue on virtues necessary for the good life, listing amataiotes, “lack of emptiness”, “lack of emptyheadedness” as one of them. According to Gammie, Qohelet chose to latch on to a notion that could be recognized by his informed audience to be counter to Stoicism.[33]

If there is a connection between Qohelet’s hebel and Hellenistic conceptions about void, we could again easily recognize the polemical nature of hebel, with a clearly humorous tone. It would also reflect the polemical gibing between Stoics and Epicureans, on void as well as other matters. On a cosmological level, this would draw on the Epicurean understanding on the all-pervasive existence of void versus the Stoic notion that everything is body. However, also this reference would mainly work in 1:2, not the rest of the book (for the exception maybe of 6:4, but this is highly unlikely). Also, the technical and abstract nature of the question on void and body casts doubts on void as a reference even in 1:2. However, Qohelet might here, as elsewhere, play with easily recognizable popular beliefs, not engage in a deep technical philosophical debate.

If Gammie is to be trusted, the polemical intent could work also on an anthropological level. However, even if there is a tight connection in Stoic theory between the physical and the ethical, connecting the cosmological kenos with an ethical imperative, expressed by a completely different word, ‘amataiotes’, makes his argument strenuous at best, even if it happens to match the rendering of hebel as mataiotes in the LXX. Here, as elsewhere, Gammie’s thought seems to be faster than his pen, and he makes no argument whatsoever why kenos and amataiotes should be connected.

[31] See e.g. É.Levine, *The Humour in Qohelet*, ZAW 109, 1997, 71-83 and K.Ehlich, *Hebel – Metaphern der Nichtigkeit*, in A.A.Diesel, R.G.Lehmann, E.Otto and A.Wagner (eds.), *‘Jedes Ding hat seine Zeit…’: Studien zur israelitischen und altorientalischen Weisheit: Diethelm Michel zum 65. Geburtstag*, BZAW 241, 1996, 49-64. In the Swedish Bible translation from 2000, ‘vanity’ was replaced by ‘emptiness’.

[32] J.Rist, *Epicurus. An Introduction.* Cambridge University Press 1972, 56-57; D.Sedley, *Hellenistic Physics and Metaphysics,* in *The Cambridge History of Hellenistic Philosophy*, eds. K.Algra, J.Barnes, J.Mansfeld, M.Schofield, Cambridge University Press 1999.

[33] J.Gammie, *Stoicism and Anti-Stoicism in Qohelet*, HAR 1985, 179-180, with references.

Hebel and the Stoic pneuma

Pneuma is a central concept in Stoic metaphysical, and even psychological theory. The exact translation of pneuma in a Stoic context is debated. Not going too deeply in this discussion, we may note some proposals; breath, wind, gas, spirit. As it is considered as a combination of the active elements fire and air, it is sometimes also described as a fiery breath.

Pneuma is the basic physical component of the Stoic universe. It acts as a cohesive force both in man and universe, on an individual and cosmological level. The world in itself was also seen as a living being. According to Stoic metaphysical theory, being is divided in that which acts and that which is acted upon. Pneuma is the active principle and can be equated with world soul or God.

Because of the close similarity in the literal meaning between pneuma and hebel and the all-encompassing nature and function of pneuma, we might consider an allusion to the Stoic conception of pneuma in 1:2. The purpose would then undoubtedly be to ridicule the highly technical and difficult Stoic theoretic construction. However, the joke would work only in 1:2, again playing with the literal and more metaphorical meanings of hebel.

A case, perhaps more serious in tone, could be made for 3:19. Pneuma was the active force also in plants and animals, pervading each thing, whether inanimate, a plant or an animal. However, at death only the human soul or pneuma, contrary to the pneuma in the irrational animals, withdraws from the body to survive for a certain time.[34] According to Chrysippus, only the souls of the virtuous survive. Rist assumes that Chrysippus thought that the erratic vibrations of the souls of ordinary men could not hold the soul together long after bodily death. The world in general, and the soul of the world moves through and ordered and rational cycle of events, and it is conceivable that an individual rational soul would be in harmony with that movement, while an irrational would not.[35]

However, it is doubtful whether Qohelet here would allude to ideas connected specifically to pneuma, than rather more generally to the likeness or difference of humans and animals, which was a dividing question between the Stoics and the Epicureans.

Hebel and adiaphora

In his Nicomachean Ethics Aristotle had considered happiness the highest good for man. In the Hellenistic philosophies the eudaimonistic emphasis is even intensified. The quest for happiness is the underlying question and the ultimate goal of all philosophy.[36]

Two differences in comparison with Aristotle can be noted. For Aristotle ethics was subordinated to politics. The questions about the well-being and right conduct of man was seen through the background of his role as a citizen in the

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[34] A.A.Long, *Stoic psychology,* in *The Cambridge History of Hellenistic Philosophy*, eds. K.Algra, J.Barnes, J.Mansfeld, M.Schofield, Cambridge University Press 1999, 561.

[35] J.Rist, *Stoic Philosophy*, London: Cambridge University Press, 1969, 93-95.

[36] According to Schwienhorst-Schönberger, 1996, 246, eudaimonia is also the central theme in the book of Qohelet. Schwienhorst-Schönberger argues forcefully, that Qohelet picked up the theme from Hellenistic philosophy.

polis. In the Hellenistic philosophies we can note a radical shift to an individualistic thinking.

Secondly, Aristotle had considered virtuous action according to reason as central for eudaimonia. Besides that, Aristotle considered some amount of external goods as a prerequisite for happiness, for example health, friends and at least a certain amount of wealth. The Hellenistic philosophers took one radical step further. Finding the idea that happiness was dependent on external circumstances unsatisfactory, they declared that (almost) all external goods were indifferent, *adiaphora*. Eudaimonia was dependent solely on man's own mental disposition and was to be reached through own strength. The extremity of this position can be seen in the statement, that the wise man is happy even while being tortured.[37] It is easy to see that the notion of adiaphora and the individualism of Hellenistic philosophy goes hand in hand.

The extent and classification of things that counted as adiaphora was a debated issue particularly in Stoicism.[38] A list of indifferent things is given by Diogenes Laertius VII.102: life and death, health and illness, pleasure and discomfort, good looks and ugliness, physical strength and weakness, wealth and poverty, good and bad reputation, high and low birth; further in VII.106: natural ability, skill, even moral progress and their opposites. As if not enough, Diogenes Laertius concludes this second list with an additional 'etc'.

Qohelet also builds up an impressive list of what can be considered hebel. Seybold notes that the dominant use of hebel in a nominal statement shows that it also for Qohelet serves a purpose of evaluation, or *devaluation*, with critic-polemic intentions. The totality of human activity 1:14, 2:17, Qohelet's own work 2:11, all living things 3:19, the future and youth 11:8,10, striving after wisdom 2:15 (1:17), laughter and pleasure 2:2, the life work of the wise 2:19, 21, 23, 26, energy exerted by the skillful 4:4, wealth 4:8, 5:9, the career of the wise 4:16, zeal 6:9, criticism of the wise, 7:6, decisions by the mighty 8:10, confidence in the law of just retribution 8:14 can all be characterized by hebel.[39] 14 times the expression gam-seh/hu-hebel is repeated 2:1,15,19,21,23,26, 4:4,8,16, 5:9, 6:9, 7:6, 8:10,14. And as if not enough, in 1:2 and 12:8 we are told that 'everything' is hebel. While of course not identical, comparing the lists I think the similarity between what Qohelet targets as hebel and the things that were customarily singled out as adiaphora, particularly in Stoic philosophy, is notable. The respective lists can be seen to comprise the totality of human concern and striving.

Things indifferent constitute the huge class between what is good and bad. Among indifferents, apart from utterly meaningless things as whether the number of hairs on one's head is odd or even, the Stoics distinguished between preferred and dispreferred things, which could be described as having positive or negative value. Preferred indifferents are 'according to nature'. For Qohelet, wisdom, though hebel, seems to have a relative value 1:13-14.[40]

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[37] Diogenes Laertius 10.22.

[38] 'Things' here understood as objects of human concern. See B.Inwood, *Stoic Ethics*, in *The Cambridge History of Hellenistic Philosophy*, eds. K.Algra, J.Barnes, J.Mansfeld, M.Schofield, Cambridge University Press 1999, 691.

[39] See Seybold, 1978, 319.

Adiaphora is a relative concept. What makes a difference or is indifferent can only be understood with respect to something else. The indifferents are things which make no contribution to a happy or unhappy life.[41] The road to happiness consists for the Stoic in the virtuous life. For Qohelet, the best bet to achieve happiness is to enjoy the creation in the thisworldly life to the fullest. Thus, the carpe diem theme of Qohelet is never considered hebel. As Lohfink points out, neither are the works of God ever valued as hebel.[42] As the carpe diem motive is clearly connected to Qohelet's creation theology, the character of life as a gift from God is emphasized. Here we may also see the different preconditions of Qohelet compared to the more individualistic Hellenistic philosophy. What Qohelet shares with the Hellenistic philosophers, however, is the understanding of happiness clearly as a subjective experience, mainly unconnected to externals. Only by understanding that not only (the temporary) life and the whole (lasting) creation is a gift from God, but also the enabling to enjoy the creation, can man distinguish between what is hebel and what is not.

Assuming the notion of adiaphora as a background to the use of hebel in Qohelet could make sense in almost every single occurrence in the book. Even in 6:4, 7:15, 9:9 this could be a possible interpretation, considering that even life and death could be considered as adiaphora.[43]

Hebel, re'ut ruah and Stoic epistemology

Gammie makes an interesting suggestion concerning the expression re'ut ruah, "a grasping after the wind", and its possible reference to Stoic epistemology. Zeno had illustrated his theory of knowledge with a famous simile. His open hand signified the impression, and the partly closed hand the assent to that impression. The clenched fist signified cognition. Cognition was within reach for the wise man and the fool alike. However, firm or scientific knowledge, which Zeno illustrated by the other hand grasping the clenched fist, was available only for the wise, being able to distinguish between true knowledge and mere opinion. The third stage, the closed fist, Zeno called katalepsis, literally 'grasping'. In contrast, Gammie sees Qohelet as asserting that everything is ungraspable, a grasping after the wind.[44] Hebel and re'ut ruah Gammie understands almost synonymically.[45] In this case, the interpretation of hebel and re'ut ruah would be mainly epistemological.

In 1:13 Qohelet set out with his mind,lb, to search ,drsh, and investigate ,twr, with wisdom everything that happens under the sun. Maybe something of the seriousness, with which epistemological issues were treated in Hellenistic philosophy in general, is reflected in the search for wisdom by Qohelet, constantly reflecting over his observations. Gammie groups Qohelet

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[40] Cf. also the *tob*-sayings in ch 7.

[41] Inwood 1999, 692.

[42] Lohfink, 1989, 213-214.

[43] In my OTSEM paper from last year I argue, however, that life, or death, is not indifferent for Qohelet.

[44] Rist 1969, 133-145 and Gammie, 1985, 180

[45] Gammie, 1985, 178-179.

epistemologically with the Cynics and the Skeptics of the Academy.[46] It is unlikely, however, that Qohelet would comment on the epistemological controversies between the Stoics and the Skeptics of the Academy. However, the possibility cannot be excluded, that he is reacting against a Stoic positivistic epistemology. The Stoics equated nature and logos with God. Having true knowledge of nature was to partake in the divine logos. Hence the fact, that the Stoics believed in divination, will not come as a surprise. On the contrary, Qohelet pronounces the transcendence of God 5:1 and states that man does not understand his works 3:11. And he will not know what will be after him 6:12.

Gammie's hypothesis is severely weakened by the fact, that most instances of hebel, without or in connection with re'ut ruah, do not seem to have any particular epistemological connotations. With a stretch of imagination 2:15 and 2:26, but also these verses address more the question of the worth of wisdom than its epistemological prerequisites. Considering the 'grasping of the wind', only in 1:17, with rajon ruah, but without hebel, an epistemological interpretation seems possible. Thus the conclusion must be, that if Qohelet is commenting on Stoic epistemology, there seems to be no direct connection to the use of hebel in this respect.

4. Translating hebel

Translating hebel has proven to be a complicated task. The easy way out would be to transliterate the word, but this is hardly a satisfactory solution in a Bible translation. One problem is to find a balance between the different meanings of hebel and its function as a leitwort. Both solutions, using the same translation in all instances, or using various translations according to the context, have their obvious advantages and shortcomings. If we apply the interpretative model with multiple allusions, the task is even further complicated. Not only would we like to change the translation from case to case, but perhaps also apply more than one translation in many individual instances. As the complexity of hebel makes it difficult to master the word even with various translations, it is best to opt for a single translation, recognizing at least the leitwort character of hebel, as is of course the case in most Bible translations. This is not to resign before the difficulty of the task, but rather to emphasize the distinction between translating and interpreting hebel.

Deciding on the translation, a word that is sufficiently inclusive and open to the different meanings and underlying connotations of hebel should be chosen. This is best served by a concrete meaning of the word, be it 'breath', 'vapour' or 'puff of wind'.[47] This is of course not a novel strategy.[48] The more complex our understanding of hebel, the more tempting this solution will be.

5. Conclusions

[46] Gammie, 1985, 180.

[47] Lohfink, Schwienhorst-Schönberger: Windhauch. Buber: Dunst.

[48] See Meeks 2016, where, incidentally, the Hellenistic context is not mentioned at all.

In this paper, I have tried to show some possible connections and allusions of Qohelet's hebel to Hellenistic philosophy. However, some caution is required. It must be admitted, that all the connections proposed here are somewhat speculative. In a way we are back where we started. If we disregard the Hellenistic philosophical discourses as an influence for Qohelet, we can easily dismiss these suggestions as nonsense, maybe with the exception of an allusion, albeit unlikely, to the theories of natural elements of pre-Socratic philosophy. However, if we assume that Qohelet is engaged in a dialogue with philosophical ideas current in more or less all the Mediterranean in the late 3rd century BCE, comments upon them critically or takes a defensive stance towards them, we should consider a 'Hellenistic' reading also of his key concept hebel.

Another concern is of course the question about Qohelet's audience. Even if we grant a significant amount of sophistication and erudition to himself, can we expect the same from his readers/hearers? Qohelet is said to have "taught the people" 12:9. However this may be, his book is most probably intended more for the elite than the common people.[49] Dating the book in the late 3rd century, we can already expect a knowledge of Greek culture and thinking by the intelligentsia and the upper classes. The book is philosophical in character, but it is not a technical philosophical treatise. Qohelet rather alludes to catchwords and popular beliefs in Hellenistic philosophy, not seldom in a playful way. The ease at which this is done betrays a deeper knowledge on his part.[50]

It has not been my intention to argue for the replacement of more standard interpretations of hebel with Hellenistic ones. Instead, I have argued that Qohelet uses hebel in a plurivalent and allusive way and sometimes plays with the different, literal and metaphorical meanings it may contain. Taking notion of the Hellenistic context adds up to this complexity. According to Webb 'it is a mistake to try to nail this word down, as though one "right" meaning could be found in it for Ecclesiastes'.[51]

In this paper I have treated 1:2, and the openness of the meaning of hebel, as a special case. The possible allusions to the natural elements or the Stoic pneuma would mainly work in this opening verse in the narrative. The same goes for void in the Epicurean cosmological sense. While Qohelet may take a critical stand against Stoic epistemology, the connection to hebel or even re'ut ruah in this respect remains unclear at best. What is significant, however, is that all of these suggestions could work as an anti-Stoic polemic.[52]

The strongest candidates for a connection between hebel and Hellenistic philosophy seem to be the concepts tyfos and adiaphora, for obvious reasons. The devaluation of traditional values and vain human striving implied in these concepts could be retained throughout in the book in Qohelet's use of hebel.[53]

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[49] Thus also many commentators, e.g. Sneed, 2012, 125-154.

[50] Against R.Gordis, *Koheleth, the Man and his World*, TSJTSA 19, New York, 1951, 56 and M.Hengel, *Judentum und Hellenismus,* WUNT 10, Tübingen 1969, 3/1988.

[51] B.G.Webb, *Five Festal Garments: Christian Reflections on the Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes and Esther*, NSBT, Downers Grove Il: InterVarsity Press 2000, 90.

[52] Elsewhere I have argued, that 7:16-20 and 9:1-10 can be identified as anti-Stoic passages.

Tyfos even has a literary affinity with hebel. Both concepts are also strongly connected to the ultimate *telos* of man, his quest for happiness.

[53] Tyfos also has an epistemological aspect, but this seems to be emphasized more in later Hellenistic philosophy.