Ecclesiastes, Fleeting and Timeless

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The book of Ecclesiastes is a philosophical account of the attempt to find happiness by a man who has everything. Written in the name of "Kohelet son of David, King in Jerusalem," the book has traditionally been attributed to Solomon, who reigned during the golden age of Israel's united kingdom, in the tenth century B.C.E. Twelve chapters long, it is one of literature's earliest encounters between faith and reason: The author struggles to believe that life is meaningful despite his experience of the world. The book's inclusion in the Hebrew Bible is therefore remarkable, testifying to Judaism's interest not only in divine revelation, but also in man's exploration of the meaning of life and mortality.

The search for meaning is an eternal one, but the use of Solomon's voice carries special importance for the modern reader.[1] Unlike other biblical Jewish leaders, Solomon lived in a time of unparalleled prosperity and freedom. As opposed to the quest of Job, Solomon's search for wisdom did not arise from a desire to make sense of either personal misfortune or national catastrophe. Indeed, his was a life of unrepentant indulgence: He tempted himself with wine, entertained himself with male and female performers, and amassed untold treasures and hundreds of wives and concubines.

Rather, Kohelet sets out on his inquiry from the perspective of a life replete with fortune and opportunity. He takes as his starting point not revelation, but man's personal need for meaning. In other words, Ecclesiastes is not about what God wants of us, but about what we want for ourselves. This approach may resonate especially strongly with Western readers of today, since few Westerners appreciate doing things simply because they are told, regardless of who does the telling. We moderns are thus in a unique position to identify with Kohelet's quest.

To all appearances, however, it would seem that this search is doomed from the start. Already in the opening passages, Kohelet despairs over what he sees as the futility of life's labors:

> Therefore I hated life, because the deeds that are done under the sun were depressing to me, for all is vanity and grasping for the wind. Then I hated all my work, which I work at under the sun, because I must leave it to the man who will come after me—and who knows whether he will be wise or a fool? Yet he will rule over all my work which I worked at, and contrived, under the sun.… This also is vanity, and a great evil.[2]

Kohelet is disillusioned with life because he believes it is all in vain; he abhors the idea of leaving his life's work behind for someone else to enjoy or to squander. Whereas all the great emperors and kings of old strove to achieve eternal life by erecting grand monuments to themselves, Kohelet understands that such attempts are illusory. He is therefore forced to pose the elementary question: *If I die anyway, why does anything matter?*

Kohelet's first word, however, is not his last. For there are numerous passages in Ecclesiastes that move in the opposite direction. They affirm, for example, the positive value of a joyful life.[3] The same Kohelet who appears to say so often that "all is vanity" also exclaims that "there is nothing better than man rejoicing,"[4] and that "nothing is better for man under the sun than to eat, drink, and be joyful."[5] Kohelet also exhorts his fellow man to "Go, eat your bread with joy, drink your wine with a content mind; for God has already graced your deeds."[6] These bold affirmations of life echo

almost word for word the maxim of Solomon's days, that brief flowering of Jewish renaissance: "Judah and Israel were as numerous as the sand by the sea in multitude; eating and drinking and rejoicing."[7] Similar verses can also be found that affirm the importance of action in this world, as well as the acquisition of wisdom—verses that do not square well with the belief that all is vanity.[8]

Conventional interpretations of Ecclesiastes offer little help in resolving these contradictions.[9] In taking the frustration expressed by Kohelet to its existential extreme, most commentators conclude that he rejects completely the finite nature of life, either by means of a skeptical nihilism or fatalistic moralism. As M. James Sawyer writes, according to Ecclesiastes "Man is compelled to seek for an answer to the meaning of life. It is a task which wearies him and causes him grief and is doomed to ultimate failure."[10] Yet any reading of the book that does not account for its affirmation of joy and wisdom misunderstands the central message of the text. For in truth, Kohelet is neither a determinist nor a nihilist. Rather, he is a profound humanist, valuing both life and the process of learning that makes it worthy of our sincerest efforts.

To be sure, Kohelet was not alone among the ancients to concern himself with the meaning of death and the quest for eternal life. Throughout much of the ancient world, rulers built monumental structures to establish their immortality. The pyramids of ancient Egypt, which aimed to project the "star" of Pharaoh into the eternal sphere of the heavens, are evidence of this.[11] Furthermore, it was common to amass material riches—what archaeologists call "grave goods"—in the hope of transferring them to the world beyond.[12] This practice was prevalent, for example, among the Egyptians, Sumerians, Mayans, and Chinese; indeed, like King Tutankhamun's numerous *shabti* and *ushebti* companions, the Chinese emperor Qin Shi Huang had thousands of life-size clay soldiers buried near his grave in order to ensure victory in his battles in the afterworld.

Thus Kohelet's bold opening—the assertion that such efforts are futile—constitutes the first step of an intellectual revolution. However, having rejected the notion of achieving immortality through material gains, Kohelet must seek another way. One possibility is the negation of life in favor of the world to come, represented in both the Christian and Islamic approaches to immortality by means of richly described afterworlds. The Koran, for example, emphasizes the similarity of heaven to the temporal world: "As for the righteous, they shall surely triumph. Theirs shall be gardens and vineyards, and high-bosomed maidens for companions: a truly overflowing cup."[13] Similarly, Christian scripture includes vivid descriptions of souls in the world to come, much of which were elaborated upon by Dante in his visual descriptions of heaven and hell, and which were captured in the grandiose paintings of Hieronymous Bosch. In all these cases, the afterlife is portrayed as a concrete reality, thus ingrained in its adherents from childhood.

The religions of India and the Far East offer, instead, the idea of reincarnation. They emphasize the immortality of the soul, yet attach little significance to the self-conscious awareness of the reincarnated individual. With the exception of certain rare enlightened beings, immortality is achieved at the expense of identity. Yet one need only look at the elaborate *Tibetan Book of the Dead* to see that the nature of the afterlife is, once again, considered concrete knowledge, and is described—and illustrated, in numerous *mandalas*—in lush detail.[14]

The common denominator of all these doctrines is a detachment from life, a dismissal of material existence in favor of a radically different reality. Judaism, too, shares the idea of the afterlife; however, it is rarely the focus of Jewish practice, and the rabbinic texts avoid engaging in lengthy descriptions of it.[15] By contrast, it is a central feature of the thinking found in Tibet, Mecca, and the Vatican, that by means of constant, detailed attention to the world beyond, this life becomes merely a treacherous pass leading to the next. Indeed, detachment from the world is almost the definition of true piety in some religions, many of which wholeheartedly embrace the

meaninglessness of mortal existence. In these cultures, the more one seeks immortality, the more one detaches oneself from the physical world.

As a result of the prevalence of this asceticism in history, many people, including Jews, have unconsciously become accustomed to seeing everyday life as separate from spiritual existence. And since most of us embrace involvement in the real world, hoping like Kohelet to make our mark in it, we must naturally wonder whether this makes our life less meaningful. In other words, if we focus on earthly reality and worldly wisdom, are we, therefore, necessarily less close to God?

Conventional readings of Ecclesiastes suggest as much. The description of Ecclesiastes provided in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* is a case in point: "The author examines everything—material things, wisdom, toil, wealth—and finds them unable to give meaning to life."[16] And yet, this attitude is at odds not only with numerous passages in the text itself, as cited above, but also with classical Jewish beliefs about the nature of mortality. In fact, visions of the afterlife are discouraged in the biblical narrative, and God is shown to place great value on man's actions in the material world. As such, it seems unlikely that Ecclesiastes' intention is to conclude that our involvement in the world is without meaning.

If we are to make sense of this challenging text, we must read it another way. We should approach it as a text that is part of, and speaks to, a broader biblical tradition. Indeed, to the assembled Israelites of the First Temple period, Kohelet's famous opening line—"Vanity of vanities, all is vanity"—would have been instantly recognizable as an allusion to another text in their unique intellectual heritage: The story of Cain and Abel from the book of Genesis. The most important clue to the mystery of Ecclesiastes, therefore, is found in the striking reference it makes to the Bible's first book.

The central message of Ecclesiastes may be encapsulated in a single word: *Hevel*, usually translated as "vanity."[17] The word appears 38 times in the text, and it is clearly critical to understanding the book's message. It is most commonly understood to mean futility or meaninglessness, or the idea that anything we do is in vain. Yet Hevel is also the Hebrew name of Abel, Cain's brother, the son of Adam and Eve. Therefore we must first remind ourselves of the original text in Genesis to which Kohelet is referring. For the sake of clarity, we will render it using the Hebrew name for Abel:

> Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, "I have acquired a man from the Lord." Then she bore again, this time his brother Hevel. Now *Hevel* was a pastor of sheep, but Cain was a tiller of the ground. And in the process of time it came to pass that Cain brought an offering of the fruit of the ground to the Lord. Hevel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat. And the Lord heeded Hevel and his offering, but he did not heed Cain and his offering. And Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell. So the Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? If you better, you will transcend. And if you do not better, sin lies at the door. And its desire is toward you, and you will be its master." Now Cain said to Hevel—and it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Hevel his brother and killed him.[18]

In light of Kohelet's preoccupation with death, his reference to Abel is striking. Abel is the first human being to die. Just two verses after humankind was denied the tree of eternal life, his story becomes the embodiment of human mortality. It is in this context that we may reread the verses of Ecclesiastes: "Man sets out for his eternal abode, with mourners all around in the street.… And the dust returns to the ground as it was, and the lifebreath returns to God who bestowed it. *Hevel havalim*, says Kohelet. All is *hevel*."[19]

However, Abel's representation of death is only one side of the story. He is also the first human being to offer a sacrifice that God accepts. This is no trifle. A far cry from the guilt of Adam, Eve, and Cain, all of whom were rebuked by God, Abel was the first human whom God clearly likes. Before him, we did not even know it was possible. When we read that "the Lord heeded Hevel and his offering," the verb "heeded," *vayisha*, carries a powerful overtone of deliverance as well as acceptance. Isaiah, for example, declares, "Israel shall be delivered (*nosha*) in the Lord, an eternal salvation (*teshuat*)."[20] Moses, in his very last words on earth, proclaims: "O happy Israel! Who is like you, a people delivered (*nosha*) in the Lord...."[21] Furthermore, God is deliberately accepting, or as the Hebrew connotes, "delivering," not only the offering, but Abel himself. Not until Abraham do we find such unqualified approval by God. Not until the crowning moment of Exodus, as God forged his eternal bond with the people of Israel, is the cognate word for "deliverance," *yeshua*, used again.[22]

In fact, Abel's deliverance is not restricted to that of a single person, either. Through Abel, God offers his first universal explanation of life's calling. By heeding the offering of Abel and not of Cain, God teaches humanity a fundamental law of divine justice, in his response to Cain's vexation: "If you better, you will transcend."[23] Life is not a game of chance.

And yet, who was this man whom God affirmed? Abel's life was too short to allow for the attainment of material success. Nor can he be credited with any innovation: Even the idea of sacrifice was Cain's.[24] Above all, Abel was childless. His life, therefore, left no trace. He walked without footprints.

If we translate Abel's name, *hevel*, as "vanity," as readers of Ecclesiastes have long been accustomed, it is impossible to reconcile the term with Abel's acceptance by God. Indeed, the story of Abel teaches the exact opposite—the possibility of salvation despite the fleeting nature of life. Precisely because of the tragic nature of Abel's interrupted life, we learn its deepest message: In turning one's life into an offering, one is not dependent on any life circumstance, or on any achievements in the material world.

Abel, moreover, carries an additional symbol that works most strongly against a pejorative reading of his name. He is, after all, the paradigmatic shepherd. This is a vivid marker to anyone familiar with the Bible's greatest heroes: Abraham, Isaac, Rachel, and Jacob, as well as Moses and David, are all shepherds. Shepherds are ever mobile, and their presence in the Bible symbolizes the idea of life as a journey, and spirituality as an ongoing quest. In fact, in Ecclesiastes and elsewhere, the image of the shepherd is extended to God, and in the Song of Songs, also attributed to Solomon, the author reserves the role of shepherd for himself. The idea of the roving shepherd has ultimately come to represent the Jewish people as a whole: When, for example, Joseph alludes to the metaphysical divide between the worldviews of Egypt and Israel, he tells his brothers that "all shepherds are abhorrent to Egyptians,"[25] meaning that the Egyptians disdained the spiritual freedom and "unattachment" which shepherds represent, in favor of a Cain-like materialism. The brothers, in turn, proudly tell Pharaoh, "We your servants are shepherds, as were also our fathers."[26] Our fathers, that is, all the way back to Abel. Like the nomadic Abraham, who left behind all that he knew in Ur to establish a new nation in Canaan, our self-identity as a nation of shepherds symbolizes our dynamic historic mission. As such, Abel is the forerunner of this spiritual lineage, and his transient life the inspiration for all those on a quest for enlightenment. [27]

A better reading of *hevel*, then, and one that provides us with an extremely important tool for understanding both Genesis and Ecclesiastes, takes us back to the root meaning of the word: *Vapor* or *mist*. What is important about the life of Abel is not its futility, but its transience. It was as fleeting as a puff of air, yet his life's calling was nonetheless fulfilled.[28]

This, too, is the meaning of *hevel* in Ecclesiastes: Not the dismissive "vanity," but the more objective "transience," referring strictly to mortality and the fleeting nature of human life.[29] "Fleeting transience (*hevel havalim*)," says Kohelet, "All is fleeting."[30] Or, read another way: Abel is every man. Without the negative connotations of "vanity," we discover in

Kohelet a man who is tormented not by the meaninglessness of life, but by how swiftly it comes to an end. Life is gone so very quickly, and likewise man's worldly deeds. We now understand the significance of Kohelet's opening proclamation that "all is *hevel*." He seeks to confront his listeners with man's own mortality—the underlying premise of any inquiry into the meaning of life in this world.[31]

The reading of *hevel* as "vanity" is not only misleading, but in some cases it makes the text impossible to read. Perhaps the most striking example can be found in the book's ninth chapter, where Kohelet discusses the value of love in one's life. "View life with a woman you have come to love—all the days of your transitory life (*kol yemei hayei hevlecha*) which he has gifted you under the sun—every fleeting day. For this is your share in life...."[32] Read the traditional way, the verse is difficult to parse. It would sound something like, "Live joyfully... all the days of your vain life." Life is vanity, so enjoy love? The verse makes far better sense if *hevel* is translated as "fleeting," focusing on life's brevity: Cherish your time together, for life is fleeting, and therefore precious. Then is your love that much more meaningful.

Understanding *hevel* in this sense is also crucial to understanding the passage, in the book's eighth chapter, which deals with the concept of injustice in the world. Read the traditional way, Kohelet explains, "Then I saw the wicked buried, who had come and gone from the place of holiness, and they were forgotten in the city where they had so done. This," he concludes, "is vanity."[33] Again, this is a difficult read: Why is it considered vanity if evildoers are forgotten? The verse makes far more sense if we understand it to relate to the illusory, temporary nature of evil's success: Kohelet reassures us that setbacks to justice are transient, and that evil will not prevail in the final round: "It is of the fleeting nature of the world, that some righteous receive what befits the acts of evildoers, while some evildoers receive what befits the righteous; this too, I say, is only temporary.[34]

It is only through the corrected reading of *hevel* as "transience" rather than "vanity" that we may understand the structure of the book of Ecclesiastes, and thereby learn its message. For Ecclesiastes does not offer a single, static teaching from beginning to end, but a thematic progression, one that follows Kohelet's own discovery of meaning.

The book can be seen as consisting of three parts. The initial stage, covering the first five chapters of the book (starting at 1:12), is characterized by frustration with the transience of life: Kohelet bemoans the fact that all achievements are short-lived. He is bitter about the transience of human contentment (2:1-3), riches (2:4-11), physical existence (3:18-21), and corrective social remedies (chapter 4). Stylistically, this stage is characterized by the juxtapositions of the term *hevel* with words of despair and tragedy. Though not all references to transience, even at this early stage, are decidedly negative, most are. It is in this first part that we learn why Kohelet "hated life," for he has discovered that all one's worldly achievements are, like man himself, in the end but dust and ashes: "For what has a man for all his work, and for his mind's notions, which he works at under the sun?"[35]

It is this bitter discovery of mortality that propels Kohelet on his quest for meaning. We are reminded of Franz Rosenzweig's words that "All cognition of the All originates in death, in the fear of death."[36] Or of the story of the young Siddhartha, the first Buddha, who lived in India just a few centuries after Solomon. His privileged upbringing, comparable to Solomon's own, shielded him from the reality of the outside world; Siddhartha embarked on his spectacular spiritual journey "to find the real meaning of life and death"[37] only after his first confrontation with age, illness, and mortality. Kohelet's quest, as well, is triggered by the traumatic realization of human transience—that the greatest efforts of the wisest king cannot stop the flow of time, nor can they eliminate suffering and injustice from the world.

Dejection soon gives way to acceptance, however, as the book enters its second stage, starting at 6:4 and running through chapter 7, in which

Kohelet begins to view the ephemeral nature of reality more philosophically.[38] Combined phrases such as "transient and grievous"[39] are completely abandoned in this section, less than halfway through the book. The neutrality of the six appearances of hevel in this stage is typified by the example of temporary flattery: "The cheers of the ignorant," we read, are "like the crackling thorns under a pot; all so temporary, too."[40] Kohelet loses no sleep over the fickle nature of fools' praise and fleeting popularity. Having resigned himself to transience, he has come to recognize that it may not be inherently bad after all. This is expressed most vividly in the verses describing the stillborn child:

> If a man fathers a hundred children and lives many years, so that the days of his years are many, but gains no pleasure from his riches, nor proper burial for himself, I say that a stillborn child is better off than he—for in transience it comes (*behevel*), in oblivion it departs, in the dark a lid is cast over its name. Though it has not seen or known of the sun, it has more peace than that man. Even if he lives a thousand years twice—but has not seen goodness. Do not all go to one place?[41]

Again we see that the word *hevel* holds the key to interpreting the passage. For if the stillborn child comes in "futility" or "vanity," how could his situation in any way be described as better off? If, however, we understand *behevel* to mean "in transience," the passage instead becomes a somber acceptance of the objective fact of mortality. Kohelet teaches that, indeed, temporal existence is not an end in itself. The attitude of this stage is in some sense reminiscent of the afterlife-centered attitudes of Christianity and Eastern thought: A long, successful existence in the world, without merit, is worse than no physical life at all.

Support for this interpretation can be found in the rabbinic literature, in a midrash that relates this passage directly to the story of Cain and Abel: "'If a man fathers a hundred children': This refers to Cain, who had a hundred sons but gained no satisfaction from his wealth or the

goodness of the world.... 'A stillborn is better'—this refers to his brother Abel."[42] For the stillborn is born in *hevel*. In Kohelet's view, man is disparaged not because fleeting life is itself unworthy, but because he has made it so by virtue of his actions. It is better, then, to have the most transient existence of Abel, whose life was short but exemplary, than the misery of Cain, whose long life became a curse.

The third stage covers the last four chapters of the book. By this point, *hevel* has lost any trace of the negativity which it carried in the early chapters. It is never tied to a second word—never "transience and," together with something distasteful. On the contrary, in these final chapters, all uses of *hevel* are associated, directly or indirectly, with joy, or *simha*.

The examples are too pervasive to ignore. In one case, as we have seen, Kohelet refers to the transience of injustice: While evildoers may succeed, their success is only temporary. This knowledge, however, is linked directly with Kohelet's own happiness at the fact—"Therefore," he concludes, "I prized joy (*hasimha*)." The same holds true in his statements about the transience of youth. "Youth and virility are fleeting," he famously declares, yet only after admonishing his reader to "rejoice (*semah*)." A similar point is made in the context of fleeting love: "Live with a woman you love all the fleeting days of your life," he suggests—but only immediately after having told his reader to "Go, eat your bread with joy (*besimha*)."[43] Indeed, only a few verses before the end of the book, the link between transience and joy becomes explicit, even emphatic: "Even if one lives many long years, he should rejoice (*yismah*) in them all, heeding the days of darkness, for they shall be many; all that transpires is fleeting (*hevel*)."[44]

From the first stage, then, in which *hevel* was but a small step from tragedy and evil, it is now never far from happiness. Thus the third stage represents a surprising turn. In it we find exuberant affirmations of life, and the joy and wisdom that it can bring. Kohelet has now learned, and seeks to teach, the deeper lesson of *hevel*: Transience as inspiration.

This lesson is later echoed in other systems of thought. Nowhere is it clearer, perhaps, than in the words of the Buddha: "This existence of ours

is as transient as autumn clouds. To watch the birth and death of beings is like looking at the movements of a dance. A lifetime is a flash of lightning in the sky. Rushing by like a torrent down a steep mountain." This insight, according to the Buddha's last sermon, has the most profound impact on our lives. "By always thinking about the transience of your life, you will be able to resist green and anger, and will be able to avoid all evils."[45]

In our own text, the wisest of Israel's kings realizes that not only good fortune and success, but also sorrow, power, jealousy, and oppression are all, in the end, fleeting. It is this realization that opens the doors to redemption. The true spirit of this third stage is crystallized in the following passage:

> Go, eat your bread with joy, drink your wine with a content mind; for God has already graced your deeds.... Whatever you find in your power to do, do it. For there are no deeds, no contriving, no knowledge, and no wisdom in the abyss you are bound for.[46]

Like fleeting cherry blossoms, almost sacredly ephemeral, the transience of *hevel* inspires Kohelet's existential transformation. It encapsulates the beauty of sunsets, autumn leaves, or the Impressionist's fascination with fleeting light. For it is precisely the transience of these things that moves us. By understanding the fleeting nature of life as a whole, Kohelet is no longer paralyzed by the burden of death. Life's transience is dynamically transformed into a powerful motivational force: An urgency to live, to experience joy, to take action, and above all, to learn. The key to embracing transience, Kohelet discovers, is not to build monuments or expand empires, but to find the truth and inner understanding that flows from the eye-opening insight into the fleeting nature of it all.

Kohelet thus ends his quest by affirming the absolute value of mortal existence. In this way he resolves the existential frustration that tormented him at the beginning of the book: While Jewish tradition undoubtedly accepts the idea of an afterlife, it is never to be allowed to take over our consciousness. To the end, life itself must remain the focus of man's existence.

An appreciation for joy grows steadily out of such an understanding. In truth, Judaism has long recognized its spiritual value. For example, the Talmud teaches that divine inspiration cannot be attained in a state of sadness, for it dwells only in a mind that has trained itself in joy.[47] Many centuries later, the Hasidic sage Rabbi Nahman of Breslav taught that it is a great thing always to be in a state of joy. As Kohelet writes: "Rejoice, O lad, in your childhood, let your mind elevate you in the days of your youth… clear your mind of grievance and relieve your body of harm…."[48] To Kohelet, joy is not a consolation prize, or an elixir for life's pains. Neither is it related to the promise of a life to come. Rather, joy is a value in and of itself; it is what it means to be truly alive.[49]

Yet even joy, it seems, is not the final destination for Kohelet. Ultimately, if there is an underlying message in the book of Ecclesiastes, it is this: That only in understanding the transience of life do we attain the beginning of wisdom; and in turn, only through the wisdom derived from our experience of life may we in some way take part in that which is eternal. The importance of wisdom is mentioned repeatedly in Ecclesiastes: "Wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness";[50] "Wisdom preserves the lives of its possessors";[51] "Wisdom empowers the wise";[52] "A man's wisdom illuminates his face, and its power is transformed."[53] Moreover, Kohelet refers to man's judgment before God when one inevitably leaves this world. It is in this context that he provides his most important conclusion regarding the nature of wisdom: "I say, dwell upon the King's commandment, and discourse of God's covenant.… He who follows the commands will avoid misconceptions; come the hour of judgment, he will know a wise mind."[54] Kohelet realizes that true wisdom is the one thing that is not dependent on transient circumstances. Yet all of the transient circumstances in this world serve as the means of acquiring it. This was the meaning of Abel's life, which served as the inspiration for the book of Ecclesiastes.[55]

This ultimate lesson—fleeting life yielding eternal truth—touches on the very core of the Bible's imagery. It is found in the book of Exodus, at the very point where Moses begins his own spiritual path. A shepherd like his

forefathers, he is tending his flock when he comes across an amazing revelation: "And the Angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire from the midst of a bush. So he looked, and behold, the bush was burning with fire, but the bush was not consumed. Then Moses said, 'I will now turn aside and see this great sight, why the bush does not burn...'"[56] In the burning bush, Moses perceived the powerful image of ephemeral, physical existence sustaining in it a fire of the eternal, two realities which seemingly cannot coexist but in truth are inseparable. Moses would himself come to resemble this image, when, having heard the word of God on Mount Sinai, descending from the mountain, now his own temporal, fleeting body radiating the eternal light.[57] Indeed, the Zohar affirms this connection when it states that Moses was a reincarnation of Abel.[58] This parable linking Abel with the greatest biblical prophet validates the hidden promise of *hevel*, which, as we have seen, is Ecclesiastes' central innovation. "Fleeting transience," concludes Kohelet, "fleeting transience, it is all thin air." Yet at the core of such thorny transience, we find a timeless flame.

Everything but wisdom is transient, teaches the king, and history has proven him right. Neither Solomon's riches, nor his power, nor even his monumental temple in Jerusalem survived under the sun. What has indeed lasted, however, is the legacy of his wisdom, embodied in the book of Ecclesiastes. This belief in knowledge as the highest form of spirituality has served as the Jewish torch throughout the ages. And no small measure of that light is reflected in the understanding that only ideas can defy time, transforming the world.

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Notes

The author wishes to express his deep gratitude to Professor Menachem Fisch, who opened that door so many years ago.

1. For the purpose of this essay, it is of little significance whether or not the historical king Solomon actually wrote the work of Ecclesiastes. It is clear both from the opening verse and from numerous other examples that its author intended it to be read as a statement of Solomon's wisdom.

2. Ecclesiastes 2:17-21. All verse translations are mine, based on the New King James Version.

3. Although mistaking *hevel* for "emptiness," Rami Shapiro fleshes out the pro-joy theme in his *The Way of Solomon: Finding Joy and Contentment in the Wisdom of Ecclesiastes* (San Francisco: Harper, 2000). Other scholars have also alluded to this theme, albeit sporadically; see, for example, Daniel C. Fredericks, who writes of Kohelet's "timely laughter, dancing and embracing, and love and peace," in *Coping with Transience: Ecclesiastes on Brevity in Life* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1993), p. 68.

4. Ecclesiastes 3:22.

5. Ecclesiastes 8:15.

6. Ecclesiastes 9:7.

7. I Kings 4:20.

8. Ecclesiastes 2:13, 7:12, 7:19, 8:1-5, and elsewhere.

9. Indeed, the Talmud tells us how the rabbis considered suppressing the entire book as a result of its apparent inner contradictions. Shabbat 30b.

10. M. James Sawyer, "The Theology of Ecclesiastes," Biblical Studies Foundation website, www.bible.org/docs/ot/books/ecc/theoecc.htm.

11. Cf. Giorgio de Santillana, *Hamlet's Mill: An Essay on Myth and the Frame of Time* (Boston: David Godine, 1994).

12. Cf. Jan Assmann, *The Mind of Egypt: History and Meaning in the Time of the Pharaohs* (New York: Metropolitan, 2002); Serge Sauneron, *The Search for God in Ancient Egypt*, trans. David Lorton (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell, 2000).

13. The Koran, trans. N.J. Dawood (Middlesex: Penguin, 1974), 78:31, p. 53.

14. John Woodroffe, in his introduction to *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, explains, "The after-death apparitions are 'real' enough for the deceased." (London: Oxford, 1960), p. lxxiii.

15. Cf. Maimonides, *Mishneh Tora*, Laws of Repentance 8:6.

16. From the entry for "Biblical Literature" in *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2003), vol. xiv, p. 951.

17. From the Latin *Vanitas vanitatum omina vanitas*, Jerome's Latin Vulgate (405 A.D.).

18. Genesis 4:1-8.

19. Ecclesiastes 12:5-8. The word *hevel*, moreover, resembles a number of Hebrew roots clearly dealing with demise over time: "And we all do wither (*navel*) as a leaf"(Isaiah 64:5); "They shall perish... all of them shall wear out (*yivlu*)... and they shall pass" (Psalms 102:27); "And your dead shall live; corpses (*nevelati*) shall arise... (Isaiah 26:19). This root, moreover, finds cognates in Old South Arabian, where *blwt* is "grave"; the Ugaritic *bly* and the Ethopic *balya* ("to be consumed"); and the Akkadian *balu* ("to fade, pass away"). Cf. Cyrus H. Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook*, entry #471; ZAW 75:307; Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Boston: Brill, 2001), p. 132.

20. Isaiah 45:17.

21. Deuteronomy 33:29.

22. Exodus 14:30.

23. Cf. Numbers 6:26. This teaching, it should be noted, rejects the pagan view of a mechanistic element to worship and sacrifice, according to which humans manipulate the gods through ritual, independent of their purity of intentions.

24. Abel, however, might very well have been the first to *take* a life: Whereas Cain's sacrifice was a portion of his harvest, Abel's was an animal. In light of the questions of life and death that pervade his story, this fact takes on new meaning. In sacrificing an animal's life, Abel ascertained a higher value: Something for which it is worth forfeiting a life.

25. Genesis 46:34.

26. Genesis 47:3.

27. Indeed, the thread runs through Genesis 4:25-26: "And Adam knew his wife again, and she bore a son and named him Seth, 'For God has appointed another seed for me instead of Hevel, whom Cain killed.' And as for Seth, to him also a son was born; and he named him Enosh; then [man] began to call on the name of the Lord...." The very next person to "call on the name of the Lord" was Abraham (Genesis 13:4), further solidifying the link between Abel and the Jewish people.

28. Translations of *hevel* as "fleeting" have appeared in the past. Notably, the Jewish Publication Society Bible—as opposed to the Artscroll and Judaica Press renditions—translates verse 11:10 as "youth and black hair are fleeting." The JPS version, in fact, goes even further, substituting "fleeting" for the appearances of

hevel in 6:12 and 9:9. However, these are clearly exceptions resulting from the misreading of *re'ut ruah*, and not the consistent rule. See note 29 below.

Furthermore, Christian readings have referred to the etymological root of the word, whose meaning is close to that of vapor or steam, in an effort to explain the source of Ecclesiastes' *hevel* as a metaphor for the insubstantial: Daniel Lys calls it the "present but evanescent." Lys, *Ecclesiastes, or What is Life Worth? Translation, General Introduction, and Commentary on 1/1 to 4/3* (Paris: Letouzey, 1977), pp. 75, 275, A. Heler (7:6) calls *hevel* "all that is doomed, by its very essence, to disappear." [French] *Notes on Kohelet* (Paris, 1951), p. 72 [French]; and Jean-Luc Marion determines the word to mean "all that is can dissipate," then explains in the context of this discussion that "man finds himself carried away by the breath of his own defeat." Cited in Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1991), pp. 125-126.

All of these readings, however, while understanding *hevel* to mean the transient nature of vapor, still see the borrowed use as implying worthlessness, or vanity, rather than the objective, non-pejorative, fleeting reality of mortal life. Some scholars use "transience" in some verses but not in others (as is the case in the JPS Bible). These include Douglas B. Miller, in his *Symbol and Rhetoric in Ecclesiastes: The Place of Hevel in Kohelet's Work* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), p. 180, who concludes that "some aspects of human existence, even humans themselves, are insubstantial, while other things are transient, and others are foul." The admirable exception is found in Daniel C. Fredericks' treatise, *Coping with Transience*, in which he notes correctly the presence of ephemeral efforts, passing pleasures, and transient tragedies, while insisting on linguistic and symbolic consistency throughout Ecclesiastes. But even here, as is evident from the title, transience is viewed as innately problematic: It is, according to Fredericks, part of "a cursed world." Fredericks, *Coping with Transience*, p. 11. This becomes evident in the tone of his conclusion as well: Kohelet "also depends heavily on joy of work, even strenuous labor, to counterbalance the pains of a fleeting world which consists only as moments." Fredericks, *Coping with Transience*, p. 97. What is missing in Fredericks' analysis is the awareness of Kohelet's existential revolution—that is, Fredericks does not concede the fact of an all-encompassing transience as the positive message—and the intellectual development within the book that eventually embraces the fleeting nature of pain, suffering, evil, and even death itself. At the opposite pole we find Rami Shapiro, who turns transience into the be-all and end-all of existence. Though there is much to respect in his radical Taoist reading of Ecclesiastes, which correctly integrates core insights in the book ("Nothing lasts, Solomon tells us, and that is the most liberating truth of all," p. 119), he lacks the linguistic proficiency to decode its systematic terminology, hence missing Kohelet's rationalistic metaphysics. Shapiro asserts that the literal meaning of *hevel* ("breath," in his view) connotes the "fleeting, ephemeral, impermanent" (p. 96), but he then takes the leap to seeing *hevel* as a metaphoric signifier of a greater Taoist idea of "emptiness." Thus, even Kohelet's first encounters with transience, explicitly causing him to hate life (Ecclesiastes 2:17), are colored by

Shapiro with detached contemplativeness ("how foolish this quest for permanence"; p. 27). Indeed, "emptiness" implies "empty of permanence" (p. 2), but, for Shapiro, it encompasses a much more radical negation of an eternal "self," creation, God's judgment, and ultimately wisdom as the crux of redemption. All in all, Shapiro's imaginative rendering is too deliberately loose, with respect to the Hebrew, to be of concrete interpretive use.

Nevertheless, both Fredericks and Shapiro offer landmark steps in rescuing Ecclesiastes from sixteen centuries of misreading. I believe that a sensitive, intertextual biblical approach, as well as a structured approach towards Ecclesiastes' take on natural philosophy (in dialogue with other, pre-Socratic elemental cosmologies), constitutes the golden path that balances both their readings in search of Ecclesiastes' straightforward, original intent.

29. In objecting to this value-neutral definition of *hevel*, the most common claim is the repeated use of the phrase "*hevel* and *re'ut ruah*," which is traditionally translated as "vanity and (the innately futile) pursuit of wind." However, this treatment of *re'ut ruah* (a term unique to Ecclesiastes) misreads the original Hebrew at least as much as does the translation of *hevel* as "vanity." Scholars are in agreement about rejecting the old notion of *re'ut* as "vexation of spirit," in favor of translations that see *re'ut* as a reflex of *ra'ah*. Nonetheless, the continuing misconception misses the core meaning of this precise root-verb, "to meander"; feeding, grazing, and herding are secondary transpositions. Critically, the Hebrew root *ra'ah* does not imply gathering, chasing, or herding-in; rather, it connotes the typical (outward-bound) movement of grazing over pasturelands. This is why the verb can easily apply to the roaming of a single animal, with no flock or shepherd about. Cf. Genesis 41:1-2; Song of Songs 4:5, 6:2. Similarly, it applies where no feeding is involved; cf. Numbers 14:33. Hence, even if we knew no more than this, *re'ut* is to be understood as a fleeting movement of wind, or air, such as a gust or a breeze. This is cognate to *tir'eh-ruah* in Jeremiah 22:22 ("a puff of wind," or "scattered by the wind"). Thus, a close approximation of the phrase *hevel u're'ut ruach*, would be "vapor and a stirring of air," or "vapor and a puff of wind." In this light, the entire idiom stresses transient phenomena, of no material value. However, the etymology of *re'ut* itself may give us a clue to uncovering its original connotation; for its Semitic root had an additional meaning, one with a close affinity to the word "vapor." While the Hebrew language lost this variant, it survives to this day in Arabic: The Arabic root of r-gh-w, as in the noun *ragha*—froth or foam—and the verb *ragha*—to froth. Like vapor, it is a potent metaphor of fleeting, passing phenomena. Froth and foam, of course, are made of air, which in the biblical Hebrew is always *ruah*, bringing us back again to Ecclesiastes' idiom, "*hevel ure'ut ruah*," which we may now render: Vapor and froth (cf. Shakespeare, *The Rape of Lucrece*: "What win I if I gain the thing I seek? A dream, a breath, a froth of fleeting joy").

This also helps us to understand Ecclesiastes 4:6, where *re'ut ruah* is depicted as something that, figuratively, one can grab "handfuls" of, albeit without much gain;

of course, one cannot grab a "pursuit of" anything in one's hand. Moreover, the two parts of the idiom, vapor and froth, become nouns corresponding to two physical entities (*re'ut ruah* as object rather than action). As a result, the entire phrase, *hevel ure'ut ruah*, constitutes a uniform, objective, double-metaphor about the factual transience of human life and worldly achievements.

Finally, it is difficult to ignore the striking similarity between Abel the shepherd (*hevel ro'eh*, Genesis 4:2), and the form of *hevel ure'ut*: Just as Kohelet succeeded in bringing Abel's mortality to mind with the simile of vapor, so, too, "froth" (or "gust") recalls the core characteristic of Abel's impermanent life.

30. Ecclesiastes 12:8.

31. Note that the Greek term in the Septuagint from which the Latin *vanitas* derives has the alternative meaning of "transitory" or "illusory," in addition to that of "empty" or "pointless." This ambiguity is likely the source of the word's erroneous use in later interpretations.

32. Ecclesiastes 9:9.

33. Ecclesiastes 8:10.

34. Ecclesiastes 8:14.

35. Ecclesiastes 2:22.

36. Franz Rosenzweig, *Star of Redemption*, trans. William Hallo (Notre Dame: Notre Dame, 1985), p. 3.

37. See "The Legend of the Buddha Shakyamuni," in *Buddhist Scriptures* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1959), pp. 39-40.

38. Here Kohelet also begins to discuss the relativity of theories of knowledge. Ecclesiastes 6:8-12.

39. Ecclesiastes 4:8.

40. Ecclesiastes 7:6.

41. Ecclesiastes 6:3-6.

42. Kohelet Rabba 6:3.

43. Ecclesiastes 8:15, 11:9-12, 9:7-9.

44. Ecclesiastes 11:8.

45. As quoted by Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche; "The Last Teaching of the Buddha," in *The Teaching of the Buddha*, 128th revised edition (Tokyo: Bukkyo Dendo Kyokai, 1986), accessed via trang.quoc.org/TheTeachingOfBuddha.htm#10.

46. Ecclesiastes 9:7-10.

47. "The Divine Presence does not rest among men in their sadness… but in their joy of the following of the commandments," Shabbat 30b; and "The Holy Spirit dwells only in a heart filled with gladness," Jerusalem Succah 5:1.

48. Ecclesiastes 11:9-10.

49. This is reminiscent, as well, of Aristotle's "perfect condition." Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, book x.

50. Ecclesiastes 2:13.

51. Ecclesiastes 7:12.

52. Ecclesiastes 7:19.

53. Ecclesiastes 8:1.

54. Ecclesiastes 8:2-5. Although the concept of *davar* or *lev* lie beyond the scope of this essay, the translation of these verses relies on an understanding of the terms as *consistent* references to "teaching" (or "saying") and "mind," respectively. These terms highlight Ecclesiastes' advanced epistemology in verses such as 1:8,10, 5:1-2, 6:10-11, 8:1, and 12:13. Cf. Genesis 11:1.

55. It is interesting to note that the two biblical books attributed to Solomon, Proverbs and the Song of Songs, also have as a central focus the affirmation of youthful love and joy, and of wisdom, respectively.

56. Exodus 3:2-3.

57. Exodus 34:30-35.

58. Zohar 3:106a. This parable also draws on a sense of morality. Unlike Cain, and for that matter Adam, who toil inanimate soil, Abel was the first to pursue an intersubjective vocation, which tended to other living beings. Furthermore, through his death humanity learned, for the first time, of man's moral obligation toward his fellow. This was a central element of Abel's spirituality, and it is also manifest in Moses' extraordinary care for the weakest of his lambs, which according to the Midrash, resulted in God's entrusting Moses with his own flock, the people of Israel.