The meaning of *hebel* in Ecclesiastes[1]

Kimmo Huovila and Dan Lioy

Abstract

The interpretation of *hebel* in Ecclesiastes has a great influence on one's understanding of the message of the book. This article discusses six different proposals for the meaning of *hebel* using the criteria of usage outside of Ecclesiastes, of natural prototype extensions from the attested meanings, of contextual fit, and of authorial cues to the reader. Using these criteria, it is argued that in Ecclesiastes the word means 'futile' without implying worthlessness. Ecclesiastes makes a case to value joy over pursuing the impossible task of achieving permanent profit in life and losing joy in the process.

About the Authors[2]
Kimmo Huovila
PhD, SATS (2018)

Dan Lioy
PhD, North-West University
The Senior Research Manager at the South African Theological Seminary, Dan has a particular research interest in intertextuality, Biblical ethics and spiritual care in professional settings.

[1]   This article is a PhD thesis summary submitted by Kimmo Huovila. Title of thesis: The contribution of the theme of divine judgment to the argument of the book of Ecclesiastes . Supervisor: Prof Dan Lioy. Institution: South African Theological Seminary.

[2]   The views expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

1. The relevance of the study of *hebel* to the study of Ecclesiastes

The interpretation of the book of Ecclesiastes depends to a large degree on the interpretation of the key word *hebel*. The message of the book is summarised by calling all things *hebel* (Eccl 1:2, 12:8). The message conveyed is quite different if all things are called worthless or meaningless (Longman 1998:61–65), temporary (Fredericks 2010:50–54), absurd (Fox 1999:30–42), enigmatic (Staples 1943, Ogden 1987:17–22, Bartholomew 2009:104–107), or futile (Huovila 2018:114–156). Understanding *hebel* as 'worthless' summarises the book in terms of value. 'Meaningless' leads one to think of the book as discussing the meaning of life, and concluding that it has none. If everything is called 'temporary', the book discusses the transience of life. If everything was called 'absurd', the book juxtaposes expectations with observations in life, and notes the incongruity between them. If everything is called 'enigmatic', Qohelet was struggling with intellectual dilemmas. If everything is called 'futile', the book relates effort to some goal. Finding a single meaning that fits all occurrences in the book has been so difficult that some argue that the word has multiple meanings in the book (Seow 1997:102), even though it would not make much sense to summarise different, unrelated meanings by using a single word (Fox 1999:35–36). This illustrates the difficulty of finding the meaning of *hebel*, especially as the book itself summarises itself using this word. Regardless of the choice the exegete makes, it has significant ramifications for understanding the book.

2. The main proposals for the meaning of *hebel*

2.1. Enigmatic

Staples (1943), Bartholomew (2009:104–107), Ogden (1987:17–22), and Ogden and Zogbo (1997:3–4) argue that *hebel* means 'enigmatic' in the book of Ecclesiastes. Staples expresses a weakly argued claim that *hebel* originally meant something like 'cult mystery', and so something unfathomable, unknowable or unknown to man. Ogden and Zogbo understand Qohelet to be wondering why God does not make things the way they should be. He uses *hebel* to express his frustration and to acknowledge that he is faced with questions that he cannot answer. Ogden understands Ecclesiastes 3:17–18 to be an example of *hebel* being used to respond to an apparently insoluble problem of God's justice. He thinks that in Ecclesiastes 4:7–8 the enigma is why the

workaholic does not stop to ask for what purpose he is toiling. Bartholomew argues that Qohelet had an epistemological quest and that if there is meaning and value, it cannot be grasped.

2.2. Absurd

Fox (1999:30–42) argues that *hebel* in the book of Ecclesiastes means 'absurd', which he defines as 'a disjunction between two phenomena that are thought to be linked by a bond of harmony or causality, or that *should* be so linked.' (quote in 1999:31). Thus absurdity is a result of a clash between one's expectations of harmony or causality and reality. Consequently one may deduce Qohelet's expections from what he calls absurd, if Fox is right about the meaning of *hebel*.

Fox (1999:36–42) lists things that are *hebel*. They are toil and wealth, pleasure, justice, wisdom, speech, living beings, death, and all. Toil is absurd when another enjoys the benefits. Pleasure is absurd in that it does not provide meaning even though it is the best thing around. Justice is absurd when lifespans do not correspond to moral deserts. Wisdom is absurd in that the wise and the fool end up the same. Speech is absurd in that words are just meaningless sounds. Living beings are absurd as life can be absurd in various ways. Death is absurd in that we are not to expect more rationality after death than before.

2.3. Temporary

There are two main views of *hebel* as transient, represented by Fredericks (2010) and Seow (1997). According to Fredericks (2010:50–54), *hebel* means transitory in almost all of the occurrences in Ecclesiastes (he mentions 5:6 as a possible exception). Seow (1997:112) thinks that *hebel* is ephemeral and unreliable. Yet in Ecclesiastes 8:14 he gives *hebel* the meaning of 'incomprehensible reality', thus actually representing a multiple-sense view (1997:295, see section 2.6 below). The main difference between Fredericks and Seow is that Seow thinks *hebel* is a negative term ('unreliable') and Fredericks (2010:197) thinks it is fortunate that some things, like the trials referred to in Ecclesiastes 8:14, are temporary (Huovila 2018:58–59).

2.4. Worthless or meaningless

Longman (1998:61–65) thinks *hebel* means 'meaningless'. This meaninglessness is not limited but it is an all-inclusive statement. There is no meaning anywhere. Also Seybold (1978:319) thinks of *hebel* as meaningless. He contrasts it to *yitron*, which he understands as 'that which counts or matters'. Both consider *hebel* to imply lack of value. *Hebel* does not mean 'meaningless' in the

sense of an expression not having any meaning, but it could perhaps mean it in the sense of lack of purpose. The latter idea implies that the book is about the search for the meaning of life.

2.5. Futile but not worthless

Huovila (2018:114–156) argues that *hebel* means 'futile' in Ecclesiastes, but this is without the connotation of worthlessness or meaninglessness. He allows for the possibility of occurrences unrelated to the summary, and considers Ecclesiastes 6:4 to be a possible example (Huovila 2018:134–136, 153). Values are implied by Qohelet's statements and there is no need to understand his view as inconsistent. Futility is to be seen in the context of being measured against expected *yitron* 'profit'. When the two words are introduced in Ecclesiastes 1:2–3, *yitron* helps the reader disambiguate the meaning of *hebel*.

Huovila argues that the futility in the book of Ecclesiastes in almost all occurrences is a prototype category consisting of three foci. The foci are metonymically related and they are 'that which is associated with failure to gain permanent profit, (1) as that which fails to accomplish this, or (2) as the cause or (3) circumstance of the failure', though at times a more general sense of futility is intended (Huovila 2018:116).

2.6. Multiple-sense views

Seow (1997:102) thinks that no single definition of *hebel* works in every occurrence of Ecclesiastes. It can refer to ephemerality (6:12, 7:15, 9:9) and to that which is of little consequence (5:7, 6:4, 6:11). He also considers the word to have the meaning of 'incomprehensible'. Miller (2002:15) has a more nuanced view. He considers the word to be used as a symbol that includes the meanings of 'insubstantiality', 'transience', and 'foulness'. The symbol brings them together under one concept.

3. Criteria for a Solution

As there are several competing hypotheses, the criteria used to evaluate them need attention. Four criteria are proposed and applied to the hypotheses in a cursory fashion to argue in a simplified manner that in Ecclesiastes *hebel* means 'futile' without implying worthlessness (option 2.5 above). Further argumentation is found in Huovila (2018:52–65, 114–156).

3.1. Usage outside of Ecclesiastes

Unless there is evidence to the contrary, the meaning of *hebel* in Ecclesiastes should be seen as one of the meanings of the word apart from its use in Ecclesiastes or as a natural extension of one of the meanings. Meanings found in the extant corpus are discussed in this section, and category extension is discussed in the next section.

Miller (2002:53–90) studied rather extensively the occurrences of *hebel* in biblical Hebrew, in rabbinic Hebrew, and in Qumranic materials. He gives two examples (1 QH 7:32, 1 QS 5:19) that he interprets as 'uncomprehending', as used of humans. In the context of 1 QS 5:14–19 the latter example talks about one who transgresses against God's word. The thought is that a holy man is not to rely on works of *hebel,* as those who do not recognise God's covenant are *hebel*. The cohesive link between the two *hebel*s favours the interpretation that the meaning of *hebel* is not related to lack of knowledge. The association with trust suggests that the sense is 'unreliable'. As it is futile to trust in something unreliable, the two senses are interrelated. Miller (2002:85) connects the sense in 1 QS 5:18 with unrighteousness. The use of *hebel* in 1 QS 5:19 functions to associate the doer and the deeds. The deeds are unreliable, because the doer is one of similar character. This seems to be a better interpretation than 'uncomprehending'.

1 QH 7:32 describes human limitations. The thought is that people are too empty (*tohu*) and are characterised by *hebel* (*ba`al hebel*) to understand God's wondrous works. This does associate *ba`al hebel* with lack of understanding. It can be argued that 'incomprehensible' is a metonymic expansion of uncomprehending. While this is a possibility, it does not seem to be attested. Thus none of Miller's examples is a clear example of *hebel* meaning 'enigmatic' or 'incomprehensible' outside of the book of Ecclesiastes.

The meaning of 'absurd' is difficult to support, since absurdity is dependent on both the objective situation and a subjective evaluation of it and these are not often, if ever, contextually evident in the extant corpus. The meanings of 'transient' (Miller 2002:75–78), and 'futile' (Miller 2002:68–69) are supported outside Ecclesiastes. In connection with effort, the sense is 'futile' in Isaiah 49:4 and Job 9:29 (Miller 2002:68–69).

Miller (2002:87) mentions 4 Q 184 1:1–2 as an example of worthlessness as associated with *hebel*, used of speech. As Miller notes, the text associates it with errors (*to`ot*). Deception is also mentioned in the text. The meaning 'unreliable' fits the text, so the

text requires no new sense for *hebel*. As many futile things are worthless, such can be called *hebel*, as failing help (Lamentations 4:17). Thus 'worthless' is also a possibility, but it is not a required sense for the word. Yet in these texts, the unreliability makes it also worthless, so the sense 'worthless' remains a possible interpretation in these texts, and it illustrates the potential for semantic extension.

The word does not seem to be used of purposelessness. Rather a frustrated purpose or expectation is often part of the context of futility, as in Job 21:34 (purpose to comfort), 35:16 (purpose to transmit knowledge), Isaiah 30:7 (purpose to help), 49:4 (the purpose that the toil had), Jeremiah 10:3 (the purpose of idolatry by the idolaters), and 16:19 (the expectation to have profit from inheritance). Usage outside Ecclesiastes supports the meanings of 'transient', 'futile', and also 'worthless' as a possibility.

3.2. Natural prototype category extension

The possibility that *hebel* is used in a somewhat novel sense in Ecclesiastes should not be excluded *a priori*. Therefore, the prototypical nature of linguistic categorization and category extension, especially by way of metonymy and metaphor (Taylor 1989), must be considered. If a proposed sense of the word is found to be metonymically or metaphorically related to an attested sense, it is thereby more plausible. It must be remembered that we have a quite limited corpus of Classical Hebrew, so many words may have had more meanings than attested in the corpus, *hebel* included.

The three attested senses discussed in the previous section are metonymically related to each other. Transience and futility are often related to each other in a cause-effect relationship, transience often being the cause of futility. Futile things can be worthless because of the futility. This is true when the futile thing does not have any value outside of fulfilling the purpose that is used to evaluate its futility. Thus these three meanings (transient, futile, worthless) are metonymically related to each other.

If 'uncomprehending' is accepted as the meaning of *ba`al hebel* in 1 QH 7:32 (see Miller 2002:85–88 and also 1 QS 5:19), *hebel* may have extended its sense to mean 'incomprehensible' by way of metonymy. Without clear examples, it is not clear if the Hebrew language made that to be part of the meaning of *hebel*.

The relationship of absurdity to the clearly-attested meanings of futility and transience is not as clear as their mutual relationships. A futile attempt can very well be also absurd, making room for

semantic extension, though I am unaware of any positive evidence for this development in Classical Hebrew. The sense of 'absurd' could extend also from 'deceit' or 'nonsense'.

Fox (1999:29) gives a list of examples of *hebel* meaning 'deceit' (Zech 10:2, Ps 62:10, Prov 31:30, Job 21:34). While it may not be clear that 'deceit' is the sense in each of the passages, they do associate *hebel* with deceit. Fox thinks that the transition from deceit to nonsensical is slight. However, if something does not make sense, it is not very deceitful. In the contexts where deceit is nonsensical, the deceit can seem also absurd.

Miller (2002:67–68) thinks that in Job 35:16 the sense of *hebel* (referent in his terminology) is 'nonsense'. If 'nonsense' is accepted as the sense, Fox's view is strengthened in that 'nonsense' is a good candidate to be the meaning in the context and it is closer to 'absurd' than 'deceit'. Fox's sense on 'absurd' is not exactly 'nonsense', as something has to make sense to defy the expectation of rationality. When that expectation is rationality, nonsense defies it. So clearly nonsensical speech can be absurd. While there is still some semantic distance, it is conceivable that *hebel* had the sense of 'absurd' in some contexts. The semantic distance is smaller if it is derived from 'nonsense' rather than 'futility' or 'deceit'.

Using the criterion of natural prototype extension, 'incomprehensible' is somewhat more plausible than 'absurd' if *hebel* in 1 QH 7:32 is considered 'uncomprehending', as the category extension is by way of a rather natural metonymy and more straightforward than the extension from 'deceit' to 'absurd'. Both 'futile' and 'transient' and possibly also 'worthless' fare best as attested meanings, with 'incomprehensible' or 'enigmatic' and 'absurd' following, when natural prototype extension is used as the criterion.

3.3. Contextual fit

Contextual fit is a highly important criterion. The meaning 'enigmatic' is not a good contextual fit for example in Ecclesiastes 2:15. There Qohelet does not consider it enigmatic that he pursued wisdom. Rather he wonders if his efforts were misplaced. Neither is 'enigmatic' a good fit for Ecclesiastes 4:7–8. The text discusses a workaholic. In Ecclesiastes 4:8, *hebel* refers either to the work of the workaholic described in verse 7 or to Qohelet's work and deprivation of good. There is nothing in the text to raise the question of why the workaholic does not ask what his purpose is. If the reference is to Qohelet's own work (Fox 1999:222), he asks for whom he toils. Either way, the question is not quite the same as

asking why he toils as if trying to find the answer to an intellectual dilemma. Workaholism is lamented rather than wondered. For a more detailed discussion of the view that *hebel* means 'enigmatic', see Huovila (2018:54–57) and for a more detailed discussion of Ecclesiastes 4:7–8, see Huovila (2018:128–129). The question is raised whom labour benefits, regardless of whether it is the labour of the workaholic or of Qohelet. It is a question of profit (*yitron*), which is used as an antonym of futility (*hebel*) in the book of Ecclesiastes (see Huovila 2018:88–91). Thus the context supports 'futile' better than 'enigmatic' as the meaning of *hebel*.

Transience is one of the meanings of the word *hebel* (Miller 2002:75–78). The question is whether transience is the sense for the word in most of its occurrences in Ecclesiastes. The hypothesis is tested in Huovila (2018:118–156). He argues that transience is a good fit in many contexts, but not all. Its contextual fit is poor in 2:19, 4:7–8, and 6:1–2. The problem of the workaholic in Ecclesiastes 4:7–8 is a good example. The problem is called 'a painful business' and *hebel*. Transience of something that is a painful business is a good thing, but the parallelism favours that both are negative statements (see Huovila 2018:128–129).

Fox (1999:48–49) thinks there are two ways something can be absurd. One blames the doer who could have desisted. The other blames the fact that the results of an otherwise good action are not in line with reasonable expectations. According to him, Qohelet assumed that actions should reliably produce appropriate consequences. This clashes with divine justice, in which Qohelet believes, making everything absurd.

This kind of absurdity can be predicated of much of futility in Huovila's (2018) sense. Bad action can reasonably be called futile in producing any profit, and when the expected good results fail to materialise, futility is manifest. According to Fox (1999:49), Qohelet expected that actions reliably produce appropriate consequences. Qohelet believes in divine justice. In this view, injustices are offensive to reason. Because they are not mere anomalies but infect the whole system, everything is absurd. This absurdity leads to the collapse of belief in a grand causal order. Fox limits the observation to life 'under the sun'.

However, if Qohelet believed in a just afterlife, all would not be absurd in this sense. Rather the grand causal order would prevail, though not under the sun. Huovila (2018:175–242) argues for this to be a plausible interpretation of Qohelet's thought. If this is so, absurdity in Fox's sense is not as good a solution for the meaning

of *hebel* as 'futile' in Huovila's sense. The relationship between the two interpretations of *hebel* and the future divine judgment can be seen in their respective arguments on Ecclesiastes 3:17. Fox (1999:215) considers that the judgment is before or at death. Huovila (2018:178–188) argues that an afterlife judgment is the most probable view. If he is right, the case for Fox's view on the meaning of *hebel* is weakened. This is because the interpretation of Qohelet's view makes Fox's lexical view a worse contextual fit to Qohelet's worldview.

To find decisive examples to disambiguate between 'futile' and 'absurd' is difficult, because a futile action is absurd in a worldview that expects the action to produce profit. This is exactly the worldview that Fox thinks Qohelet had. Therefore, the exegetically more difficult case of Qohelet's view of divine judgment may be one of the strongest arguments one can make on the basis of contextual fit alone, along with lack of textual cues that absurdity is in view.

Fox (1999:30) claims on the basis of Ecclesiastes 8:14 that *hebel* is not 'futile'. His thought is that while the works of the righteous may turn out to be futile insofar as they aim at a reward, the same cannot be applied to the wicked when they receive what the righteous deserve. Huovila (2018:147) understands the passage to refer to the fact that it happens that righteousness and wickedness do not produce corresponding results. The fact causes futility, as the profit of righteousness is not materialised and as wickedness can produce the same profit. Thus it is called futile by way of metonymy.

The sense of 'worthless' is contextually problematic in making Qohelet inconsistent. It creates unnecessary tension between all being worthless (Eccl 1:2) and some things being valued (such as joy in 3:12–13 and work in 9:10). This is a problem of contextual fit within the larger worldview of the book. If Qohelet claimed that all things lack value, he was not consistent in applying this. Nevertheless, Seybold (1978:319) is to be commended for noticing the link between *hebel* and *yitron* in Ecclesiastes.

Huovila (2018:118–156) tests the meaning of 'futile' for all occurrences of *hebel* in the book of Ecclesiastes, and concludes that for all occurences likely to be related to the summary of the book, the sense has good contextual fit. The multiple-sense view fails the contextual fit criterion as the very summary of the book in 1:2 and 12:8 argues for a unified meaning for all mentions of *hebel* that are connected with the summary (see also section 3.4). However, for any occurrences that are not connected to the summary, it remain a possibility that is to be decided contextually. Out of the views

surveyed here, the view that *hebel* means 'futile' without meaning 'worthless' has the best contextual fit.

3.4. Authorial cues to the reader

The word *hebel* is a polysemous word. The author of Ecclesiastes helps the reader arrive at his intended meaning. When he first introduces the word, he introduces it in the context immediately preceding the question of the profit of work. This helps orient the reader to the question of the benefit of work, which in turn disambiguates *hebel* and sets the two words in opposition. This is further confirmed in 2:11 where the rhetorical question is answered and the two words appear again as antonyms (Huovila 2018:91). See also Huovila (2018:154–156).

The problem with multiple-sense views is well expressed by Fox (1999:36): 'If Qohelet were saying, "X is transitory; Y is futile; Z is trivial", then the summary, "All is *hebel*" would be meaningless.' This argument applies to Seow's view, but also to Miller's symbolic view with one qualification. If it is possible to find an abstract sense that unites all of Miller's symbols, then the summary is appropriate. However, this is what Miller (2002) does not do, and if he had done it, it would no longer be a multiple-sense view proper. It is also to be noted that the possibility that some occurrences of the word are not related to the summary cannot be excluded *a priori.*

In Ecclesiastes things are called *hebel* in contexts that some interpreters have considered enigmatic or problematic in some way. These include the question of lack of distinction between humans and animals in death in Ecclesiastes 3:19 (Ogden and Zogbo 1997:115) and that the righteous get what the wicked deserve and vice versa in 8:14 (Ogden and Zogbo 1997:305). However, there is nothing in the text to indicate that an intellectual dilemma is at issue. The author of the book does not lead the reader into identifying 'enigma' as the meaning of the word. The nature of the assumed enigma is not spelled out in the book. At most the questions that are difficult to answer are raised, but the book goes no further in identifying them as engimas or describing what is enigmatic about them. Even if *hebel* clearly had the meaning of 'enigmatic', the ambiguity of the term would need to be clarified for the reader.

It is clear that at times *hebel* is painful. For example in Ecclesiastes 2:15–18 *hebel* and the associated lack of memory and death led Qohelet to hate life and work. It is clear that Qohelet thought *hebel* to be contrary to his expectations. He expected his work to produce permanent profit (2:11), but there was none. The

results were not in line with his expectations, so the results were absurd. This is in line with the idea that *hebel* means 'absurd'. This absurdity is related to work. Work is used in the immediately-following text when *hebel* is introduced in Ecclesiastes 1:2–3.

However, the link between absurdity and work is not a very clear authorial cue for the meaning of *hebel*. This is because the word is inherently ambiguous, and because absurdity is not a clearly attested or common meaning of the word, especially in connection with work. Though neither is *hebel* a frequent word associated with work or profit, the evidence we have points rather to *hebel* in connection to effort meaning 'futile' rather than 'absurd' (section 3.1).

Transience makes good sense as the meaning of *hebel* in many of the occurrences in Ecclesiastes. However, as the term is introduced in chapter 1, the discussion is in the context of permanence of activites (1:4–10) rather than a discussion of transience of individual activities. Thus the author actually leads the reader away from interpreting *hebel* as 'temporary'. Huovila (2018:58–59) discusses this further.

Worthlessness makes some sense as the meaning of *hebel* the way it is introduced in Ecclesiastes 1:2. In 1:3 it is contrasted with profit, and it is reasonable to assume that lack of profit implies lack of worth. The main problem with this view is not how the word is introduced but the fact that it makes the message of the book somewhat less coherent. If everything were worthless, it would not make much sense to ascribe value to various things, such as joy (2:24). For further discussion, see Fredericks (2010:47–49).

The view that *hebel* means 'futile' without implying worthlessness is supported by the introduction in Ecclesiastes 1:2–3. The contrast with profit leads the reader to contrast *hebel* with it and to disambiguate the word not to mean 'transient'. The profit is further elaborated. The rhetorical question of what profit there is for the work (Eccl 1:3) is answered in the negative in 2:11. Lack of profit is futility in Ecclesiastes 2. Temporal profit exists (2:13), but it is not the kind of profit that he is looking for (2:11). He is looking for profit that is not nullified by death (2:14–16). Whether future generations benefit from one's possessions is uncertain because a fool may end up having them (2:18–19). That futility does not indicate lack of value is implicit in the affirmation of various values in the book (wisdom in 2:13; joy in 2:24,3:12–13; work in 9:10).

Multiple-sense views face the difficulty that the author summarises the book using *hebel*, signalling to the reader that a singular meaning is meant for whatever occurrences of the word relate to the summary. The sense of 'enigmatic' lacks authorial cues, and the sense 'absurd' can claim only weak support from the argument of authorial cues, though 'absurd' fits many contexts. The sense of 'temporary' goes against authorial cues in the introduction of the term. The sense of 'futile' accords best with the way *hebel* is introduced. The evidence for the idea that futility does not imply worthlessness comes out only implicitly as it is needed to make Qohelet coherent. That authorial cue is clear even though it is not explicit.

3.5. Discussion of criteria

Usage outside the book of Ecclesiastes fits best the views that in Ecclesiastes it means 'temporary' or 'futile', though this argument on its own is not conclusive. These are clearly-attested meanings of the word. If potential extensions of attested meanings are included, 'incomprehensible' or 'enigmatic' becomes a possibility based on the idea that *ba`al hebel* can mean 'uncomprehending'.

The meaning of 'absurd' for *hebel* does not seem to be clearly attested, but it is arguably a possible extension of the basic meaning of 'nonsense' or 'deceit' or even 'futile' in the context of an absurd attempt at something. The contextual fit of 'absurd' is somewhat dependent on the view one takes on divine judgment in the book. If it is considered that Qohelet believed in a just divine judgment in the afterlife, the meaning is less likely than if he believed that God is a just judge in this life but that life does not meet the corresponding expectations. There are possible authorial cues to hint that 'absurd' may be the sense of *hebel*, but the signs are weak and ambiguous.

The multiple-meanings view can find some support in that *hebel* is polysemous. Many of the suggested meanings fit individual occurrences, and the difficulty scholars have had in finding a single meaning for the whole text is a major reason for the view. However, the view is strongly argued against by the use of *hebel* to summarise the book.

Contextual fit is the best with 'futility' as it fits every occurrence of the word, as tested by Huovila (2018:118–156). This view is also favoured by the criterion of authorial cues, regardless of whether Qohelet is considered to have believed in a just divine judgment in the afterlife or not. So on the basis of the cumulative evidence by these criteria, 'futile' without any implication of worthlessness is the most likely sense of *hebel* in the book of Ecclesiastes.

4. The significance of *hebel* for the study of Ecclesiastes

The meaning of *hebel* has long been considered to be an important word for understanding the book of Ecclesiastes. The author of the book makes this clear by using the word to summarise the message of the book. Other important themes add to the argument of the book, such as the major theme of joy and the theme of divine judgment, which is a minor theme until the very end, where it is made quite central in summarizing the teaching of the book.

Joy is recommended on the basis of futility (Eccl 2:23–23, 3:19–22, 8:14–15). If this joy is a genuine recommendation to grasp the value of joy, as argued by Huovila (2018:101–114) rather than a resigned, disappointed recommendation (Longman 1998:106–107), the book makes sense as a recommendation not to lose joy over pursuit of permanent profit, which is an unattainable goal in life.

The theme of divine judgment, if understood as a just divine jugdment of all deeds in the afterlife, gives a hint how to reconcile the teaching with Jesus's command to gather treasures in heaven (Matt 6:19–20). Divine judgment is not futile, but rather the ultimate evaluation of values. It determines lasting profit. However, divine judgment is not a judgment of achievements in life but of deeds. No permanent profit is achievable in this life because death separates one from all one's possessions and accomplishments. However, permanent profit is granted by divine judgment in the afterlife on the basis of deeds.

This view of divine judgment as being Qohelet's view is very much a minority view. If it is not accepted, understanding *hebel* as futility still contributes to understanding the message of the book. In that case the connection to the rest of the canon is weaker, but the overall message of futility and joy remains almost the same. The epilogist believed in a divine judgment of all deeds (Eccl 12:13 –14). The minority view that Qohelet held the same view of divine judgment has been argued to be plausible by Huovila (2018:175–242).

Understanding *hebel* as referring to futility as an antonym of profit without the implication of worthlessness, Huovila (2018:7, 167–168) summarises the message of book as 'there is nothing anyone can do to make any profit out of life', or in more detail, 'No permanent profit is possible in this life. This makes all work futile with respect to the goal of securing permanent profit. Yet people work as if it were possible, depriving themselves of joy in the process. People should rather face their mortality and the futility of all work, and enjoy life while doing good and taking God's judgment into account.'

5. Conclusion

This study compared six proposals for the meaning of *hebel* in Ecclesiastes by using a combination of criteria. The criteria are usage outside of Ecclesiastes, possible semantic extensions, contextual fit, and authorial cues to the reader. Huovila's view that *hebel* means 'futile' without implying 'worthlessness' satisfies these the best. In most cases the meaning can be narrowed down to one of the three subcategories, resulting in the meaning of *that which is associated with failure to gain permanent profit, (1) as that which fails to accomplish this, or (2) as the cause or (3) circumstance of the failure*, though at times a more general sense of futility is intended. The futility of 'all' (Eccl 1:2) can be understood as a somewhat limited 'all'. God's judgment is not included. Rather it sets the ultimate value of deeds (Ecclesiastes 12:13–14). The book makes a case to value joy over pursuing the impossible task of achieving permanent profit in life and losing joy in the process.

Reference List

Bartholomew CG 2009. *Ecclesiastes*. Baker commentary on the Old Testament wisdom and Psalms. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic.

Botterweck GJ and Ringgren H (eds) 1978. *Theological dictionary of the Old Testament. Volume 3*. Translated by JT Willis, GW Bromiley and DE Green. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans.

Fox MV 1999. *A time to tear down and a time to build up: a rereading of Ecclesiastes*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans.

Fredericks DC 2010. Ecclesiastes. In Fredericks and Estes 2010:15–263.

Fredericks DC and DJ Estes 2010. *Ecclesiastes & the Song of Songs*. Apollos Old Testament commentary 16. USA: Intervarsity Press.

Huovila KK 2018. The contribution of the theme of divine judgment to the argument of the book of Ecclesiastes. Doctoral dissertation, South African Theological Seminary. Johannesburg, South Africa.

Longman T III 1998. *The book of Ecclesiastes*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans.

Miller DB 2002. *Symbol and rhetoric in Ecclesiastes: the place of hebel in Qohelet's work*. Academia Biblica 2. Atlanta: Society of biblical literature.

Ogden GS 1987. *Qohelet*. Sheffield, England: JSOT press.

Ogden GS and Zogbo L 1997. *A handbook on Ecclesiastes*. UBS handbook series. New York: United Bible societies.

Seow C-L 1997. *Ecclesiastes*. The Anchor Bible 18C. New York: Doubleday.

Seybold K 1978. Hebhel; habhal. In Botterweck and Ringgren 1978:313–320.

Staples WE 1943. The 'Vanity' of Ecclesiastes. *Journal of Near Eastern studies* 2(2):95–104.

Taylor JR 1989. *Linguistic categorization: prototypes in linguistic theory*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.