

## Dr. Al Fuhr, Ecclesiastes, Session 2, major Motifs: Hebel—Fleeting, Futile, Frustration, Absurd

### Resources from NotebookLM

1) Abstract, 2) Audio podcast, 3) Study Guide, 4) Briefing Document, and 5) FAQs

#### 1. Abstract of Fuhr, Ecclesiastes, Session 1, Introduction, Qohelet, Genres, Biblicalelearning.org, BeL

This lecture by Dr. Al Fuhr analyzes the Hebrew word *hevel*, meaning "vapor" or "mist," as it appears 38 times in Ecclesiastes. He argues that *hevel* carries multiple, flexible meanings throughout the book, encompassing the **fleeting nature of life**, the **futility of human effort**, the **absurdity of events in a fallen world**, and a resulting **negative judgment** of these realities. Fuhr suggests that Ecclesiastes explores the limitations imposed on humanity in a fallen world and the search for "yitrone" (profit or gain), ultimately transitioning to a focus on "tov" (goodness). He connects the concept of *hevel* to the consequences of the fall described in Genesis and contrasts this with the ultimate solution found only in Christ.

**2. 13 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of Dr. Fuhr, Ecclesiastes, Session 2 – Double click icon to play in Windows media player or go to the Biblicalelearning.org [BeL] Site and click the audio podcast link there (Old Testament → Psalms and Wisdom → Ecclesiastes).**



**Fuhr,  
Eccles\_Session02.mp**

### 3. Briefing Document

Okay, here is a detailed briefing document summarizing the key themes and ideas from the provided source, "Fuhr\_Ecclesiastes\_EN\_Session02.pdf":

#### **Briefing Document: Understanding "Hevel" in Ecclesiastes**

**Overview:** This document provides an analysis of Dr. Al Fuhr's lecture on the Hebrew word "hevel," a crucial term in the Book of Ecclesiastes. Fuhr argues that a proper understanding of "hevel" is essential to correctly interpreting the entire book. He explores the various nuances of "hevel" beyond a simple translation of "meaningless" or "vanity," emphasizing its metaphorical nature and connection to a fallen world.

#### **Key Themes & Ideas:**

##### **1. The Centrality of "Hevel":**

- The word "hevel" (הֶבֶל) appears 38 times in Ecclesiastes. It's often translated as "vanity" (KJV), "meaningless" (NIV), or "futile" in modern translations.
- Fuhr emphasizes that "hevel" is not simply "meaningless" or "purposeless," which is a common misinterpretation.
- Hevel literally means "mist" or "vapor," and it carries significant metaphorical weight. A popular description is "what is left after a soap bubble pops."
- Understanding "hevel" correctly is "programmatic" for interpreting the book, meaning it sets the framework for how the rest of the book should be read. Misunderstanding this word will likely lead to misinterpreting the book.
- The lecturer believes that hevel is a programmatic term.

##### **1. The Metaphorical Nature of "Hevel":**

- "Hevel" is used as a metaphor, allowing for a range of meanings and interpretations.
- Metaphors carry multiple ideas, offering flexibility beyond literal definitions. Like when God is described as a "rock" (not literally stone, but stability).
- "Hevel" can highlight different aspects of life lived in a fallen world depending on the context.
- A single context can sometimes express multiple senses of hevel.

##### **1. Word Study of "Hevel" in the Old Testament:**

- Outside of Ecclesiastes, "hevel" appears in various contexts, revealing multiple shades of meaning:
- **Transience/Fleetingness:** Life is like a "breath," "mist," or a "fleeting shadow" (Psalm 144:4; 39:4-5, 11; Job 7:16). "Man is like a *hevel*, his days are like a *hevel* shadow".
- **Vain/Futility:** Effort or labor that yields no lasting fruit or profit (Job 9:29).
- **Hopelessness:** Something without any real chance of success or fulfillment (Psalm 62:9-10). "Men of low degree are only *hevel*, only vanity."
- **Inadequacy:** Efforts or words that fail to achieve their intended purpose (Job 21:34; 27:12; 35:16).
- **Worthless/Idols:** False prophets and idols are described as "hevel" (Jeremiah 10:8; 14:22; 8:19). "Their *hevel* is wood."
- This varied use of the word points to the flexibility inherent in the word and that *hevel* carries multiple senses.

#### 1. "Hevel" in Ecclesiastes: Families of Meaning:

- Fuhr identifies several families of meaning for "hevel" in Ecclesiastes, all relating to the "fallenness" of the world. These families include:
- **Fleetingness/Transience:** The ephemeral nature of life and its experiences. "Enjoy life with your wife whom you love all the days of this *hevel* life that God has given you under the sun all your *hevel* days." (Ecclesiastes 9:9); "For youth and vigor are *hevel*." (Ecclesiastes 11:9); "Beauty is *hevel*." (Proverbs 31:30).
- **Vain Effort/Futility:** Efforts, even wisdom, that ultimately fail to provide lasting satisfaction or solution to the problems of life. "Everything was *hevel*, a chasing after the wind, nothing was gained under the sun." (Ecclesiastes 2:11). "All of it is *hevel*, a chasing after the wind." (Ecclesiastes 2:17); "This too is *hevel*, a chasing after the wind." (Ecclesiastes 2:26); "This too is *hevel*, a chasing after the wind." (Ecclesiastes 4:4). "This too is *hevel*, a miserable business." (Ecclesiastes 4:8)
- **Absurdity:** The seeming senselessness and injustice of the way things happen in a fallen world, where the righteous may suffer while the wicked prosper. "There is something else *hevel* that occurs on earth. Righteous men who get what the wicked deserve, and wicked men who get what the righteous deserve." (Ecclesiastes 8:14).

- **Negative Judgment:** The frustration and vexation caused by the realities of a fallen world, reflecting that things are not as they should be.

### 1. The Search for "Yitron" and "Tov":

- Kohelet (the teacher in Ecclesiastes) seeks "yitron" (יִתְרוֹן) which means "gain," "profit," or "advantage." This is posed as an interrogative in the beginning of the book - "What does man gain from all his labor at which he toils under the sun?" (Ecclesiastes 1:3).
- This search for yitron represents a quest to find a solution to the "hevelness" of life.
- However, Kohelet ultimately does not discover yitron through his reflections and experiences (Ecclesiastes 2:11). "No *yitron* was found under the sun."
- Kohelet then transitions to seeking "tov" (טוֹב), which means "good." This is presented in the recurring phrase - "There is nothing better than..."
- The focus shifts from finding a solution to hevel to finding what is good or beneficial in a fallen world.

### 1. Ecclesiastes in a Canonical Context:

- The book of Ecclesiastes provides practical wisdom for living in a fallen world.
- It acknowledges the limitations of human wisdom in solving mankind's deeper problems.
- The book repeatedly alludes to the "fallen" state of man, using intertextual references to the book of Genesis, especially Genesis 3. The author of Ecclesiastes seems to be very familiar with the book of Genesis.
- While Ecclesiastes does not provide the ultimate solution, it sets the stage for the need for divine revelation, emphasizing that salvation is through Christ, not just through wisdom.

## 1. Solution Through Christ

- The creation was subjected to *hevel* or frustration (Romans 8:20).
- Only through Christ can the dilemma of *hevel* be solved. Wisdom can only provide what is "tov", "good", but not the solution.

### **Conclusion:**

Dr. Fuhr's lecture highlights the importance of understanding "hevel" as a multifaceted term, far beyond a simple translation. The term is a crucial key to unlocking the depths of the book of Ecclesiastes and its message about living in a fallen world. The use of "hevel" in the book shows that Kohelet's search is for a solution to the problem of life, and that search is not resolved in human wisdom but rather a solution through God. By understanding its various nuances – transience, futility, absurdity, and negative judgment – and its connection to "fallenness," we can gain a richer interpretation of Ecclesiastes and its timeless wisdom.

This briefing document should help facilitate a deeper understanding of the ideas presented in the lecture.

## 4. Fuhr, Ecclesiastes, Session 2, Major Motifs : Hebel— Fleeting, Futile, Frustration, Absurd

### Ecclesiastes: Understanding *Hevel*

#### Short Answer Quiz

1. What is the literal meaning of the Hebrew word *hevel*, and how is it translated in various English versions of the Bible?
2. Why is understanding the word *hevel* crucial to interpreting the book of Ecclesiastes?
3. Explain how *hevel* functions as a metaphor and why this is important for interpreting the book.
4. How is the word *hevel* used in Psalms to describe the nature of human life?
5. In addition to fleetingness, what other facets of life are associated with *hevel* in the Old Testament, using examples from Job?
6. What are the three "families of meaning" that Dr. Fuhr identifies for *hevel* within the book of Ecclesiastes, and how do they relate to each other?
7. Describe the meaning of the phrase "chasing after the wind" in relation to *hevel* within Ecclesiastes.
8. What is the key question posed in Ecclesiastes 1:3, and how does it relate to the concept of *yitron*?
9. According to Dr. Fuhr, does the book of Ecclesiastes ultimately provide a solution to life's *hevelness*, and if not, what does it offer?
10. How does Paul use the concept of *hevel* in Romans 8, and what does it reveal about the ultimate solution to its dilemma?

#### Answer Key

1. *Hevel* literally means mist or vapor. It is translated in English versions as vanity (KJV), meaningless (NIV), or futile.
2. *Hevel* is a programmatic term for the book, and misunderstanding it can lead to misinterpreting the entire message of Ecclesiastes; a correct understanding is key to proper interpretation.

3. *Hevel* functions as a metaphor, allowing it to carry multiple ideas beyond its literal meaning, providing flexibility to convey ideas about various aspects of life.
4. In Psalms, *hevel* is used to highlight the transience or fleeting nature of human life, often emphasizing how brief and temporary human existence is.
5. In Job, *hevel* is used to convey the vanity or futility of human effort and the hopelessness of certain situations, such as false comfort and worthless words.
6. The three families of meaning are fleetingness (transience), vain effort (futility), and absurdity (senselessness). They relate to different aspects of the human condition in a fallen world.
7. The phrase "chasing after the wind" accompanies *hevel* to emphasize vain or futile effort, specifically when one cannot find satisfaction or fulfillment in what is pursued.
8. Ecclesiastes 1:3 asks, "What does man gain from all his labor at which he toils under the sun?" This question introduces the idea of *yitron*, a search for profit, gain, or a surplus, suggesting a solution to *hevel*.
9. Ecclesiastes does not ultimately provide a solution (*yitron*) to the *hevel* of life but suggests finding what is *tov* (good). It provides practical wisdom to navigate a fallen world.
10. Paul uses the Greek word that translates *hevel* to refer to the frustration of creation due to its fallen condition, pointing to the need for redemption found in Christ as the ultimate solution.

## Essay Questions

1. Analyze the various ways Dr. Fuhr describes *hevel* as it relates to the human experience in a fallen world. Explain how these descriptions impact our understanding of the book of Ecclesiastes.
2. Compare and contrast the concept of *hevel* as it's used in the Old Testament (Psalms and Job) to its usage in Ecclesiastes.
3. Discuss the progression of thought in Ecclesiastes from seeking *yitron* to finding *tov*. How does this shift reflect the book's overall message?

4. Explore the relationship between the concept of *hevel* and the themes of fallenness and mortality as discussed by Dr. Fuhr.
5. Critically evaluate the claim that the book of Ecclesiastes is both theologically important and yet not the ultimate answer to life's dilemmas, and what is implied by the statement.

## Glossary of Key Terms

- **Hevel (הֶבֶל):** A Hebrew word that literally means mist or vapor, often translated as vanity, meaningless, futile, or fleeting. It serves as a programmatic term in Ecclesiastes, describing the transient, futile, and absurd aspects of life in a fallen world.
- **Kohelet (קֹהֵלֶת):** The Hebrew word for "teacher" or "preacher," referring to the primary figure and authorial voice in the book of Ecclesiastes.
- **Metaphor:** A figure of speech in which a word or phrase is applied to an object or action to which it is not literally applicable. It allows for flexible meaning by conveying multiple ideas through a single term.
- **Yitron (יִתְרוֹן):** A Hebrew word meaning gain, profit, or surplus. In the context of Ecclesiastes, it refers to the solution or advantage sought by the Kohelet to overcome the dilemma of *hevel*.
- **Tov (טוֹב):** A Hebrew word meaning good. In Ecclesiastes, it is contrasted with the unattainable *yitron* and refers to the attainable good things one can experience in life, even amidst *hevel*.
- **Fallenness:** A theological concept that refers to the corrupted state of humanity and the world resulting from the disobedience of Adam and Eve in the book of Genesis.
- **Transience:** The quality or state of being temporary and short-lived.
- **Futility:** The pointlessness or uselessness of an action or pursuit.
- **Absurdity:** The state of being ridiculous, unreasonable, or senseless.
- **Intertextual References:** References within a text to other texts, often used to create layers of meaning or to highlight particular themes. In Ecclesiastes, they often connect back to Genesis 3.



## 5. FAQs on Fuhr, Ecclesiastes, Session 2, Major Motifs: Hebel—Fleeting, Futile, Frustration, Absurd, Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)

### Frequently Asked Questions about Ecclesiastes and the Meaning of *Hevel*

1. **What is the significance of the word *hevel* in Ecclesiastes, and how is it typically translated?**
2. The Hebrew word *hevel*, often translated as "vanity," "meaningless," or "futility," appears 38 times in Ecclesiastes. Literally, *hevel* means "mist" or "vapor," like a soap bubble after it pops. Its significance lies in its metaphorical usage, which conveys a range of ideas about life in a fallen world. Understanding *hevel* is key to correctly interpreting the book.
3. **Why is understanding *hevel* crucial to interpreting the book of Ecclesiastes?**
4. *Hevel* is a "programmatic term" in Ecclesiastes. If misunderstood, it can lead to misinterpretations of the entire book. The text often uses *hevel* to describe the nature of life and existence. Whether it means complete meaninglessness or another quality of a fallen world will change how the rest of Ecclesiastes is viewed.
5. **Beyond its literal meaning, what concepts does the metaphor of *hevel* convey in the Old Testament?**
6. Beyond "mist" or "vapor," *hevel* is a flexible metaphor with multiple meanings in the Old Testament. It can signify:
  - **Transience/Fleetingness:** The temporary nature of life, like a passing shadow or a breath.
  - **Vain Effort/Futility:** Efforts that yield no lasting fruit or profit, like "chasing after the wind."
  - **Hopelessness:** Situations where hope of a goal is impossible to achieve.
  - **Worthlessness:** Idols or false comforts that fail to provide help or meaning.
  - **Absurdity:** Situations that defy logic and fairness, reflecting the fallen nature of the world.
1. **How does the book of Ecclesiastes use *hevel* in relation to the transience of life?**

2. Ecclesiastes uses *hevel* to highlight the fleeting nature of life and its various stages. It is connected to aging, the brevity of youth and vigor, and the fact that our days pass like a shadow. Examples of *hevel* related to transience include Ecclesiastes 6:12 ("few and fleeting days") and 11:9 ("youth and vigor are *hevel*").
3. **In what ways does Ecclesiastes present human effort and wisdom as *hevel*?**
4. The book illustrates that even with wisdom and hard work, we cannot always achieve lasting satisfaction or resolve life's problems. Many times, efforts are in vain and the end result does not accomplish the goal. *Hevel* in this context is often coupled with the phrase "chasing after the wind" (e.g., 2:11, 2:17, 4:4), indicating futile pursuits. The idea here isn't that actions are simply fleeting, but that the efforts are ultimately unable to reach the intended goals.
5. **How does *hevel* relate to the idea of absurdity or the senselessness of some aspects of life in Ecclesiastes?**
6. Ecclesiastes highlights the absurdity and lack of logical consistency that exists in a fallen world using the idea of *hevel*. This is demonstrated in chapter 8:14 with the observation that sometimes the righteous suffer while the wicked prosper. This idea demonstrates that the world is not as it should be, and that reality itself can be absurd at times.
7. **What is *yitron*, and how does it relate to Kohelet's quest in Ecclesiastes?**
8. *Yitron*, translated as "gain," "profit," or "surplus," represents the advantage or solution Kohelet seeks for the *hevel* (or dilemma) of life. Initially, Kohelet searches for *yitron* through his experiences and wisdom. However, he does not find a solution to *hevel* in *yitron*. He then transitions to finding *tov*, or what is good, rather than a solution.
9. **Does Ecclesiastes offer a solution to the problem of *hevel*, and if not, where is this solution found?**
10. While Ecclesiastes offers wisdom for living in a fallen world and identifies what *tov* (good) can be found, it does not provide a solution to the fundamental dilemma of *hevel*. The book's themes are meant to prompt reflection on life's meaning, but the ultimate solution is revealed through revelation, and not merely through observation and wisdom. The New Testament, particularly Romans 8, explains that the solution to *hevel* is found in Christ, where creation and humanity find hope and liberation from the fallen condition.