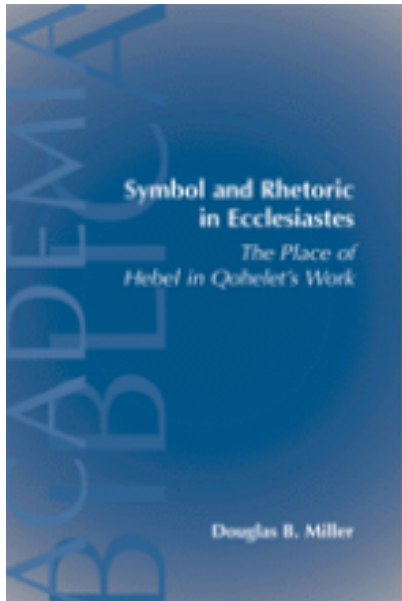


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Miller, Douglas B.

Symbol and Rhetoric in Ecclesiastes: The Place of Hebel in Qohelet's Work

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The book *Symbol and Rhetoric in Ecclesiastes: The Place of Hebel in Qohelet's Work*, by Douglas B. Miller, is beautifully written both in terms of grammar and style. This gives it a clarity of expression. Miller also treats differing scholarship with a grace that is uncommon these days.

Miller takes a rhetorical-critical approach to Qoheleth's use of *hebel* in the book of Ecclesiastes. Chapter 1, "Introduction," begins with a helpful survey of the various approaches of scholarship regarding the central term *hebel* in Ecclesiastes. Miller points out the strengths and weaknesses of the abstract-sense, multiple-senses (multivalency), and single-metaphor approaches to understanding Qoheleth's use of *hebel* in Ecclesiastes. It is out of these perceived weaknesses that Miller advances his own thesis of "symbol"—which has the benefits of a single term with multiple metaphors or senses.

In Chapter 2, "Metaphor and Symbol," Miller outlines his case for adopting the literary concept of symbol—by way of rhetorical criticism—as best representing Qoheleth's intention and use of *hebel* in Ecclesiastes. Here Miller is careful to define many important terms in his thesis. However, definitions of important

terms is not an argumentative case. Miller comes to a rather abrupt end and conclusion to the chapter without really making a substantial case for adopting symbol as the interpretive mechanism for *hebel* in Ecclesiastes. He says on page 52: "There is reason to believe that Qohelet has proceeded by a careful and deliberate process to construct his symbol, and is consistently precise about the meaning of *hebel* in each context." It is really impossible to demonstrate this "careful and deliberate process" Qoheleth had in mind because we have no other information about what was in his mind except that which is extant in Ecclesiastes. Miller's position here is further complicated by the definitions he assumes for *hebel*, as articulated in chapter 3.

In Chapter 3, "Material and Metaphorical Uses of *Hebel*," Miller outlines the various material and metaphorical uses of *hebel* with a rather unusual emphasis on postbiblical uses. Miller adopts the primary sense of *hebel* as "vapor" but also the rabbinic use of *hebel* as "foul," that is, "toxic fumes" (that arise out of the confined space of a hole in the ground). This is an interesting twist regarding *hebel* scholarship in Ecclesiastes, but again one is left wondering if a substantial case has been made for such a position. Another significant problem for Miller is adopting a simple "vapor" definition for many of the thirty-eight occurrences of *hebel* in Ecclesiastes. Miller is correct insofar as he acknowledges the wide range of semantic meanings for *hebel*, but it seems ironic that he would want to "box" *hebel* into a symbol reading in terms of "vapor" and "foulness." Indeed the adoption of the latter term "foulness" also seems in question because it is largely derived from much later rabbinic literature use and because it is not at all clear that this is what Qoheleth meant by using the term *hebel*. In conjunction with this, Miller does not seem to argue adequately against the single-term multivalency position regarding *hebel*—a powerful argument that recognizes Qoheleth's employment of *hebel* as a singular term with multiple uses and meanings as a running play on words relative to Qoheleth's *topoi*. This is why it is perhaps best to simply adopt the transliteration of *hebel* in translations with a footnote to the wide semantic range of the term. Thus, there is a singularity of term that enables a context sensitive approach to understanding the *hebel* in Ecclesiastes. Why keep trying to unnecessarily "box" the term in?

In Chapter 4, "*Hebel* As Symbol in Ecclesiastes," Miller articulates how *hebel* is used in Ecclesiastes relative to the various *topoi* of the book. Initially the chapter attempts to make the case for why *hebel* should be understood as a symbol with multiple meanings but primarily in a tandem sense of "vapor" and "foulness." It is precisely this chapter's overview of the use of *hebel* in the *topoi* of Ecclesiastes that undermines this narrow tandem conception and strengthens the

multivalency position. While Miller argues that Qoheleth attempted to find a symbol that “best represented life as he had experienced and deliberated upon it,” he never provides a substantial case as to why the reader of Ecclesiastes should be alerted “to the possibility of *hebel* as a symbol” (152).

In Chapter 5, “Implications,” Miller strikes a winning note because the “implications” of various positions seem to be a neglected aspect of scholarship. Here Miller attempts to support the integrity of Ecclesiastes while explaining the tensions within the book. Ultimately Miller postulates that Qoheleth’s literary purpose was to “offer his audience ways of coping with these realities,” that is, the insubstantiality, transience, and foulness of life (180). While Miller again demonstrates good balance in his views here, he perhaps is a little left of it when he concludes that Qoheleth nonetheless wished to reaffirm “the orthodox picture of God as just, powerful, and the source of good” (180). It appears that the book of Ecclesiastes remains less sure of those things than Miller might be.

In summary, the strengths of the book are that it provides a good survey of *hebel* scholarship while putting a different “spin” on how the term is to be understood in Ecclesiastes. Particularly notable is Miller’s positive redemption of Ecclesiastes’ “realist” position balanced between the extremes of the outright joy interpretation of the book and a pessimistic reading of it. The charts provided in the book are also very helpful for “sorting out” the appearances of *hebel* in Ecclesiastes, the Hebrew Bible, and rabbinic literature. The weaknesses are that while there are a good number of subarguments for various understandings of *hebel* in Ecclesiastes, the overall case for the various positions adopted in the thesis seems underdeveloped. Even more problematic is that it is yet another attempt to “jam” *hebel* into an *unnecessary* interpretive “straight-jacket.” Having said all that, it is clear that Miller has done his homework and provided a rare example in biblical scholarship of balance and even-handed treatment of the subject matter at hand. The book is very well written and clear in what it is saying. While the thesis is ultimately unconvincing, it does not undermine the overall success and value of Miller’s book and its reading of Ecclesiastes. The Society of Biblical Literature dissertation series has yet another “winner” here.