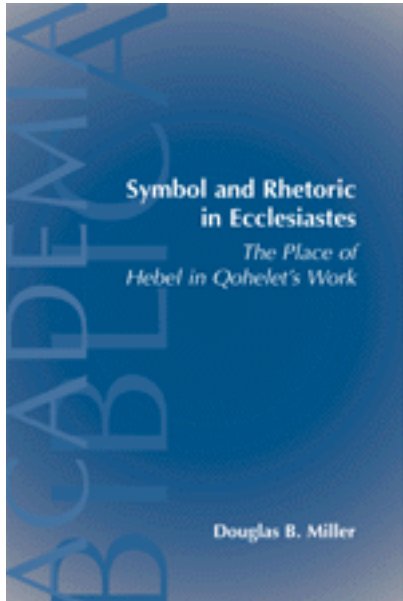


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Miller, Douglas B.

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

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The meaning of *hebel* in Ecclesiastes is a perennial question for those who have studied this book. In this revised doctoral dissertation written under C. L. Seow, Miller not only proposes a new understanding of the use of this elusive term but also attempts to demonstrate that this understanding is the key to unlocking the method and message of Qoheleth. Miller opens his investigation with a critique of previous attempts to define Qoheleth's use of *hebel*. He adroitly demonstrates that previous approaches to understanding *hebel* are deficient. The commentators and translations that attempt to determine one abstract sense to cover all occurrences of the word in Ecclesiastes (e.g., "vanity") run afoul of several contexts in which the meaning assigned does not seem to fit. Those who attempt a calculated use of multiple senses often seem to imply that Qoheleth's thought was far from coherent. Finally, those who attempt to find a single metaphor that reveals Qoheleth's meaning for this term can find no single metaphor that makes sense of all uses of the term. Instead, Miller proposes that *hebel* is a "symbol," that is, an image that holds together a set of meanings or, as he prefers, referents. His thesis is that all uses of *hebel* in some way relate to its material sense, *vapor*. This does not imply that *hebel* is used imprecisely or indiscriminately, according to Miller; rather, it serves as a symbol carefully crafted by Qoheleth simultaneously to unify his thought and to fit the shape of each context in which it is used. In his introductory chapter Miller includes an

extended discussion of Qoheleth's use of metaphor and frequent use of terms with multiple senses to underscore his assertion that *hebel* may well be polyvalent in meaning. He also includes a discussion of Israelite wisdom literature to demonstrate that Qoheleth is well within the mainstream of his culture when he employs such strategies. Before proceeding to prove his thesis, Miller also includes brief discussion of issues of genre and structure of Ecclesiastes. These short sections tantalize the reader and clearly demonstrate that Miller is familiar with the secondary literature on Ecclesiastes. However, they fall far short of presenting a convincing argument that Miller's view of the genre or structure of Ecclesiastes is correct or even one of the more plausible alternatives.

Before discussing the meaning of *hebel* or examining its individual uses, Miller presents an entire chapter devoted to the concepts of metaphor and symbol. He begins with a discussion of rhetorical criticism and the history of its use in biblical studies. In this discourse Miller covers ground that is familiar to most involved in contemporary biblical studies and appears to be devised largely to substantiate his exploration of the rhetorical use of *hebel*. This is well and good, but readers should not expect anything substantially new or enlightening here. He progresses to a discussion of rhetorical theory of metaphor, defining it technically as "speaking about the subject (S) in terms of the predicate (P) to communicate the referent or meaning (R)" (32). Therefore, a metaphor designates a linguistic relationship among three components but does not equate all of the characteristics of a subject and its predicate, only those implied in the referent. After short technical discussions of the theory of how authors construct and audiences decode metaphors, Miller arrives at one of the most useful discussions in his book, that of "guarding terms" that an author may use to aid the audience in determining the referent of a metaphor. These are three: synonyms, contraries, and extensions. The noting of such guarding terms throughout Ecclesiastes is a major part of Miller's method. However, Miller is not concerned with *hebel* as a metaphor but with *hebel* as a symbol that serves to unite several metaphors through a single image. That is, in Miller's terms, "the predicate term (P) communicating an R-value 'system,' or multiple R values, about a subject or subjects (S)" (45). Authors, according to Miller, may employ a symbol because of its ability to hold together multiple referents in one image. Moreover, in some contexts they may employ a symbol to refer to more than one referent value (becoming multivalent), or at times the symbol may embody all referents (becoming omnivalent). Audiences are then challenged to incorporate all referent values used throughout a work in order to grasp the author's intentions in using such a symbol.

In order to classify Qoheleth's use of the *hebel* symbol, Miller proposes that Ecclesiastes contains four main speech-types: statements of report, statements of inference, statements of judgment, and injunctions. He gives several examples of each in order to demonstrate that Qoheleth uses *hebel* both to describe and to evaluate. While I am convinced that

Qoheleth does both, this section is too short to demonstrate that these are Qoheleth's primary speech-types or even that they are prominent ones in Ecclesiastes. No matter, Miller's point is well-taken and put to good use later on: *hebel* is not merely a description of a state of affairs; it is Qoheleth's verdict about them.

An extended investigation into the uses of *hebel* in texts other than Ecclesiastes occupies his third chapter. Miller begins with the material sense of *hebel*, that of *breath* or *vapor*. He briefly notes a number of these in postbiblical rabbinic texts before moving on to the biblical texts where he notes such usages. For the biblical texts he includes both the Hebrew text and his translation. He finds only two material uses in the Bible: Ps 62:10 and Isa 57:13. Even here, he must admit that Ps 62:10 is parabolic in nature, so that the use of *hebel* is not a clear-cut case for the material meaning. He notes that *vapor* is probably the best English term corresponding to this material sense, which in rabbinic texts may refer not only to an insubstantial, transient substance in the air but also to fumes with foul properties. It is Miller's contention that these basic properties of *hebel* in its material sense supply the referents used in its metaphorical senses.

More common are the metaphorical uses of *hebel*, and Miller spends considerable time discussing these and classifying them (including five uses of the verbal root *hbl*). He once again has in-depth discussions of biblical texts and summary discussions of other texts, including Ben Sira, rabbinic writings, and texts from Qumran. He finds three basic referent values for *hebel* in all of these (insubstantial, deception, and transient) as well as a number of uses of the employment of *hebel* in stock metaphors relating to pagan nations and foreign deities. In four of the biblical occurrences he proposes a multivalent metaphorical use (Prov 21:6; Pss 144:4; 39:6, 12). It is these four that present a challenge to his classification system, but Miller is strangely silent on this point. Is *hebel* being used as a symbol in these passages, which would explain the multivalency? Or, is his classification system somehow flawed and his separation of the insubstantial from the transient too rigid? Does insubstantiality imply transience when *hebel* is used metaphorically (or vice versa)? Or does it imply this only in a few cases?

Miller is now prepared for a thorough examination of the uses of *hebel* in Ecclesiastes. He devotes his entire fourth chapter to collecting, classifying, and summarizing Qoheleth's use of this term. Pericope by pericope in the order found in the text, he examines each use of *hebel* and its metaphorical referent. His exegesis is skillful, and he is conversant with other contemporary opinions throughout this chapter. He concludes that there are three basic metaphoric referents employed by Qoheleth in constructing the *hebel* symbol: insubstantial, transient and foul. A number of uses are multivalent, usually combining insubstantiality (futility) and foulness (disgust), with only one multivalent use (8:14) combining transience with insubstantiality.

This, I believe, brings to the fore two methodological problems for Miller. The first involves his identification of larger and smaller textual units in Ecclesiastes. When he set forth an outline of the book in chapter 1, Miller did not go to any lengths to justify the structure for Ecclesiastes that he proposed to follow. Since the structure of Ecclesiastes has eluded generations of scholars, and since the outline he follows often determines contextual factors in his exegesis, Miller's conclusions on the meaning of *hebel* in particular instances are open to serious challenge. This is especially true near the beginning and end of sections where Miller finds a particular use of *hebel* to be part of a programmatic or summary statement by Qoheleth. While I would agree that 1:2 and 12:8 are summary statements for the entire book, I am less convinced of several others Miller proposes.

Second, Miller bases his use of the *foul* referent mainly on rabbinic sources where vapors are said to have foul properties. This seems suspiciously like reading later evidence in order to project it anachronistically back onto Qoheleth's earlier work. I suspect that the occurrences of the supposed *foul* referents are actually Qoheleth's conclusions based on *hebel*'s insubstantiality and, in one instance, transience. That is, things in this life are *hebel* and therefore, foul or disgusting or repulsive or unreliable because they are insubstantial and/or transient and thus cannot be trusted. Therefore, it may be that in calling some things *hebel* Qoheleth is not calling on a different referent but extending his two major referents by means of a conclusion.

These objections, however, do not completely invalidate Miller's main thesis. I believe he is essentially correct that *hebel* is a symbol employed skillfully by Qoheleth throughout his book to engage the reader in an ongoing dialogue about life "under the sun." He is correct that this symbol can be multi- or omnivalent. His great contribution is precisely at this point. One does not need to search for a single meaning or metaphor, nor does one need to have a largely eclectic, occurrence-by-occurrence approach to its meaning. Instead, *hebel* is a term that Qoheleth employs to unite a number of metaphors into a single system that is emblematic of his view of the human condition and its temporal uncertainties.

Miller's final chapter applies his conclusions about Qoheleth's use of *hebel* to important issues in Ecclesiastes. He argues very ably that Qoheleth's use of *hebel* as a symbol demonstrates the coherence of the book as a whole and tends to negate the assertions of earlier scholars who challenged some parts of the book as secondary additions from a later editor. Thus, 1:2 and 12:8 in particular with their omnivalent use of *hebel* are not to be excised from the book as later intrusions but are essential parts of Qoheleth's argument. Miller also argues that Qoheleth's strategy is to engage in his culture's ethos through presentation of his competence, status, and moral character, to destabilize his

readers' view of the world, and then to restabilize it to a new, enhanced moral and ethical worldview. *Hebel* and its use by Qoheleth plays an important part in this process. Miller's argument is persuasive, though perhaps a little too Hegelian in form and execution and perhaps overly simplistic due to the summary nature of this chapter. More satisfying are Miller's conclusions about Qoheleth's nature. Was he a repentant king, an ascetic, a bitter skeptic, a preacher of joy, or a realist, as various interpreters have argued? Miller argues, rightly in my estimation, that he was a realist who could accept that some things in life appear to be contradictory, bizarre, or tragic without becoming a cynic. Miller sees Qoheleth's use of *hebel* as indicating this by its application to situations where there are limitations or complications for humans. Moreover, this realist position of Qoheleth places him squarely in line with Israelite wisdom traditions and with wisdom throughout the ancient Near East, as Miller deftly points out.

This volume also contains two helpful appendixes that summarize in tabular form all the occurrences of *hebel* that Miller discusses in the book as well as his conclusions about them. The impressive bibliography substantiates what is evident throughout the book: that Miller is familiar and conversant with research on Ecclesiastes and rhetorical criticism. The four indexes (author, ancient texts, words [Hebrew and other languages], and topical) are very helpful.

While I have expressed a number of reservations about Miller's method in particular places, this remains a book worth reading. Although I believe some of his assertions and conclusions need to be tempered, Miller's main thesis is well worth considering and, in my view, presents a better approach to the use of *hebel* than has been proposed heretofore. I would recommend this book to anyone who wishes to grapple with not only the meaning of *hebel* in Ecclesiastes but also with the message of Qoheleth and his wisdom.