

Qoheleth's Allusions to Abel:

Reading Qoheleth as a Contemplation on the Story of the First Unjustly Murdered Human

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Abstract

In Qoheleth's reflection on the state of human life, he finds that life is often unfair. This leads him to the conclusion that "all is הבל" (1:2). הבל, a term that still proves difficult to translate, is not only the central theme of this enigmatic book, but also the name of the first murder victim in the Hebrew bible: Abel, whose birth and death is described in Genesis 4. That Qoheleth chose the word הבל to describe, among others, the injustices in life, has led some scholars to suggest that the author of Qoheleth was familiar with the story in Genesis 4. This paper, using the approach of inner-biblical allusion, argues that not only the term הבל, but also the phrases רעות/רעיון רוח and רעה אחד can be understood as allusions to Abel. Specifically, this paper argues for a new reading of the phrase רעה אחד (usually translated as "one/a/any shepherd"), as "shepherd (number) one," that is, "the first shepherd," as a direct allusion to Abel. This paper suggest that the author of Qoheleth uses the three words/phrases הבל, רעות/רעיון רוח and רעה אחד as allusions to Abel in order to contemplate and reflect on the story of the first human who was unjustly murdered as a part of his broader reflection on human life and its injustices.

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1. Introduction

The book Qoheleth takes its name after the main speaker, who is introduced by the narrator in Qoh 1:1 as “the Teacher (תִּלְקֵה), the son of David, king in Jerusalem.”¹ Most English translations translate תִּלְקֵה as “teacher” or “preacher.” Yet, the noun תִּלְקֵה, from which תִּלְקֵה is a “noun-from-noun denominative,”² means “assembly,” and the denominative verb תִּלְקֵה means “to assemble.”³ Consequently, תִּלְקֵה is “an assembler,” or “one who assembles.” Other translations render תִּלְקֵה throughout the book as “Ecclesiastes.” Most English translations also use this term as the title of the book. The term “Ecclesiastes” is based on the Septuagint’s title of the book, Ἐκκλησιαστής, which means “member of the ἐκκλησία, the assembly.”⁴ It is, however, unclear what the object of Qoheleth’s assembling is. It could either refer to gathering “an assembly consisting, perhaps, of students,” or to collecting “things such as wisdom sayings and instructions.”⁵ Either way, the epilogue identifies Qoheleth as a sage, חָכָם (12:9), which “implies that he was among the wise (*ḥākāmîm*).”⁶

The book Qoheleth is often categorized as part of the “Wisdom literature” of the Hebrew Bible. “Wisdom literature” is a group of books that have been lumped together for various reasons such as similarities in form, theme, and worldview. The category of “Wisdom literature” is, however, a contested category about which various scholars have voiced their criticism. They have, for example, criticized the fact that the Wisdom literature label is “a creation of modern scholarship”; that this label is rather vague; and that it makes it difficult to appreciate the individual characteristics of each text, as one and the same label is applied to works that are vastly different.⁷ On top of that, there is no consensus about which books should be included in the Wisdom literature category. While some would only include the three books Proverbs, Job, and Qoheleth, others choose to add Ben Sira and Wisdom of Solomon, and yet others also include Song of Songs and certain Psalms that deal with the concept of wisdom.⁸

¹ Unless otherwise specified, the translation used is the NRSV.

² Michael V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and A Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 160.

³ F. Brown, S. R. Driver, C. A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon with an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2018), s.v. “תִּלְקֵה.”

⁴ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 161.

⁵ William P. Brown, *Wisdom’s Wonder: Character, Creation, and Crisis in the Bible’s Wisdom Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 137.

⁶ C. L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 18C (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 60.

⁷ Samuel L. Adams and Matthew Goff, “Editors’ Introduction,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Wisdom Literature*, eds. Samuel L. Adams and Matthew Goff (Hoboken: John Wiley and Sons, 2020), 4.

⁸ Will Kynes, *An Obituary for “Wisdom Literature”: The Birth, Death, and Intertextual Reintegration of a Biblical Corpus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 1.

Whereas the various “Wisdom” books are extremely diverse, they still display thematic similarities in that they all deal with the concept of wisdom. They all do so, however, in their own way. William P. Brown argues that the three books Proverbs, Job, and Qoheleth are so distinct, that “If the wisdom corpus were a choir, melodious harmony would not be its forte. Dissonance would resound at almost every chord.”⁹ Qoheleth, too, deals with wisdom in a way that differs from other so-called Wisdom books. When scholars compare Qoheleth to the other Wisdom books, they primarily compare it to Proverbs.

Proverbs is often seen as the preeminent example of Wisdom literature, or the “mainspring of wisdom.”¹⁰ What makes the book Qoheleth stand out from Proverbs is the epistemology that it reflects and the ideas about the human capacity of attaining wisdom it conveys.¹¹ Proverbs teaches that wisdom is always out there, waiting to be found by the one who truly wants to find it.¹² This more “traditional” approach to wisdom teaches that one only needs to find wisdom and appropriate it.¹³ Once one has “found wisdom, [one] need only embrace it, hold it.”¹⁴ The book Qoheleth, on the other hand, reflects a rather innovative approach to wisdom. Instead of only relying on the wisdom that is passed down from one generation to the next, Qoheleth relies on his individual capacity to observe, analyze, and reason.¹⁵ Instead of trusting that wisdom is out there, waiting to be found, Qoheleth takes matters into his own hands and starts to use his own “intellect to discover new knowledge and interpret the data of individual experience.”¹⁶ Qoheleth is therefore sometimes seen as “the Bible’s first and only ‘empiricist.’”¹⁷ Whereas some parts of Proverbs at first glance seem to use the same “empirical” method, as the author “sees” and “observes” certain things (e.g., Prov 7:6–7; 24:30–34), the observations in Proverbs are of a different nature than Qoheleth’s observations. Though the author of Proverbs observes various phenomena, no new knowledge flows from these observations. He already knows exactly what will happen in the observed situation, based on the knowledge that he has through the teachings that were passed on to him. The observations are only used to illustrate something and to teach a pupil a lesson.¹⁸ In Proverbs, observations do not lead to new knowledge but only confirm what was already

⁹ Brown, *Wisdom’s Wonder*, 2.

¹⁰ Katharine J. Dell, *The Solomonic Corpus of ‘Wisdom’ and Its Influence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 20, 27.

¹¹ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 71.

¹² Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 75.

¹³ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 83.

¹⁴ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 75.

¹⁵ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 76.

¹⁶ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 76.

¹⁷ Brown, *Wisdom’s Wonder*, 138.

¹⁸ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 80.

known.

Qoheleth's observations do lead to new knowledge. Instead of calling out to, finding, and then holding on to wisdom, he applies his intellect to examine everything *using* wisdom. This entails "that he will use his powers of reason rather than his prior knowledge, anything he 'heard', as an argument for his convictions."¹⁹ He says: "[I] applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven" (Qoh 1:13). All throughout his work he informs the reader that he has applied his mind (8:16 נתתי את-לבי);²⁰ carried out a test (2:1 ואנסכה); searched with his mind (2:3 תרתי בלבי); considered (2:11 ופניתי);²¹ tested by wisdom (7:23 נסיתי בחכמה); and turned his mind to know (7:25 סבותי אני ולבי לדעת). He describes the observations that have come from his investigations by reporting what he saw (ראה); what he has come to know (ידע); and what he said in his mind (אמר).

Qoheleth's observations and reflections all have to do with the state of the world and with the nature of human life. He claims to have seen "all the deeds that are done under the sun" (Qoh 1:14), yet many of his observations about everything under the sun are quite grim. He observes, for example, that human life is unfair, and often no justice is found where it should be. Instead he concludes:

There is a vanity (הבל) that takes place on earth, that there are righteous people who are treated according to the conduct of the wicked, and there are wicked people who are treated according to the conduct of the righteous. I said that this also is vanity (הבל). (Qoh 8:14)

Qoheleth's verdict on life and its injustices is epitomized in the term הֶבֶל (*hebel*). Indeed, this seems to be the central theme of the book Qoheleth, for "all is הבל," according to the sage (1:2).

Yet הבל is a mysterious word and one of the contributing factors to the book's puzzling message. Despite the term's prominence in Qoheleth it remains difficult to find an adequate translation for it. The various proposed translations of the word given by scholars over the years illustrate this difficulty. Jerome, in the *Vulgate*, translated the term as *vanitas* which is why "vanity" or related terms became the standard English translation of הבל.²² However, the

¹⁹ Michael V. Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions*, JSOTSup 71 (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1989), 86.

²⁰ See also 1:13, 8:9, and 9:1.

²¹ See also 2:12.

²² Russell L. Meek, "Twentieth- and Twenty-first-century Readings of *Hebel* (הֶבֶל) in Ecclesiastes," *CurBR* 14 (2016): 283.

word is etymologically related to the concept of “vapor, breath,”²³ “whiff, puff, or steam.”²⁴ Thus, according to some scholars, Qoheleth uses the term for vapor or breath metaphorically, to describe the ephemerality and elusiveness of situations in life, things that cannot be grasped, either physically or intellectually.²⁵ Nevertheless, other nuances can be added to it, and the debate around this mysterious term is still ongoing.

הבל is not only the central theme of the book Qoheleth, it also features in the cosmologically and anthropologically important stories of the primeval history in the book of Genesis. For הבל is the name “Abel,” the second son of Adam and Eve. The story of the brothers Cain (קין) and Abel (הבל) in Genesis 4 is a “story of firsts.”²⁶ Beginning with the first act of sexual intercourse, the first pregnancy, and the first birth (4:1), the story moves to “the first time that human beings chose their occupation (4:2).”²⁷ Whereas Cain takes on the same occupation as his father by becoming a farmer, Abel takes a different route. He is the first one to become a shepherd. Apart from being the first shepherd, Abel is perhaps best known for being the first murder victim. The story describes the first offerings presented to God by the two brothers, but whereas God accepted Abel’s offering he rejects Cain’s, which makes Cain very angry. The next scene tells of Cain arranging for the brothers to go out to the field together where Cain then kills his brother Abel.

However many “firsts” this story contains, it still “generates more questions than answers.”²⁸ One element that the text itself does not address is the reason for God’s accepting one offering and rejecting the other. Nowhere does God justify his preference, yet he does directly address Cain in response to his anger. His words in 4:6–7 remain puzzling. Another aspect that remains largely a mystery is the reason why Cain murdered Abel. While it is often assumed that Cain killed his brother because he was jealous of Abel for the attention God gave him and his offering, this is not specified by the biblical text.²⁹ Other pressing questions that the text raises are: why does God allow Cain to walk free after committing a murder? Why does there seem to be no justice for Abel? Or, as one interpreter asks: “even more significantly, what does this say about God and the way that the affairs of the world are handled by the divine?”³⁰ As the story stands, Abel is quickly forgotten. Cain’s punishment,

²³ BDB, s.v. “הַבֵּל.”

²⁴ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 47.

²⁵ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 47.

²⁶ John Byron, *Cain and Abel in Text and Tradition: Jewish and Christian Interpretations of the First Sibling Rivalry*, TBN: Jewish and Christian Traditions 14 (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 1.

²⁷ Byron, *Cain and Abel*, 1.

²⁸ Byron, *Cain and Abel*, 1.

²⁹ Byron, *Cain and Abel*, 2.

³⁰ Byron, *Cain and Abel*, 2.

that he will have to live as a fugitive, seems hardly fair, especially when by all accounts he appears to still live a rather successful life, bearing children and even building a city.

Like the book Qoheleth, the story of Cain and Abel draws the reader's attention to the vicissitudes of human existence and, importantly, the questions of justice in the face of the divine. The overlap between the use of the term הבל in Genesis 4 and the book Qoheleth has led some scholars to suggest that the author of Qoheleth was familiar with the story. In fact, this is part of a larger tendency among scholars to see several connections between the book Qoheleth and Genesis 1–11. While some are very cautious in suggesting a direct link,³¹ others are convinced that the author of Qoheleth was familiar with Genesis and was engaging particularly with its first chapters.³² This is especially visible in certain themes that arise in both texts, such as the nature of man, human knowledge, and the threat of death.³³ A correspondence is not only detectable on a thematic level, but on a lexical level as well. In 2:4–6, for example, Qoheleth describes how he made gardens and parks for himself, and in doing so he uses much of the same vocabulary that is used in Genesis' description of the Garden of Eden in chapters 1–2.³⁴

In this paper I agree with those scholars that suggest that the author of Qoheleth was familiar with the story of Abel and Cain. I argue that הבל is an intended allusion to Abel, which the author of Qoheleth uses to evoke the memory of Abel. He assesses various situations of human life with the term הבל to indicate that they are in some way similar to aspects of Abel's life.

Apart from הבל, the book Qoheleth contains other textual references to the Abel narrative that have not received much scholarly attention. One such reference is the phrase רעות רוח (*ra'ût rūah*) and the variant form רעיון רוח (*ra'yôn rūah*). Modern English translations

³¹ See, for example, Katharine Dell, "Exploring Intertextual Links between Ecclesiastes and Genesis 1–11," in *Reading Ecclesiastes Intertextually*, eds. Katharine Dell and Will Kynes, LHBOTS 587 (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 3–14, where she argues that actual linguistic links between the two texts are few. See also James L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987), 38, who writes "actual use of canonical writings remains in doubt. Qohelet may simply have drawn upon common knowledge." Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 62 writes "I do not believe that Qohelet is consciously or unconsciously reflecting upon the name Abel in Gen. 4, so I leave that text out of consideration."

³² Often mentioned in this regard is Charles C. Forman, "Koheleth's Use of Genesis," *JSS* 5 (1960): 256–63. He concludes that Gen 1–11 "represents the most important single influence" on Qoheleth's theology. See also Russell L. Meek, "The Meaning of הבל in Qohelet: An Intertextual Suggestion," in *The Words of the Wise Are Like Goads: Engaging Qohelet in the 21st Century*, eds. Mark J. Boda, Tremper Longman III, Cristian G. Rață (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 241–56 and Arian Verheij, "Paradise Retrieved: On Qohelet 2.4–6," *JSOT* 50 (1991): 113–15.

³³ Forman, "Koheleth's Use," 262–63.

³⁴ E.g., the use of the verb נטע in Gen 2:8 and Qoh 2:4; and the hiphil verb שקה in Gen 2:6, 10 and Qoh 2:6. For a more complete overview see Meek, "The Meaning," 247–48 and Verheij, "Paradise Retrieved," 114.

typically render this phrase as “chasing after wind” (NRSV), “striving after wind” (ESV) or “grasping for wind” (NKJV). However, another possible translation of the phrase is “shepherding of wind.” As Abel was a shepherd, and as the majority of instances of רעות/רעיון רוה appear in combination with הבל, I argue that this, too, is likely an allusion to Abel.

Another reference to Abel that has largely been overlooked is found in Qoh 12:11. In this verse in the final chapter the author of Qoheleth mentions a shepherd, in the phrase רעה אהד (*rō'eh ehād*). Modern English translations mostly render this phrase as “one shepherd” or “any shepherd.” Often “Shepherd” is capitalized to indicate that this shepherd is thought to be referring to God. In biblical scholarship, however, there is no consensus about who רעה אהד represents. In this paper I argue what has not yet been argued, namely that רעה אהד should be translated as “shepherd one,” or, rather, “the first shepherd,” and thus serves as a direct allusion to Abel, who was the world’s first shepherd.

This paper, therefore, explores the links between the book Qoheleth and the narrative of Abel and Cain. I argue that the central theme הבל as well as the phrases רעות/רעיון רוה and רעה אהד demonstrate a symbolic and lexical connection between the book Qoheleth and Genesis 4. The author of Qoheleth uses these words/phrases as allusions to Abel in order to contemplate and reflect on the story of the first human who was unjustly murdered as a part of his broader reflection on human life and its injustices.

In this paper I use the approach of inner-biblical allusion to demonstrate that there is enough evidence to suggest that the author of Qoheleth alludes to Genesis 4. The method section following this introduction elaborates on this approach. In the central sections of this paper I discuss each of the three key words/phrases, illustrating that they, both individually and in conjunction with each other, can be seen as direct allusions to the Abel narrative. Finally I end with a brief summary of the findings, offering a synthetic reading of Qoheleth’s allusions to the Abel narrative as part of his broader reflection on the transience and injustice of human life.

2. Methodology: Intertextuality and Inner-Biblical Allusion

This paper draws literary connections between the two texts Qoheleth and Genesis 4 and as such has implications with respect to the discussion about intertextuality among biblical scholars. It is necessary, therefore, to outline some of the contours of the debate around intertextual approaches to biblical text as a means of locating this paper’s approach within this

methodological context. For the purposes of this paper I have adopted a diachronic, rather than a synchronic, approach for attempting to interpret Qoheleth's literary relationships to Genesis 4. Some discussion of these two intertextual approaches and the criteria for establishing the diachronically framed notion of "inner-biblical allusion" is, therefore, necessary.

While intertextuality is a widely used concept among biblical scholars, there is still much debate about its precise definition and application in biblical interpretation. As Geoffrey D. Miller notes, "intertextuality" is frequently used "as a catchall term to refer to any relationship that can be established between texts. Other scholars have been more precise in their definition and use of the term, but consensus on the exact nature of intertextuality has proven elusive."³⁵ The central debate deals with whether this approach is suitable for both diachronic and synchronic, or solely for synchronic studies. In a diachronic study, the chronology of the texts in question is of crucial importance for establishing the direction of influence. This type of study also concerns itself with finding support for the idea that these relationships between the texts resulted from authorial intent, which is why this approach is also labelled "author-centered"³⁶ or "author-oriented."³⁷ Synchronic studies, on the other hand, are "reader-centered"³⁸ or "reader-oriented"³⁹ meaning that the role of the reader as the maker of meaning is centralized. Here there is no interest in authorial intent, which "enables the reader to make connections without regard for homogeneity and propinquity, opening the door for the examination of textual relationships across vast spectra of time and place."⁴⁰

Some see both the diachronic and synchronic approaches as "versions" of intertextuality, where the diachronic one is sometimes seen as the "traditional" and the synchronic one as the "progressive" approach.⁴¹ The idea that intertextuality is appropriate for diachronic studies, however, has been questioned by various scholars. Ellen van Wolde, for example, argues that intertextuality is a synchronic approach in which the attention is fixed not on the writer and his intention, but on the reader who gives meaning to a text in relation to

³⁵ Geoffrey D. Miller, "Intertextuality in Old Testament Research," *CurBR* 9 (2010): 283.

³⁶ Russell L. Meek, "Intertextuality, Inner-Biblical Exegesis, and Inner-Biblical Allusion: The Ethics of a Methodology," *Bib* 95 (2014): 283.

³⁷ Miller, "Intertextuality," 286.

³⁸ Meek, "Intertextuality, Inner-Biblical," 291.

³⁹ Miller, "Intertextuality," 286.

⁴⁰ Meek, "Intertextuality, Inner-Biblical," 284.

⁴¹ Will Kynes, "Intertextuality: Method and Theory in Job and Psalm 119," in *Biblical Interpretation and Method: Essays in Honour of John Barton*, eds. Katharine J. Dell and Paul M. Joyce (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 202.

other texts.⁴²

Russell L. Meek similarly argues that “intertextuality is a strictly synchronic discussion of wide-ranging intertextual relationships that necessarily precludes author-centered, diachronic studies,”⁴³ and does so on the basis of three criteria. First of all, intertextuality concerns itself not just with the written word but also with oral traditions behind the text. Secondly, it is unconcerned with the direction of influence or the origin of texts. It explores relationships between many different texts, rather than between a small number of texts. Finally, intertextuality has no criteria to help readers establish relationships between texts.⁴⁴ In fact, Miller argues that such criteria only matter to those who use an author-oriented approach. For users of a reader-oriented approach, criteria for differentiating actual intertextual connections from casual correspondences are irrelevant, as “the reader is the sole agent of meaning.”⁴⁵

The idea that intertextuality only applies to synchronic, and not to diachronic, studies is supported by more scholars, who, as a result, argue for methodological clarity. They propose that scholars use the appropriate terms that accurately reflect which approach they use to avoid confusion. Some scholars label their work using the term intertextuality, creating the expectation of a synchronic study while in reality they conduct a diachronic study. Meek calls these studies “guilty of pulling a bait-and-switch, even if it is unintentional.”⁴⁶ As an example he points to one of his own earlier articles, “The Meaning of *הבל* in Qohelet: An Intertextual Suggestion.”⁴⁷ As opposed to what one might expect from the title, this is a diachronic study as Meek argues for intertextual references that were intentionally created by the author of Qoheleth. To achieve methodological clarity a number of scholars have made distinctions among the terms “intertextuality,” “inner-biblical allusion,” and “inner-biblical exegesis.”⁴⁸

The present thesis uses the approach of inner-biblical allusion, which is a strictly diachronic and author-oriented approach. The goal of this approach is to show that a later text,

⁴² Ellen Van Wolde, “Trendy Intertextuality?” in *Intertextuality in Biblical Writings: Essays in honour of Bas van Iersel*, ed. Sipke Draisma (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1989), 47.

⁴³ Meek, “Intertextuality, Inner-Biblical,” 283.

⁴⁴ Meek, “Intertextuality, Inner-Biblical,” 283–84.

⁴⁵ Miller, “Intertextuality,” 294.

⁴⁶ Meek, “Intertextuality, Inner-Biblical,” 284.

⁴⁷ Meek, “The Meaning,” 241–56

⁴⁸ See Meek, “Intertextuality, Inner-Biblical,” 290–91; Miller, “Intertextuality,” 305; Benjamin D. Sommer, “Exegesis, Allusion and Intertextuality in the Hebrew Bible: A Response to Lyle Eslinger,” *VT* 46 (1996): 479–89; Jeffery M. Leonard, “Identifying Inner-Biblical Allusions: Psalm 78 as a Test Case,” *JBL* 127 (2008): 241–65.

or “receptor” text, alludes to an earlier, or “source,” text.⁴⁹ Here, the receptor text is the book Qoheleth, which is argued to refer to Genesis 4:1–16, the source text.

When it comes to the dating of Genesis there is an “increasing tendency in Pentateuchal scholarship to focus attention on the final form of the text as having its own literary integrity, and to date the completion of this final form sometime in the Persian period (539–333 BCE).”⁵⁰ As for the book Qoheleth scholars generally either argue that it was written in the Persian period or in the Hellenistic period, somewhere between the fifth and second century BCE.⁵¹ Nili Samet, however, very recently published a work in which she uses a new linguistic method that produces a more specific and more accurate date for the book Qoheleth. She examines two Aramaic calques in the book Qoheleth and traces the “development and distribution of their Aramaic equivalents.”⁵² She finds that these Aramaic equivalents developed in Aramaic during the Hellenistic period. This leads her to the conclusion that the calques in Qoheleth could not have dated back to the Persian Period. Samet’s research suggests that it is more likely that the book Qoheleth was composed in the Hellenistic period than in the Persian period. Ben Sira is known to partially quote Qoheleth in his work, written in the early second century BCE.⁵³ Therefore, Qoheleth was most likely written somewhere between the late fourth century (the beginning of the Hellenistic period) and the early second century BCE. With such a dating in mind, it is, therefore, reasonable to suppose that the author of Qoheleth could have been familiar with the Torah (and thus with the story of Abel and Cain) as the final form of these five books was completed in the Persian period, before the composition of the book Qoheleth in the Hellenistic period.

This study takes an author-oriented approach in that it argues that the author of Qoheleth intentionally made allusions to Abel as a way of contemplating this story in Genesis 4. Here it is also important to note that throughout this paper I distinguish between Qoheleth the book, Qoheleth the author, and Qoheleth the speaker. When I talk about the book or the author I will specify using the words “the book Qoheleth/in Qoheleth” or “the author of Qoheleth.” When no specification is given then this is in reference to Qoheleth the speaker, to whom most of the words in the book belong. He is introduced in Qoh 1:1 and starts speaking

⁴⁹ Meek, “Intertextuality, Inner-Biblical,” 288.

⁵⁰ F. V. Greifenhagen, *Egypt on the Pentateuch’s Ideological Map: Constructing Biblical Israel’s Identity*, JSOTSup 361 (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 207.

⁵¹ See for example Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 21; Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 6; Stuart Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism* (New York: T&T Clark, 2012), 5.

⁵² Nili Samet, “Linguistic Dating of the Book of Qohelet: A New Angle,” *VT* (2021): 12.

⁵³ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 6.

in first person in 1:12 where he introduces himself as “I, Qoheleth”⁵⁴ (אני קהלת).

In order to demonstrate textual relationships between the book Qoheleth and Genesis 4, this paper will make use of several criteria of inner-biblical allusion that have been put forward by multiple scholars. Most important of these criteria is shared language: words or phrases in the receptor text that first make an appearance in the source text. As Jeffery M. Leonard has pointed out, not all shared language is of equal importance. For example, the sharing of rare language supports the argument for a textual relationship more than the sharing of common language. Similarly, shared phrases rather than shared individual terms as well as “shared language in similar contexts” rather than just shared language provide more support.⁵⁵ Apart from shared language, non-lexical similarities can also suggest a textual relationship. This includes similarities in theme or motif or similarities in the way that the characters of both texts are portrayed.⁵⁶

By using the method of inner-biblical allusion together with these criteria, this paper will examine the various allusions to Abel in the book Qoheleth and demonstrate that these allusions were the result of authorial intent.

3. הבל as Allusion to Abel

In this section I argue that Qoheleth’s use of הבל is frequently employed as an allusion to Abel in Genesis 4, and that by doing so Qoheleth evokes the memory of Abel’s fleeting life and the inconsistencies between deed and consequence that are present in Abel’s life. In order to demonstrate this point, I first discuss the etymology of הבל and how it is used throughout the Hebrew Bible to give some semantic context to the term’s potential meanings and uses. I then turn to the meaning and specific use and function of הבל in the book Qoheleth. In the subsequent section I discuss the first use of הבל in the Hebrew Bible, namely Genesis 4, and elaborate on the story of Abel and Cain and the significance of Abel’s name therein. Finally, I offer a reading of the book Qoheleth that takes as its premise that Qoheleth’s use of הבל can be understood as an allusion to Abel.

3.1 Etymology of הבל and Use Throughout the Hebrew Bible

When it comes to Qoheleth’s use of הבל, determining the meaning of this term is rather difficult, and it is still very much debated among scholars. Yet, as it is a key concept in

⁵⁴ Own translation. NRSV reads “I, the Teacher.”

⁵⁵ Leonard, “Identifying Inner-Biblical Allusions,” 246–55.

⁵⁶ Miller, “Intertextuality,” 295.

Qoheleth, how one reads and interprets הבל will most likely affect one's reading of the entire book.⁵⁷

Etymologically, הבל is related to “vapor” or “breath,”⁵⁸ and various scholars have also pointed to its onomatopoeic nature: “it is spoken by the exhalation of ‘breath’ that the word itself denotes.”⁵⁹

Throughout the Hebrew Bible הבל is often applied to things that exhibit qualities of vapor or breath, metaphorically speaking.⁶⁰ הבל is ascribed to things that are transient or fleeting, for example the days of a human life. In Job 7:16 Job addresses God and laments his misery. He begs to be left alone by God who he believes is tormenting him. He says: “I loathe my life; I would not live forever. Let me alone, for my days are a breath (הבל).” The days of his human life are like a breath, fleeting, transient, short-lived. In the praise of the virtuous woman of Prov 31:30 physical beauty is called הבל. It reads: “charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain (הבל), but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.” A woman's trust in God is seen as a more reliable quality than physical beauty, which is not lasting.

The verdict הבל is also assigned to things that are empty or futile. Job, in his reply to Zophar, calls his friends' attempt to comfort him הבל, “empty nothings” (21:34). Ps 62:9 says that the sons of *men* (אדם) are הבל, which is paralleled by the statement that the sons of a *man* (איש) are a lie (כזב). This verse is found in a Psalm in which the author claims that God alone is his rock, his refuge. In him alone he puts his trust. Verse 9 is followed by a warning not to put confidence in extortion, and not to set one's hopes on robbery (62:10). The point of calling mankind הבל is to warn against trusting people, as opposed to trusting God. Only in God one should put their ultimate trust. Putting one's trust in mortal mankind is nothing but futile, as in the end it will not amount to anything.⁶¹ The term הבל also often appears in the context of idols. In Jer 10:3 the custom of other nations of making silver and gold idols from cut down trees is called הבל, and Isa 57:13 portrays idols as utterly ineffective: “the wind will carry them off, a breath (הבל) will take them away.”

It thus seems, as Eric S. Christianson claims, that all instances of הבל throughout the

⁵⁷ Graham S. Ogden, “‘Vanity’ It Certainly Is Not,” *BT* 38 (1987): 302.

⁵⁸ BDB, s.v. הָבַל.

⁵⁹ Jason S. DeRouchie, “Shepherding Wind and One Wise Shepherd: Grasping for Breath in Ecclesiastes,” *SBJT* 15 (2011): 18. See also A. B. Caneday, “‘Everything Is Vapor’: Grasping for Meaning Under the Sun,” *SBJT* 15 (2011): 34; and K. Seybold, “הֶבֶל *hebhel*,” in *TDOT: Volume III*, eds. Botterweck and Ringgren (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 313–20.

⁶⁰ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 27.

⁶¹ Other examples: human thoughts (Ps 94:11) and foreign military help (Isa 30:7) are also called הבל.

Hebrew Bible seem to be “negative in connotation.”⁶² הבל is associated with transience and fleetingness. It is associated with things that have no lasting value; with things that are ineffective, empty, or that amount to nothing.

3.2 *The First הבל: Abel in Genesis 4*

In the Hebrew Bible הבל is not only a concept, it is also a proper noun. The first time it occurs in this sense is in Genesis 4 where it is the name of Abel, Adam and Eve’s second son. After Adam and Eve have been banished from the garden of Eden the story of Cain and Abel follows (Gen 4:1–16). The story describes the birth of these two sons of Adam and Eve and immediately after describes the two sons’ presenting an offering to God. As Cain is a tiller of the ground, his offering consists of “the fruit of the ground” (4:3). Abel, who is a shepherd, offers the fat portions of the firstlings of his flock. Whereas God is pleased with Abel and his offering, he does not pay attention to Cain or his offering. The text itself gives no explanation as to why God seems to favor Abel’s offering over Cain’s. In any case, Cain is not pleased and gets angry. Being angry, and possibly jealous, he tells Abel to join him in going out into the field. When they are there, Cain rises up and kills Abel. The first murder has happened and Abel, the first murder victim, disappears from the scene within less than ten verses of being introduced.

The reader only knows a few things about Abel and throughout his short appearance in the story he never says a word. This creates a contrast with Cain, who speaks to Abel (4:8) and to God (4:9, 13) and about whom the text even gives insight into his emotions (4:5). On top of that, more often than not Abel is identified only indirectly as “his/your/my brother,” as if his role as Cain’s brother is the main determinant of his identity.⁶³ It seems, as Van Wolde suggests, that “the entire emphasis is on Abel’s being a brother: he does not *have* a brother, he *is* a brother only.”⁶⁴

Also, in contrast to Cain’s introduction in 4:2, no explicit explanation is given for Abel’s name. At first glance, this might suggest that Abel’s name is not significant or has no meaning,⁶⁵ but, on closer examination, the lack of information might be in accordance with the name itself. Since הבל is related to concepts such as “breath,” and “vapor,” Abel’s name seems to reflect his brief existence on earth: “Abel is thus the embodiment of transience.”⁶⁶ K.

⁶² Eric S. Christianson, *A Time to Tell: Narrative Strategies in Ecclesiastes*, JSOTSup 280 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 79–80.

⁶³ “His brother”: 4:2, 8 (twice); “your brother”: 4:9, 10, 11; “my brother”: 4:9.

⁶⁴ Ellen van Wolde, “The Story of Cain and Abel: A Narrative Study,” *JSOT* 52 (1991): 36 (emphasis original).

⁶⁵ Karolien Vermeulen, “Mind the Gap: Ambiguity in the Story of Cain and Abel,” *JBL* 133 (2014): 31.

⁶⁶ Meek, “The Meaning,” 253.

Seybold similarly argues that everything points to the idea that the name הבל is meant to signify Abel's fleeting life. No explicit explanation is needed "since it is phonetically motivated and is thus directly present."⁶⁷ Thus, Abel's name "speaks for itself"⁶⁸ and reflects his short, fleeting presence in the story and on earth.

It is very common for names in the Hebrew Bible to reflect parts of the life or characteristics of the owner of that name. This is the case, for example, with Abraham whose name means "ancestor of a multitude of nations"⁶⁹ and with Nabal, about whom Abigail says to David "My lord, do not take seriously this ill-natured fellow, Nabal; for as his name is, so is he; Nabal is his name, and folly is with him."⁷⁰ This also happens in the Cain and Abel story itself. Whereas Eve gives no explanation for Abel's name, about Cain she says: קניתי יהוה (4:1). The verb קניתי comes from the root קנה and resembles Cain's name. The verb is related to "get, acquire."⁷¹ Here, Eve says: "I have acquired a man with the help of the LORD."⁷²

3.3 הבל in *Qoheleth*

3.3.1 Translation of הבל in *Qoheleth*

Translating הבל in the book *Qoheleth* seems to be a rather difficult task. Since הבל is used in many different contexts all with different connotations, C. L. Seow concludes that there is no one word in English that adequately covers and expresses all nuances of the term. This is why he picks the traditional "vanity" as the translation for הבל in his commentary. Vanity, futility and meaningless are still, to this day, the most used translations of הבל in modern English translations.⁷³ The translation of הבל as "vanity" is based on Jerome's Vulgate, the late 4th century Latin translation of the Bible. In this translation הבל is translated as "vanitas," and so "vanity" and related terms became the standard English renderings of the term.⁷⁴ Whereas the Hebrew הבל conveys notions of breath, vapor, and, by extension, transience, and temporality, "vanitas" and the Septuagint's ματαιότης carry meanings such as "emptiness," "futility," and "vanity."⁷⁵ According to Meek, this translation of הבל as "vanity," "robbed Ecclesiastes of

⁶⁷ Seybold, "הֶבֶל *hebhel*," 316.

⁶⁸ Van Wolde, "The Story of Cain and Abel," 29.

⁶⁹ Gen 17:5.

⁷⁰ 1 Sam 25:25.

⁷¹ BDB, s.v. "קנה."

⁷² The NRSV renders the verb קניתי "I possessed."

⁷³ Vanity: e.g., ASV, ESV, KJV. Futility: e.g., CSB, TLB, NASB. Meaningless: e.g., NIRV, NIV, NLT.

⁷⁴ Meek, "Twentieth- and Twenty-first-century Readings," 283.

⁷⁵ *Woordenboek Latijn-Nederlands*, s.v. "Vanitas," accessed June 2021, <https://www-latijnnederlands-nl.ru.idm.oclc.org/lemma?term=vanitas>; W. Bauer, F. W. Danker, W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), s.v. "ματαιότης."

much of its meaning by reducing הַבַּל to a single idea: lack of value.”⁷⁶

Whereas some scholars stick to the translation “vanity,”⁷⁷ many alternatives have been suggested over the years. Among the suggestions are “incomprehensible,” “absurd,” “transience,” “senseless,” “enigma,” “mystery,” and many others.⁷⁸

Michael V. Fox has suggested “absurd” for all cases of הַבַּל in Qoheleth, based on Albert Camus’ description of the absurd in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. He specifically argues for the use of one and the same term rather than multiple different words to translate הַבַּל, arguing that “to do Qohelet justice, we must look for a concept that applies to all occurrences, or, failing that, to the great majority of them.”⁷⁹ However, Qoheleth applies הַבַּל to a number of situations, and the nuance of the term also changes as it is applied to different situations. As I discuss in the next subsection on the use and function of הַבַּל in Qoheleth, in some cases הַבַּל is used to denote the transience of something. In those cases “transience” or “fleeting” may be appropriate. Yet, in other verses הַבַּל applies to the disconnect between actions and consequences. In those cases something like “absurd” may be more fitting. Using only one English term to translate הַבַּל seems to ignore the complexity of the Hebrew term.

Christianson follows Fox’s translation but appreciates the complexity of הַבַּל more thoroughly and agrees with Fox only partly. He argues that 21 out of 38 cases of הַבַּל apply to situations rather than things, and that those 21 can be grouped into two types. He claims that “absurd” is only adequate for the first type, which includes 14 instances of הַבַּל, and refers to those situations in which deeds and consequences do not match (e.g., Qoh 2:15). The second type includes the other seven cases that describe that “it is הַבַּל that a situation is the way it is.”⁸⁰ These seven instances, Christianson argues, are better translated with “futile,” because here, “the reader can only *assume* that Qoheleth thought it absurd as well,” since the relation between deed and consequence is not explicitly mentioned (e.g., Qoh 4:4).⁸¹ Similarly, James L. Crenshaw also argues for multiple different senses of הַבַּל: “transience,” “sickness,” and “insubstantiality.” He argues that choosing a single word to translate הַבַּל “impoverishes Qoheleth’s language,” and that interpreters must select one of the three options dependent on the context.⁸² Ethan Dor-Shav is convinced that “vanity” is a less than ideal translation since

⁷⁶ Meek, “Twentieth- and Twenty-first-century Readings,” 283.

⁷⁷ See Seow, *Ecclesiastes*; H. W. Hertzberg, *Der Prediger (Qohelet): übersetzt und erklärt*, KAT 16 (Leipzig: A. Deichertsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1932) uses the German “Eitelkeit” (vanity); T. A. Perry, *The Book of Ecclesiastes (Qohelet) and the Path to Joyous Living* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

⁷⁸ For an overview see Meek, “Twentieth- and Twenty-first-century Readings.”

⁷⁹ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 36.

⁸⁰ Christianson, *A Time to Tell*, 82.

⁸¹ Christianson, *A Time to Tell*, 84 (emphasis original).

⁸² James L. Crenshaw, *Qoheleth: The Ironic Wink* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2013), 36–37.

it “is not only misleading, but in some cases it makes the text impossible to read.”⁸³ Instead, he argues that “transience” is a more appropriate translation. Meek does not give one specific translation but argues that the author of Qoheleth uses the word הבל “as a symbol to discuss how a number of situations in life are ‘Abel-like’ or contain an aspect of ‘Abel-ness.’”⁸⁴ To this interpretation I will return in the subsection on how the author of Qoheleth uses הבל as an allusion to Abel.

3.3.2 Use and Function of הבל in Qoheleth

הבל is the central theme of the book Qoheleth. This is indicated, first of all, by the amount of times it occurs. Over half of the 73 total occurrences in the Hebrew Bible⁸⁵ appear in Qoheleth alone: the book uses it 38 times.⁸⁶ A second indication that it is the central theme comes from the fact that the term הבל “is part of the thematic statements that frame the main body of the book.”⁸⁷ The main body is framed by 1:2 and 12:8, which both contain the theme word in almost the same formula. The first time it appears is in 1:2, right after Qoheleth has been identified as “the son of David, king in Jerusalem,” evoking the memory of Solomon: “הבל הבלים, says Qoheleth, הבל הבלים, all is הבל.” 12:8 is almost identical and reads: “הבל הבלים, says Qoheleth, all is הבל.”

Qoheleth concludes that various aspects of life are הבל. Among those aspects that he calls הבל are pleasure, speech, living beings, death,⁸⁸ but also joy, success, and youth.⁸⁹ His assessment of הבל is often to note the transient and fleeting nature of these things. In 11:9–10, for example, he tells a young man to rejoice “while you are young,” to “follow the inclination of your heart,” and to “banish anxiety from your mind” because “youth and the dawn of life are הבל.”⁹⁰ He recommends rejoicing and a calm mind for the youthful one, as the carefree days of youth will disappear quickly as a breath.

Other times, Qoheleth ascribes הבל to unexpected outcomes of a certain behavior, “or, more precisely, the violation of reason implicated in its outcome.”⁹¹ Fox calls this “the severance of deed from consequence.”⁹² Qoheleth expects certain outcomes to follow certain

⁸³ Ethan Dor-Shav, “Ecclesiastes, Fleeting and Timeless: Part II,” *JBQ* 37 (2009): 17.

⁸⁴ Meek, “The Meaning,” 254.

⁸⁵ That is, in the MT. This is excluding the proper noun “Abel” which occurs eight times in Genesis 4.

⁸⁶ The denominative verb, הָבַל, occurs only five times in the Hebrew Bible, none of those found in Qoheleth: 2 Kgs 17:15; Job 27:12; Ps 62:10; Jer 2:5; 23:16. See also BDB, s.v. הָבַל.

⁸⁷ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 47.

⁸⁸ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 38–40.

⁸⁹ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 112.

⁹⁰ NRSV with substitution of Hebrew term for “vanity.”

⁹¹ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 39.

⁹² Fox, *Qoheleth and His Contradictions*, 47.

behaviors. Yet, it is his observation of the imbalance between actions and results that leads him to the conclusion that certain things are הבל. He says in 2:18–19

I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to those who come after me—and who knows whether they will be wise or foolish? Yet they will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is הבל.

It is not the toil itself which he hates and calls הבל, but the fact that his acquired wealth, the fruits of his labor, will go to someone else after his death, possibly to someone “foolish,” someone who does not deserve it.⁹³ In 8:10 and 8:14, too, Qoheleth observes an incongruence between actions and outcomes which he calls הבל. He sees that the wicked are given a burial and are even honored (8:10). The problem for Qoheleth lies in the fact that the wicked do not get what they deserve. In spite of their wickedness, they are still properly buried.⁹⁴ He also observes that there are righteous people who are treated according to the behavior of wicked ones and wicked people who are treated according to the behavior of righteous ones (8:14). In 3:16 and 7:15 Qoheleth likewise comments on unexpected outcomes, though he does not explicitly call it הבל in these verses. He observes wickedness in the place of justice (3:16), people who perish even though they are righteous, and people living a long life while being wicked (7:15).⁹⁵

Behind these statements lies the presumption that there is a principle of divine retribution, where righteousness is rewarded and wickedness is punished. Qoheleth elaborates on this presumption in 8:5, 12–13. He believes that those who obey commands will not suffer harm (8:5) and that it will be well with those who fear God, but not with those who do not (8:12–13). Qoheleth knows exactly how the principle of retribution *should* work. He has the hope and expectation that God, in time, will indeed judge justly the righteous and the wicked (3:17). However, instead of blindly trusting what he knows should be true, he puts the learned tradition to the test. By applying his own ability to observe matters, he questions what he has learned. Immediately after 8:12–13, in verse 14, he shares his observations that seem to contradict his earlier presumptions. He has observed situations in which the principle of divine retribution does not apply. Sometimes justice is just not executed speedily, yet other

⁹³ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 36.

⁹⁴ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 294 explains: “Denial of a proper burial is a curse that the worst sinners were supposed to suffer.”

⁹⁵ Whereas Qoheleth does not explicitly call this הבל, 7:15 starts with “in my vain life”, so the verdict of הבל seems to be extended to his observation in 7:15b.

times justice is not executed at all. The latter is the case for those who die prematurely in spite of being righteous, as Qoheleth observes in 7:15. Whereas Qoheleth believes that God has appointed a time for everything, including for judgment, he also “recognizes that judgment sometimes comes too late to rectify wrongs.”⁹⁶ The dead, whether humans or animals, righteous or wicked, all go to the same place, “all are from dust, and all turn to dust again” (3:19–20). Death, as the great equalizer, “provides the sameness of fate for all, but the sameness of fate is not quite fair, because there are inequities in life.”⁹⁷ Much about what happens after death is uncertain (3:21) but what Qoheleth does know is that “the dead know nothing; *they have no more reward*, and even the memory of them is lost” (9:5).⁹⁸ As far as humans know, God’s judgment can only affect the living.⁹⁹ Thus, when the inequity of a righteous person is not set right before his or her death, or when a wicked person lives a long life despite their wickedness, the principle of retribution fails.

Qoheleth thus uses *הבל* to denote aspects of life that are fleeting and situations where the principle of retribution does not seem to apply, where consequences and actions do not correspond. It therefore seems that *הבל* mostly “has negative connotations” for Qoheleth, also as it is associated with phrases such as “a great evil” (2:21); “an unhappy business” (4:8); and “a grievous ill” (6:2).¹⁰⁰

3.4 Qoheleth’s *הבל* as Allusion to Abel

Qoheleth’s use of *הבל* brings to mind the first *הבל* “Abel,” whose very life was characterized by transience and a disconnect between actions and consequences. There seems to be a correspondence between Qoheleth’s use of *הבל* and various aspects of the life of Abel. This suggests that the author of Qoheleth had the story of Abel in mind when composing this work and thus that Qoheleth’s *הבל* can be understood as an allusion to Abel.

A correspondence is most easily recognizable between Qoheleth’s use of *הבל* to comment on the transience and fleetingness of life and the transience that is intrinsic to Abel’s life through his name. Qoheleth says, for example, “For who knows what is good for mortals while they live the few days of their vain life (*היי הבלו*), which they pass like a shadow?” (6:12a). Here, *הבל* denotes the fleetingness of a human life. Like a passing shadow, the days of a human quickly pass by. Other verses where Qoheleth comments on the fleeting nature of human life are 9:9 and 11:10. “Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your

⁹⁶ Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions*, 129.

⁹⁷ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 294.

⁹⁸ Emphasis mine.

⁹⁹ Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions*, 130.

¹⁰⁰ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 102.

vain life (הַיְהוּבָה) that are given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun.” (9:9). Once again Qoheleth recognizes that life is fleeting. As the uncertainty of death looms over everything, it is best to enjoy life while it lasts. “For Qoheleth, too, people ought to enjoy life precisely because life is ephemeral.”¹⁰¹ In 11:9–10 Qoheleth recommends the young person to delay worrying and instead be cheerful, for “childhood and youth are הַבָּל.”¹⁰² He knows that the early days of a human being are over in the blink of an eye. Qoheleth sees the fleetingness and transience that he has observed in his own lifetime as exemplified in Abel’s life which ended abruptly, even prematurely. He urges his audience to be aware of this, because, just as for Abel, life often takes unpredictable turns and death sometimes arrives at moments when it is least expected. Meek argues that “by using הַבָּל as the *leitmotif* of the book, Qoheleth expands the theme of transience introduced in Genesis 4 to include everything in life. Not only is Abel transient, but everyone and everything in life is subject to the reversal of fortunes that he experienced.”¹⁰³

This “reversal of fortunes” that Meek comments on is a second aspect that both Genesis 4’s Abel and Qoheleth’s הַבָּל represent. Many of the situations that Qoheleth calls הַבָּל reflect such a reversal, an incongruence between deeds and their consequences. Abel’s life story, too, reflects a disconnect between actions and outcomes. The story of Genesis 4 “seems to overturn much of what the rest of the Hebrew Bible teaches: if a person obeys Yahweh, the person will be blessed.”¹⁰⁴ The opposite seems to happen for Abel and Cain. Cain, who is guilty of murdering his own brother seems to walk free. Even though his punishment entails that he will no longer be able to successfully till the ground, and that he will have to wander the earth (4:12), God gives him a special mark that ensures he will not be killed (4:15). Not only does he then find a place to live (4:16), he also acquires a wife and progeny, and builds an entire city which he names after his son Enoch (4:17). That Cain gets to have a wife, offspring, and a city, shows that he secured his future, and that “he lived an apparently meaningful life.”¹⁰⁵ Abel, on the other hand, had his life taken away before he could achieve any of this. His existence ended prematurely and with no progeny, contrary to what would be expected. He presented to God a pleasing offering, and according to the system of retribution blessings were expected to follow from his God-fearing action. Yet, what follows is his

¹⁰¹ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 306.

¹⁰² Own translation.

¹⁰³ Meek, “The Meaning,” 253–54.

¹⁰⁴ Meek, “The Meaning,” 252.

¹⁰⁵ Radiša Antic, “Cain, Abel, Seth, and the Meaning of Human Life as Portrayed in the Book of Genesis and Ecclesiastes,” *AUSS* 44 (2006): 207.

untimely death. Cain seems to enjoy the blessings that should have gone to Abel. Qoheleth observes a similar situation, where fruits of the labor of the one who has toiled for it go to one who has not (2:21). He sees this exemplified in Abel's life as he assesses this situation with הבל.

Furthermore, Qoheleth observes that some righteous people are treated according to the behavior of the wicked and vice versa (8:14) and calls this הבל, too. This is exemplified in the Abel and Cain story as Cain, who has murdered his brother, is treated as if he has acted righteously. Though he has to live as a fugitive, he still lives a successful life and acquires a family and material wealth. Abel, on the other hand, seems to have endured "the consequences of disobedience"¹⁰⁶ that Cain should have experienced: he dies prematurely, before having had the chance to start a family or gain any material wealth. "The one-to-one relationship between disobedience and curses, obedience and blessing, has been reversed."¹⁰⁷ Qoheleth has observed this in his own inquiry into human life too. He sees that sometimes there is no correspondence between actions and their outcomes.¹⁰⁸ He uses the verdict הבל to communicate that he perceives this observation exemplified in the story of the first murder.

A few scholars recognize Qoheleth's use of הבל as a reference to Abel in Genesis 4, though in general they only make this observation in passing, usually only commenting on the aspect of transience that is reflected in both Genesis 4 and Qoheleth. Ellen F. Davis, for example, argues that the story of Abel was "surely in Koheleth's mind as he composed the book"¹⁰⁹ and that "from Koheleth's perspective, the short history of Hevel son of Adam is emblematic of human life altogether, for in this book everything is examined in light of our inescapable mortality."¹¹⁰ For Davis, הבל in Qoheleth embodies the fleetingness of human life and the fate of death that awaits every human being.¹¹¹

Jacques Chopineau argues that Qoheleth uses the term for Abel's name to express the fragility and transience of humanity that is represented in Abel's life. For Qoheleth, הבל expresses that every human being is like Abel. He writes:

¹⁰⁶ Meek, "The Meaning," 253.

¹⁰⁷ Meek, "The Meaning," 253.

¹⁰⁸ Meek, "The Meaning," 254.

¹⁰⁹ Ellen F. Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 168

¹¹⁰ Davis, *Proverbs*, 169.

¹¹¹ See also Ethan Dor-Shav, "Ecclesiastes, Fleeting and Timeless: Part I," *JBQ* 36 (2008): 215; and Hertzberg, *Der Prediger*, 39 who briefly notes: "es ist sehr wohl möglich, daß Qoh bei seinem Wort הבל gerade an jeden ersten Menschen dachte, der den Namen "Eitelkeit" trug."

Ce n'est pas seulement le même mot, c'est le même jugement terrible sur la fragilité de l'existence humaine. ... Le terme *hévèl* est utilisé de manière suggestive par l'Ecclesiaste pour exprimer un aspect de la réalité humaine: tout homme est *hévèl*, tout homme est comme Abel... Un passager sur cette terre.¹¹²

Similarly, Meek argues that “Qohelet uses הבל, not only to refer to the transience of life, but as a symbol to discuss how a number of situations in life are ‘Abel-like’ or contain an aspect of ‘Abel-ness.’”¹¹³ Thus, Qoheleth calls various situations הבל “and leaves the reader to decide which aspect of Abel he is referring to: Abel’s transience, the lack of congruence between his actions and rewards, the injustice he suffers, or his inability to attain lasting value.”¹¹⁴ Instead of using multiple terms to evaluate various situations, Qoheleth uses one and the same term that embodies the transience, incongruence between deeds and consequence, and injustice, all of which are epitomized by Abel’s brief existence.

Thus, for Qoheleth the term הבל derives its meaning from the story of Abel and Cain in Genesis 4. By using הבל to refer both to the transience of life as well as to the inconsistencies between deeds and consequences that he observes in life Qoheleth implicitly calls to mind multiple aspects of Abel’s life. He evokes Abel’s name, the unrighteousness that befell him and the resulting reversal of fate that takes place. Qoheleth does not explicitly refer back to any specific event described in Genesis 4, but uses הבל as a more general term to assess situations that are in some way or another similar to Abel’s life. He uses this specific term because the story of Abel is the first example in the Torah of an unrighteous murder. As his audience was most likely familiar with this story, it served as the perfect example for some of Qoheleth’s observations.

4. רעות/רעיון רוח as Allusion to Abel

In addition to the frequent repetition of Abel’s name and the coincidence of theme that this name inspires, Qoheleth makes use of a pair of phrases that, when properly understood, can readily be understood as further allusions to Abel. In this section I argue that the phrase רעות רוח and its near parallel רעיון רוח are, like הבל, allusions to the first murder victim. The connection, in this case, is not signaled by homonymic reference to Abel’s name but, rather, to his occupation. Both phrases feature a form of the verb רעה which, notably, is used in Gen

¹¹² Jacques Chopineau, “Une Image de l’Homme: Sur Ecclesiaste 1/2,” *ETR* 53 (1978): 369.

¹¹³ Meek, “The Meaning,” 254.

¹¹⁴ Meek, “The Meaning,” 254.

4:2 to describe Abel's occupation as a shepherd. Thus, the phrase רעות/רעיון רוה in Qoheleth can be translated "shepherding the wind." In the book Qoheleth, the expression "shepherding the wind" denotes the futility of attempting to guide a situation in a particular direction or to control its outcome, for the wind, as is commonly understood, is impossible to control or direct. With this phrase Qoheleth evokes the memory of Abel, who despite his efforts to "shepherd" his life in a particular direction by his attempts to please God, could not exercise any control over the outcomes of his efforts and did not manage to secure a future for himself.

4.1 Translation and Meaning of רעות/רעיון רוה

The phrase רעות רוה appears seven times in Qoheleth,¹¹⁵ and the variant רעיון רוה, twice.¹¹⁶ While רעות and רעיון are two different forms, Qoheleth seems to use them synonymously and places them in similar contexts, and thus they may be treated together.¹¹⁷ However, רעות/רעיון רוה is quite a debated expression in terms of derivation, translation, as well as meaning.

Both רעות and רעיון derive from the same root, רעה. Yet, in biblical scholarship there has been some debate about the lexical etymology of this root. There are three different verbs that are spelled this way. רעה I means "to shepherd, tend, graze."¹¹⁸ רעה III is a loanword derived from the Aramaic root רעי (or רעה), meaning "desire," or "will."¹¹⁹ רעה II means "to associate with."¹²⁰ There is no universal agreement as to whether Qoheleth's רעות/רעיון relates to רעה I or III. Most seem to agree that רעה II is not appropriate in this context. Regardless of whether רעות/רעיון is tied to רעה I or III, the term in Qoheleth usually appears in construct with רוה, which can mean "wind," or "spirit."¹²¹ Thus, as both elements of the phrase can have several meanings, the phrase as a whole has also been translated in various ways. Modern English translations have suggested, for example, "striving after wind,"¹²² "grasping for the wind,"¹²³ "chasing the wind,"¹²⁴ and "vexation of spirit."¹²⁵

To discern which of the translations of the phrase is appropriate for Qoheleth, scholars often compare רעות/רעיון רוה to the similar expression רעה רוה in Hos 12:1a. This verse reads:

¹¹⁵ Qoh 1:14; 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4, 6; 6:9.

¹¹⁶ 1:17; 4:16. In 2:22 a form of the term רעיון, namely וברעיון, appears on its own.

¹¹⁷ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 42–43.

¹¹⁸ BDB, s.v. "רעה" I.

¹¹⁹ BDB, s.v. "רעה" III; Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 43.

¹²⁰ BDB, s.v. "רעה" II.

¹²¹ BDB, s.v. "רוה." The only exception is 2:22, which reads "For what does a human get for his labor, for the וברעיון of his heart, with which he toils under the sun?" (Own translation.)

¹²² E.g., ASV, AMPC, ESV, NASB, RSV.

¹²³ E.g., NKJV, AMP.

¹²⁴ E.g., CEB, CEV, EHV, GNT, ISV, LEB, MEV, NIRV, NRSV.

¹²⁵ E.g., KJ21, BRG, GNV, KJV.

“Ephraim רעה רוח and רדף קדים all day.”¹²⁶ As the expressions רעה רוח and רדף קדים stand in synonymous parallelism,¹²⁷ the meaning of רעה רוח can be explained by the expression רדף קדים, meaning “chases/pursues the east wind,”¹²⁸ suggesting that רעה is in some way related to “chasing” or “pursuing.” It thus seems most likely that רעה is tied to the root רעה I¹²⁹ as chasing and pursuing correspond to notions of shepherding or tending more so than to notions of desire and will. The expression רעה רוח can therefore be translated as “herds the wind.”¹³⁰ Hos 12:1 then describes that Ephraim, “Judah’s rival, the northern state, is occupied with a futile task of shepherding wayward people.”¹³¹ Hertzberg, too, calls Ephraim’s action “ein sinnloses Tun,” as nobody can gather the wind like a shepherd gathers together his flock.¹³²

As רעה in the expression רעה רוח in Hos 12:1 seems to be related to “shepherding,” it is reasonable to suggest that Qoheleth’s term רעות/רעיון is also related to the root רעה I, and that the expression רעות/רעיון רוח can be translated as “shepherding the wind.”¹³³ More importantly, however, is the lexical connection that the author of Qoheleth as well as his audience possibly made between רעות/רעיון and the verb and noun רעה that denote “to shepherd/a shepherd.” It is likely that both author and audience connected רעות/רעיון to the physical work of “shepherding.”

The expression רעות/רעיון רוח, then, refers to the attempt to control the wind in the same way a shepherd controls his herd of sheep.¹³⁴ As a shepherd guides the sheep in a particular direction, one who tries to “shepherd” the wind attempts to “bring the wind under control so as to make it blow in a certain direction, to guide it and set its course.”¹³⁵ Trying to control the wind and the ways in which it moves is of course humanly impossible. As Qoheleth himself noted in 1:6, the wind goes around in circles, in a continuously repeating cycle. The wind seems totally oblivious to human activity and focuses only on its own movement. No human is capable of changing its course. Any attempt to do so is utterly futile.

¹²⁶ Own translation.

¹²⁷ Crenshaw, *The Ironic Wink*, 35.

¹²⁸ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 121 (pursues); NRSV (pursues); Crenshaw, *The Ironic Wink*, 35 (chases); Martin A. Shields, *The End of Wisdom: A Reappraisal of the Historical and Canonical Function of Ecclesiastes* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 114 (pursue, chase).

¹²⁹ Shields, *The End of Wisdom*, 114.

¹³⁰ See the NRSV translation of Hos 12:1. Crenshaw, *The Ironic Wink*, 35 translates it with “tends” and Christianson, *A Time to Tell*, 113 with “herds.” Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 122 writes “The word [רעה] is related to Hebrew *rō’eh* “shepherd” – that is, one who runs after and minds sheep.”

¹³¹ Crenshaw, *The Ironic Wink*, 35.

¹³² Hertzberg, *Der Prediger*, 65.

¹³³ Several scholars choose to translate it in this way, too. See for example Caneday, “Everything is Vapor,” 32; DeRouchie, “Shepherding Wind,” 11; Ogden, “Vanity it Certainly is Not,” 305.

¹³⁴ Shields, *The End of Wisdom*, 114.

¹³⁵ Ogden, “Vanity it Certainly is Not,” 305.

4.2 Use and Function of רעות/רעיון רוה in Qoheleth

In order to understand what רעות/רעיון רוה exactly means in Qoheleth, it is necessary to consider how this expression is used. In almost every verse that features the phrase רעות/רעיון רוה, there is also a comment about “work” (מעשה) and/or (עמל) “toil.”¹³⁶ The first time the phrase occurs is in 1:14, where Qoheleth says: “I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is הבל and a רעות רוה.”¹³⁷ In the section that follows he conducts a search “to determine what value there is in all his labor.”¹³⁸ His search is, however, to no avail. He finds that there is no value in his labor. 1:14 and 2:11 reflect his conclusion that everything under the sun is not only transient, but also like trying to shepherd the wind: “his labor is profitless; it is ... ‘futile’, as is attempting to control the course of the wind.”¹³⁹ Qoheleth finds that the work and toil of a human being is like shepherding the wind. It is futile and, in the end, amounts to nothing.

Another example of Qoheleth’s use of the phrase is in 1:17. Here, he reflects on the fact that he “applied [his] mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly.” He observes that this, too, is a shepherding of wind (רעיון רוה). What he calls a shepherding of wind is not wisdom and knowledge of madness and folly, but rather his attempt at grasping and understanding these things. His “personal attempt at reaching true understanding is not fixed or able to be controlled.”¹⁴⁰ Thus, for Qoheleth, the expression רעות/רעיון רוה is “a metaphor for futile effort,”¹⁴¹ as it describes attempts to grasp or control things that are unable to be grasped or controlled.

Furthermore, what helps in establishing the meaning of רעות/רעיון רוה for Qoheleth is the fact that it almost always appears in combination with the central theme הבל. In seven out of nine times the phrase רעות/רעיון רוה occurs, it appears together with הבל.¹⁴² This suggests that רעות/רעיון רוה is thematically related to הבל. Fox even argues that this makes it difficult to distinguish their meanings. He argues: “On the face of it, *r^e’ut ruah* could be either a synonym added for emphasis or a different concept that adds a further undesirable nuance to the assertion of absurdity.”¹⁴³ However, he admits that close synonymy is unlikely, as רעות/רעיון

¹³⁶ 1:14; 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4, 6. In 2:22, which only features the word וברעיון (without רוה), the word עמל appears as both a noun (עמל) and a verb (עמל).

¹³⁷ NRSV with substitution of Hebrew terms for “vanity” and “a chasing after wind.”

¹³⁸ Shields, *The End of Wisdom*, 115.

¹³⁹ Shields, *The End of Wisdom*, 115.

¹⁴⁰ Christianson, *A Time to Tell*, 113.

¹⁴¹ Douglas B. Miller, “Qoheleth’s Symbolic Use of הבל,” *JBL* 117 (1998): 447.

¹⁴² Only in 1:17 and 4:6 the expression stands by itself.

¹⁴³ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 45.

רוח “is not precisely parallel to *hebel*.”¹⁴⁴ More likely, thus, is that רעות/רעיון רוח adds further nuance to הבל. As outlined in the previous section, הבל is mostly related to transience. Together with רעות/רעיון רוח, however, it can also convey notions of the futility of human actions. Qoheleth seems to observe not only the finiteness of human behavior, but also the lack of ability to control anything in life.

4.3 רעות/רעיון רוח as Allusion to Abel

Because the term רעות/רעיון רוח in the expression רעות/רעיון רוח is connected to “shepherding,” it can be understood as an allusion to Abel. It evokes the memory of another part of Abel’s life, namely his occupation as shepherd (רעה). Reinforcing the idea that רעות/רעיון רוח is an allusion to Abel is the fact that the phrase usually appears in parallel to the term הבל. The notion of “shepherding” is thus not only thematically but also positionally related to Abel.

One of the few pieces of information about Abel that Genesis 4 makes clear is Abel’s occupation: הבל רעה צאן “Abel was a shepherd of sheep”¹⁴⁵ (Gen 4:2). He was the first one to become a shepherd, while his father and brother were both tillers of the ground.¹⁴⁶ The author of Qoheleth does not only use Abel’s name as the central theme but also uses a form of the word for Abel’s occupation as shepherd, and often places them in parallel. This lends support to the idea that these are allusions to Abel.

Whereas quite some scholars observe a thematic connection between הבל and רעות/רעיון רוח, only a few involve Abel in this observation. Crenshaw mentions that in the phrase רעות/רעיון רוח, Qoheleth has used a form of the word for shepherd, רעה, “the Hebrew noun for Abel’s occupation.”¹⁴⁷ Dor-Shav writes that

“it is difficult to ignore the striking similarity between Abel the shepherd (*hevel ro'eh*, Genesis 4:2), and the form of *hevel u're'ut*: Just as Kohelet succeeded in bringing Abel's mortality to mind with the simile of vapor, so, too, [רעות/רעיון רוח] recalls the core characteristic of Abel's impermanent life.”¹⁴⁸

Jean-Jacques Lavoie argues “Aussi, lorsque le Qohélet affirme que toutes les oeuvres et les travaux ne sont que pâturage (*r'h*) de souffle (1,14; 2,11.17.26; 4,4), il convient de ne pas oublier que le métier de berger (*r'h*) fut précisément celui d'Abel”¹⁴⁹ Meek does not comment

¹⁴⁴ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 45.

¹⁴⁵ Own translation. NRSV renders this as “Now Abel was a keeper of sheep.”

¹⁴⁶ Adam was created to till the ground (לעבד את־האדמה, 3:23), Cain became a tiller of the ground (עבד אדמה, 4:2).

¹⁴⁷ Crenshaw, *The Ironic Wink*, 34.

¹⁴⁸ Dor-Shav, “Ecclesiastes, ... Part I,” 221.

¹⁴⁹ Jean-Jacques Lavoie, *La pensée du Qohélet: Étude exégétique et intertextuelle*, Héritage et Projet 49 (Montréal: Fides, 1992), 224.

on the Hebrew form רעות/רעיון רוה, but does relate the English rendering of it to Abel: “By making הבל parallel with pursuing wind, Qohelet points to the inability of all people, like Abel, to grasp anything with lasting value, which like wind is ungraspable.”¹⁵⁰ The point he makes can be strengthened if the Hebrew form for what Meek translates as “pursuing wind,” רעות/רעיון רוה, is understood as a direct allusion to Abel.

While these scholars in various degrees recognize a link between the language that Genesis 4 uses to describe Abel’s occupation and Qoheleth’s language of רעות רוה, they do so only in passing and offer little elaboration on how the use of this phrase is part of Qoheleth’s broader scheme of drawing multiple allusions to the Abel narrative or how it fits in the book’s broader message.¹⁵¹

By paralleling הבל with the phrase רעות/רעיון רוה Qoheleth doubly evokes the memory of Abel. הבל evokes Abel’s name and short existence, while רעות/רעיון רוה evokes his occupation as shepherd and his inability to “shepherd” his life in a way that allowed him to secure his future and attain lasting value. Thus, the two expressions together remind the reader of two of the few aspects of Abel’s life that are made known in Genesis: Abel’s name as well as his occupation. These recall his transient, fleeting life and the futility of his existence, as he fails to manage to secure his future: he dies prematurely despite his attempts to create a pleasing offering for God. Shepherding the wind also has to do with the reversal of fortunes in Abel’s life that the previous section outlined. Qoheleth observes unrighteousness in the place where one would expect righteousness. He observes that actions do not always correspond to expected outcomes. He sees this exemplified in the story of Abel, who was the first to experience this kind of unrighteousness. He concludes therefore that it is a futile business to attempt to control situations and their outcomes. It is like shepherding wind: it will not change anything. However one may attempt to steer things in a desired direction, the opposite can still happen. Abel’s “shepherding” seemed to be efficacious, both literally and metaphorically. His offering of the firstborn of his flock pleased God, and he seemed to be well on his way to a life filled with blessings. Still, the story took an unexpected turn. Abel was murdered by his brother Cain. Thus, Abel’s literal shepherding is functionally equivalent to Qoheleth’s shepherding of wind: his efforts to secure his future amounted to nothing. The

¹⁵⁰ Meek, “The Meaning,” 254.

¹⁵¹ See also Christianson, *A Time to Tell*, 112–13, who writes in a footnote: “The close association of הבל (as the name ‘Abel’) with the verb רעה at Gen. 4.2 is interesting to note here ... Of course if the author of Ecclesiastes was aware of the word association in Genesis it would be of some significance.”

fact remains that humans are never in control, and sometimes unrighteousness will prevail when righteousness is what is expected.

5. רעה אחד as Allusion to Abel

In addition to the “shepherding of wind,” Qoheleth makes reference to the occupation of Abel in one other expression, although to this point such a connection has hardly received any notice by scholars. In 12:11 Qoheleth employs the phrase רעה אחד. Often rendered as “one shepherd,” this phrase has puzzled scholars, particularly in terms of its obscured referent. The use of the noun רעה on its own evokes the memory of Abel’s by way of referring to his occupation, but an alternative translation of the second unit of the phrase creates an even more direct allusion to Abel. In this section I argue that, in Qoh 12:11, the numeral אחד can be properly understood not as the cardinal “one” but as the ordinal “first.” I thus argue for the translation of רעה אחד as “the first shepherd,” a direct allusion to Abel who was the world’s first shepherd.

5.1 Identification of the Shepherd in Scholarship

The last time that the author of Qoheleth makes use of shepherding language is in 12:11 which reads: “The sayings of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings that are given by one shepherd.” The Hebrew phrase that the NRSV translates as “one shepherd,” is רעה אחד. Other common translations of רעה אחד are “a shepherd,”¹⁵² or “a single shepherd,”¹⁵³ and many translations capitalize “Shepherd” to indicate that this shepherd is thought of as referring to God.¹⁵⁴ The editor of the AMP, for example, adds that “This verse establishes the divine inspiration of Ecclesiastes.”¹⁵⁵ Other translations even add “God” into the translation of the verse: “These sayings come from God, our only shepherd.”¹⁵⁶

Among biblical scholars there is debate about the interpretation of רעה אחד and scholars have put forward various suggestions for who the shepherd represents. For example, it has been argued that this figure refers to Solomon, Moses, or Qoheleth himself.¹⁵⁷ Still, like

¹⁵² E.g., CEB, ERV, NLT.

¹⁵³ E.g., CJB, NCB.

¹⁵⁴ E.g., KJ21, AMP, ESV, NASB, NKJV.

¹⁵⁵ Frances E. Siewert, ed., *The Amplified Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1965).

¹⁵⁶ CEV. See also GNT (“They have been given by God, the one Shepherd of us all”), and MSG (“They are given by God, the one Shepherd”).

¹⁵⁷ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 388.

many of the modern translations, the most common view among scholars seems to be that this shepherd refers to God as the divine source of all wisdom sayings and collections.¹⁵⁸

However, there are several issues with the identification of the shepherd as God. First of all, wisdom sayings and collections of the sages were generally not considered to be given by God. God gives wisdom “as a personified entity and as a personal mental quality,”¹⁵⁹ but the sayings themselves came from the sages. On top of that, while God is sometimes called “shepherd” in the Hebrew Bible (e.g., Ps. 23:1), this does not happen in the biblical wisdom literature.¹⁶⁰ Furthermore, when God is called “shepherd,” it is only ever in reference to his qualities as keeper and protector. This is the case for Ps 23 (“I fear no evil; for you are with me”), but does not apply to Qoheleth.¹⁶¹ Finally, the unlikelihood of the identification of the shepherd with God is further supported by a point raised by Kyle R. Greenwood. He traces and identifies three voices in Qoheleth: Q_P (Preacher/Qoheleth), Q_S (Qoheleth speaking as Solomon), and Q_{FN} (Frame-Narrator). The Frame-Narrator is the voice in Qoh 1:1–11 and 12:8–11, and thus Qoh 12:11 is attributed to this voice. As Greenwood points out, Q_{FN} does not mention God anywhere in 1:1–11 or 12:8–11. Thus, seeing the shepherd in 12:11 as a reference to a human shepherd as opposed to God as the divine shepherd, is consistent with the rest of Q_{FN}, which is “silent on divine matters” everywhere else.¹⁶²

Several scholars have argued that the suggestion that the shepherd in 12:11 refers to Solomon or another specific, famous figure—such as Moses or even Qoheleth himself—is also unlikely. Against the identification of the shepherd as Solomon Crenshaw argues that Qoheleth’s teachings and the teachings in Proverbs are too divergent.¹⁶³ Fox argues that the narrator does not identify Qoheleth with Solomon in the epilogue, as he did in Qoh 1:1. On top of that he claims that it cannot be said that “Solomon “gave” the words of the sages.”¹⁶⁴ Similarly, Martin A. Shields is convinced that the shepherd cannot be identified with any historical character, be it Solomon, Moses, or Qoheleth, because none of these “gave” wisdom sayings or collections nor did they “give” goads and nails.¹⁶⁵ Whereas many commentaries

¹⁵⁸ See for example DeRouchie, “Shepherding Wind,” 12; Craig G. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 366–369; and Hertzberg, *Der Prediger*, 187, who argues “Der “Eine Hirte” kann weder Salomo noch Mose, aber auch nicht das “Haupt einer Gelehrtenversammlung”, — das wäre unrichtig und banal zugleich, — sondern natürlich nur Gott sein, der als der letzte auctor der Weisheit angesehen wird. Dann aber will der Satz hier noch besonders hervorheben, daß auch die Qoh-Spruchsammlung eine von Gott gegebene sei.”

¹⁵⁹ Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions*, 325.

¹⁶⁰ Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 279.

¹⁶¹ Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions*, 325.

¹⁶² Kyle R. Greenwood, “Debating Wisdom: The Role of Voice in Ecclesiastes,” *CBQ* 74 (2012): 489.

¹⁶³ Crenshaw, *The Ironic Wink*, 94.

¹⁶⁴ Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions*, 325.

¹⁶⁵ Shields, *The End of Wisdom*, 80.

lack a solid refutation of the shepherd's identification as Moses or Qoheleth, most seem to discard these as implausible options.

Instead of identifying the shepherd with a historical figure or God, several scholars argue for a different interpretation. They argue that the phrase *רעה אהד* is better understood not as referring to a specific shepherd, but to "any" shepherd.¹⁶⁶ The point of this verse, then, would be that any shepherd uses the necessary means (goads and nails) to guide the flock in the right direction.¹⁶⁷ Shields, who comes to the conclusion that "the text is too vague about the identity of the shepherd to permit any identification"¹⁶⁸ translates the phrase as "a lone shepherd," where *אהד* functions to isolate the shepherd, to emphasize his working alone as opposed to his working together with other shepherds. He argues that the goads and nails "function to assist the lone shepherd in controlling the herd."¹⁶⁹ One shepherd on his own probably has more difficulty with guiding a flock of sheep than if he were to work together with multiple shepherds. Thus, a lone shepherd would be more inclined to use multiple pieces of shepherding equipment to aid him in his task.¹⁷⁰

5.2 A New Translation of *רעה אהד*

The idea that the shepherd in Qoh 12:11 cannot be identified with a specific historical figure can be challenged when read in light of *הבל* and *רעות/רעיון רוח* as allusions to Abel. Radiša Antic (based on a dissertation by Chopineau) briefly comments on the possibility that here Qoheleth refers to Abel. He writes,

At the end of Ecclesiastes, 'the words of the wise' are 'given by one shepherd' (12:11), which may also be a reference to Abel. Chopineau states that the term 'shepherd' was carefully chosen by the author of Ecclesiastes to designate, first, the wisdom of the one who leads his flock and, second, to Abel's occupation.¹⁷¹

Yet, Antic does not elaborate on this statement. Though brief, his comment is still valuable, especially when both *הבל* and *רעות/רעיון רוח* are recognized as allusions to Abel.¹⁷² Connecting

¹⁶⁶ See for example Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions*, 326, and Crenshaw, *The Ironic Wink*, 94.

¹⁶⁷ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 388.

¹⁶⁸ Shields, *The End of Wisdom*, 80.

¹⁶⁹ Shields, *The End of Wisdom*, 80–81.

¹⁷⁰ Shields, *The End of Wisdom*, 80.

¹⁷¹ Antic, "Cain, Abel, Seth," 209–10. Based on Jacques Chopineau, "Hevel en Hébreu Biblique: Contribution à l'Étude des Rapports Entre Sémantique et l'Exégèse de l'Ancien Testament," (PhD diss., University of Strasbourg, 1971).

¹⁷² Antic, "Cain, Abel, Seth," 210–11 has suggested that Qoheleth not only alludes to Abel but also to Cain and Seth. He points to the use of the terms *קניתי* in Qoh 2:7 (from the root *קנה*) and terms such as "to plant" (2:4), "to build" (2:5), and "to acquire" (2:8) that all point to the character of Cain. He also sees references to Seth (*שת*) whose name comes from the root *שית* ("to place, put"). This suggests, according to Antic, that Seth was a

Qoh 12:11, which evokes an image of a shepherd who guides his sheep, with Qoheleth's language of "shepherding the wind" and the constantly reoccurring theme of הבל support the idea that Qoheleth is alluding to Abel.

In fact, I argue that Qoheleth does not "just" allude to Abel here. רעה אהד can be read as a rather direct allusion to Abel if one translates the phrase slightly differently. Instead of the translation "one/a/any shepherd," I suggest a rendering that takes אהד as the ordinal instead of the cardinal form of "one." Thus, I translate רעה אהד not as "one (or any) shepherd" but as "shepherd (number) one," or, better, "the first shepherd."

Understanding the phrase in this way bears some explanation. On the one hand, cardinal and ordinal numbers in biblical Hebrew generally have different forms. For example, the number two, in its masculine absolute form, is שנים¹⁷³ while the ordinal number "second" is שני.¹⁷⁴ For אהד, however, there is no separate ordinal form, and instead the word ראשון is generally used to mean "first." Nevertheless, the word אהד can also designate the ordinal form. This is evident by several cases throughout the Hebrew Bible where אהד is used in the ordinal sense and thus can be—and has been—translated as "first." The most prominent example of this is found in Genesis 1:5, which reads: "God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day." What is translated in English as "the first day," is in Hebrew יום אהד or "day one." Yet, as the NRSV offered here, most English translations render the phrase using the ordinal. To support the idea that אהד is used in the ordinal sense in Genesis 1:5, it can be compared to 1:8: "God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day." The Hebrew for "the second day" is יום שני, where שני is the ordinal form of the number two. Similar to this is Genesis 2:11 where, in the second creation account, the text describes how the one river that flows out of Eden divides into four branches. Verse 11a reads: "The name of the first is Pishon" and in Hebrew this is שם האהד פישון. Thus, האהד is used in the ordinal sense. That it is not "the name of the *one* [river] is Pishon," becomes clear from the subsequent verses where the second, third, and fourth river are all described with ordinal numbers. Verse 13 reads "the second (השני) river is Gihon"; verse 14 reads "the third (השלישי) river is Tigris ... and the fourth (הרביעי) river is the Euphrates."

substitute, "put in the place of" Abel, and he therefore calls Seth "God's gracious gift" (208–09). Though Qoheleth does not use the Hebrew term שית, Antic still recognizes an allusion to Seth through the regular use of the expression "the gift of God" (2:24; 3:13; 5:19; 9:9).

¹⁷³ P. Joüon and T. Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, 3rd repr. of the 2nd ed., with corr., SubBi 27 (Rome: Gregorian and Biblical Press, 2011), 296.

¹⁷⁴ Joüon and Muraoka, *A Grammar*, 301.

These examples illustrate that אֶחָד can be translated not only as the cardinal “one,” but also as the ordinal “first.”¹⁷⁵ Consequently, רֵעֵה אֶחָד may be translated as “shepherd (number) one” or “first shepherd.” Understanding the Hebrew phrase in this way, therefore, would suggest that the verse is referring to Abel, who was, at least for Qoheleth and his audience, the very *first shepherd* ever to have existed. The questions that remain are: why does Qoheleth allude to Abel in 12:11 and what is the meaning of this verse?

5.3 Meaning of Qoh 12:11 as Allusion to Abel

Interpreting the meaning of Qoh 12:11 is complicated by the fact that this verse contains several metaphors which “are arranged in a difficult syntax.”¹⁷⁶ It seems likely that the agent of the verb נָתַן is the shepherd.¹⁷⁷ Less obvious, however, is the subject of נָתַן. This could either be the “sayings of the wise” and “collected sayings” or the “goads” and “nails.” Many of those who argue that the subjects of the verb are the sayings and collections and who thus claim that the shepherd is the direct source of these, identify the shepherd as God.¹⁷⁸ In this interpretation the shepherd is the direct source of the words of the sages and the collected sayings. The sayings and collections are then said to be *like* goads and nails, in that they, too, are “able to inflict, correct and so forth.”¹⁷⁹ This interpretation is reflected in the translation of the NRSV, where the shepherd is the one who gives (at least) the collected sayings.

However, as pointed out above, several scholars see problems with this idea, as it is unlikely that any shepherd (be it a historical figure or a nonspecific shepherd) is the direct source of these words and sayings. Accordingly, a second way of interpreting this verse is one that recognizes a simile between one domain (“goads/nails” and “shepherd”) and another domain (“the words of sages” and “collected sayings”). It identifies “goads” and “firmly fixed nails” as the subjects of the verb נָתַן. The shepherd, then, “‘gives’ or ‘puts’ [the goads/nails] in the sense that he prods his herd with them.”¹⁸⁰ The words of the sages function like the goads and nails of a shepherd: a shepherd uses a disciplinary tool (i.e., goads and nails) to guide his

¹⁷⁵ Other examples where אֶחָד is translated as the ordinal: Gen 8:5, 13; Exod 28:17; 39:10; 40:2, 17; Lev 23:24; Num 1:1, 18; 29:1; 33:38; Deut 1:3; 2 Chr 29:17; 36:22; Ezra 1:1; 3:6; 7:9 10:16, 17; Neh 8:2; Job 42:14; Ezek 10:14; 26:1; 29:17; 31:1; 32:1; 45:18; Dan 1:21; 9:1, 2; 11:1; Hag 1:1.

¹⁷⁶ Christianson, *A Time to Tell*, 106.

¹⁷⁷ Whereas it is likely that here the shepherd is the agent of נָתַן, the preposition מִן is not typically used to signal agency. It is most often used to denote provenance or origin. See Joüon and Muraoka, *A Grammar*, 460.

However, in rare cases it is used to denote agency, e.g., in Gen 16:2.

¹⁷⁸ E.g., DeRouchie, “Shepherding Wind,” 13.

¹⁷⁹ Christianson, *A Time to Tell*, 107. Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 279 explains that a goad “is a long rod with one or more points on the end of it and is used to stir cattle into motion.” Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 287 writes about the firmly fixed nails: “we should think here of spikes or nails implanted at the end of sticks to be used as prods.”

¹⁸⁰ Fox, *Qoheleth and His Contradictions*, 325–26. He points to Deut 15:17, where נָתַן means “‘to stick’ (an awl)” to support his reading that it is the goads and nails that are given, “i.e., set or struck.”

sheep in the right direction. In a similar way, the words of the sages guide the recipients on the right path, however uncomfortable it may be. Just as the goads and nails may be unpleasant to sheep, the words of the sages are often disagreeable to human recipients.¹⁸¹ The words of the wise often convey painful truths that may be uncomfortable, yet necessary, to hear.

Returning to the idea that Qoheleth alludes to Abel as the first shepherd, I propose the following translation: “The sayings of the wise and the collected sayings are like the goads and the firmly fixed nails given by the first shepherd.” To be clear, it is unlikely that Abel was the direct source of any wisdom sayings or collections, or that Qoheleth thought of him as such. Genesis 4 hardly portrays Abel as a wise sage who composed any type of wisdom sayings or collections. In fact, Abel does not speak at all. He is completely silent throughout the story. However, rather than a direct source of wisdom sayings, Abel and his tragic life story seem to be a source of inspiration for Qoheleth. As the first shepherd (and any shepherd after him) guided his sheep using goads and nails, so Abel’s story has guided Qoheleth. Abel’s life story full of unrighteousness acts for Qoheleth like a goad and a firmly fixed nail, and confirms to him the many injustices of life that he has observed in his own lifetime. Accordingly, Qoheleth’s words, as the “sayings of the wise” and as part of the “collected sayings,” function as goads and nails for his own audience.

In this final chapter Qoheleth evokes the memory of Abel one last time, after the last three occurrences of הבל in 12:8, as an appropriate ending to the various allusions to Abel throughout his work. A final allusion that calls to mind Abel and his occupation through the use of the words רעה, “goads” and “nails”, that belong to the domain of shepherding. By his use of אהר he confirms that this shepherd is not any shepherd but the very first shepherd. Like the goads and nails of any shepherd, Qoheleth’s words may be the cause of irritation, frustration, or even anger, but they are necessary as they contain (painful) truths about life. However, Qoheleth further specifies that his words are not just like the goads and nails of *any* shepherd. His words have been guided by his contemplating the story of the *first* shepherd specifically. Abel’s story, like the words of the sages, offers reproof and correction as it teaches a painful lesson about the futility and transient nature of life.

¹⁸¹ Christianson, *A Time to Tell*, 107.

6. Conclusion: A Synthetic Reading of Qoheleth's Allusion to the Abel Narrative

Qoheleth conducts an inquiry into life “under the sun” and all throughout his work he describes the various observations he makes about human life. Already in the first chapter he claims to have seen “all the deeds that are done” and reaches the verdict that “all is הבל and a רעות רוח” (1:14). Everything about human life is transient and human attempts at securing or controlling anything are futile. Not long after he also shares his observations about the many injustices in life, for example, when he observes that “in the place of justice, wickedness was there, and in the place of righteousness, wickedness was there as well” (3:16). He sees all the oppressions, the tears of the oppressed (4:1), the oppression of the poor and the violation of justice (5:8). He also comments on the apparent disconnect between actions and their consequences when he sees for example that some righteous people “are treated according to the conduct of the wicked” and vice versa (8:14). In 9:11 he observes that every person is subject to time and chance, and that talent and skill do not necessarily lead to the results that one might expect.¹⁸²

His inquiry into life under the sun leads Qoheleth to the assessment of many aspects of human life as הבל, a term that becomes the central theme of the book. הבל can have many nuances but Qoheleth primarily employs the term to denote the transience of human life and the inconsistencies between actions and consequences that lead to injustice.

It seems to be no coincidence, then, that הבל is also the name of the first murder victim in Genesis 4. By using Abel's name as the central theme of his work, Qoheleth intentionally alludes to Abel. This allusion is not only created on a lexical level by the use of the same Hebrew word, but also on a metaphoric level, as Qoheleth applies the term to situations that all somehow reflect parts of Abel's life story. The element of transience is reflected in Abel's overall fleeting existence. Though Eve gives no explanation for Abel's name in Genesis 4, through the course of Abel's life the significance of his name becomes apparent. His name, which means “vapor,” functions as a foreshadowing of his fleeting and minimal role in the story. Like a vapor, Abel disappears quickly, without a trace, having never even said a word. The disconnect between actions and consequences and the injustices that Qoheleth observes and to which he ascribes the verdict הבל are reflected in the way that Abel gets what Cain deserves. Abel presents to God a pleasing offering of the firstlings of his flock, yet instead of the expected blessings that would follow from such an offering, he is killed by his brother. The blessings that would normally follow his righteous behavior go to Cain, the one who has

¹⁸² Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 295.

committed the horrendous murder, instead. Despite the supposed cursed mark (Gen 4:15), Cain seems to lead a relatively successful life. Some strange form of a reversal of fortunes has occurred here. Cain kills, yet he walks free and, ostensibly, thrives: even though he is to be a fugitive and a wanderer, he is nevertheless protected from being killed, finds a place to live, has a wife and offspring, and even builds a city. Abel, as far as the reader knows, has acted righteously by creating a pleasing offering, yet he is the one that is killed. He died prematurely without ever finding a wife and having kids, and thus did not manage to secure a future for himself. Qoheleth seems to reflect on this discrepancy between actions and their outcomes that he observed in his own lifetime and in Abel's story when he ascribes the term הבל to those situations where the fruits of one's labor go to someone who does not deserve it (2:21) and where righteous people are treated according to the conduct of wicked people (8:14).

The idea that Qoheleth intentionally alludes to Abel is supported by two other allusions to Abel that both correspond with some aspect of Abel's life and that are lexically connected to the story of Abel through the use of shepherding language.

רעות/רעיון רוח almost always appears in combination with הבל and thus further develops the first allusion to Abel. On a lexical level רעות/רעיון רוח alludes to Abel through the use of רעות/רעיון, which comes from the same root as the word רעה. The noun רעה is used in Gen 4:2 to describe Abel as a shepherd. On a metaphoric level, "shepherding the wind" denotes futile attempts to grasp the ungraspable. It reflects the inability of humans to control anything in life. Everyone is subject to time and chance (Qoh 9:11) and nothing is really in control of humans. Similarly, Abel's fate was not secured. His pleasing offering did not amount to any lasting value for him, as he was killed before he could enjoy any blessings that would have been the result of his attempt at pleasing God.

The final allusion to Abel once again evokes the memory of Abel through the use of shepherding language, this time through the use of the exact same noun as in Gen 4:2, רעה. It does not appear in combination with הבל here, but with the word אהק. When recognized as allusion to Abel, the phrase should be translated as "the first shepherd," to refer directly to the first shepherd, Abel. In 12:11 Qoheleth creates a parallel between sayings/collections and goads/nails. This parallel suggests that wisdom sayings and collections are to humans similar to what goads and firmly fixed nails are to sheep. They are painful yet necessary tools to guide people through life. As the goads and nails guide and teach the sheep to move in certain directions while avoiding others, the sayings of the wise teach the recipients a lesson about the unreliability of the principle of retribution, justice, and even the traditional learned

wisdom. As exemplified by the story of Abel, life is transient and there is no guarantee that righteous actions will lead to rewards, nor that the wicked will be judged justly.

By referring specifically to the goads and nails that were given by the *first* shepherd, Qoheleth evokes the memory of the story of Abel. This story of transience, futility and inconsistency between deed and consequence is filled with unpleasant insights into human life. This story has acted for Qoheleth as a goad and a nail, and has confirmed his own troublesome observations about life under the sun. For him it is more than clear that what happened to the first shepherd was not some isolated event or a glitch in the system, but that it is something universal.

By alluding to Abel through the use of his name and through the use of shepherding language, Qoheleth evokes the memory of the story of the first shepherd, that serves to confirm and illustrate Qoheleth's observations about human life. H. G. L. Peels notes that Genesis 4 not only contains "de *eerste* beschrijving van het fenomeen van menselijk geweld in het Oude Testament, maar ook biedt dit hoofdstuk een *exemplarische* beschrijving hiervan."¹⁸³ For Qoheleth, too, the story of Abel and Cain is not just any example, but the primary example of the transience of human life, the futility of human behavior, the imbalance between actions and results and the injustices that follow from that.

The proposal that Qoheleth, as the receptor text, intentionally alludes to the source text Gen 4:1–16, is supported by various criteria of inner-biblical allusion particularly focusing on shared language such as repetition of rare words and phrases as well as correspondences in theme. I have argued for and outlined three distinct allusions, namely (1) הַבֵּל, as the very name of Abel himself, functions in Qoheleth as an allusion to the transience that Abel embodies and the inconsistency between actions and their consequences that Abel's life story reflects, two aspects that resonate with Qoheleth's themes of transience and the unexpected reversal of fortunes; (2) the near-synonymous phrases רעות/רעיון רוח are an allusion to Abel's occupation as shepherd, and in their conjunction with הַבֵּל in Qoheleth they point to the futility of trying to "shepherd" (i.e., control or direct) any purpose in life; and (3) in 12:11 רעה אהד stands as an allusion to Abel as the *first* shepherd, whose painful life story, like wise sayings do for a sage's students, teaches a lesson about the transience of human life and the futility of human actions. Abel's story has first guided Qoheleth in that it has confirmed to him that the uncomfortable observations he made about human life are a universal phenomenon, and Qoheleth in turn offers his insights to his own audience as a means of guidance and reproof.

¹⁸³ H. G. L. Peels, "In het teken van Kaïn. Een theologische exegese van Genesis 4," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 29 (2008): 174 (emphasis original).

In short, Qoheleth alludes to Abel by the use of the shared term הבל, and by the use of the phrases רעות/רעיון רוח and רעה אהד that both use a form of the word רעה. Abel is described as a shepherd with the word רעה in Gen 4:2. It is striking that the text of Genesis 4 only provides the reader with a few pieces of information about the character Abel, yet of those few things, Qoheleth uses two terms that are either exactly the same or come from the same root.

As not all cases of shared language directly suggest a literary relationship, it is also important to discuss the rarity of the shared language. While הבל is not exactly a rare term, it is not as common as some other terms. Whereas the total number of instances of הבל in the Hebrew Bible is 73, it only appears 35 times outside of the book Qoheleth. Finally, Qoheleth not only uses the shared term הבל but also רעות/רעיון and רעה, which suggests an accumulation of shared terms; and accumulation of shared terms is stronger support for inner-biblical allusion than a single shared term. Taken together, these examples support this paper's argument that the author of Qoheleth intentionally alludes to the story of Abel in Genesis 4.

Recognizing Qoheleth's allusions to the Abel narrative serves to enhance the reader's understanding of and appreciation for both the book Qoheleth and Genesis 4. Genesis 4 treats Abel as a secondary character. No explicit explanation for his name is provided, he does not speak throughout the story, and he disappears from the scene rather quickly. The reader only knows Abel's name, occupation, and family relations. Qoheleth makes use of the few pieces of information about Abel that are known, as he alludes to him by the use of his name and by the use of the term for his occupation. Combined with the fact that he applies this term to situations that are reminiscent of what Abel went through, this supports the idea that he intentionally made these allusions. Genesis quickly forgets Abel, and seems to be rather indifferent to the fact that there is no justice for Abel, despite his apparent righteous behavior before God. However, Qoheleth appears to reflect on what Genesis was silent about. He recognizes the injustice of Abel's situation and observes that what has happened to Abel is still part of everyday life. Where God says in Gen 4:10 "Listen; your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground!" Qoheleth seems to amplify the voice of this silent character, giving meaning to unsaid words.

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