

# Ecclesiastes 1:2

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/eccl/eccl-1/ecclesiastes-12/>

*Solomon uses an enigmatic metaphor to introduce the intention of the book: attempting to reconcile man's search for meaning with the practical limitations around him.*

Solomon begins with a vivid metaphor that will reappear more than thirty times throughout Ecclesiastes.

The Hebrew word *hebel* is translated here as *vanity*. Other translations choose the word “meaningless.” A more literal translation is “warm breath” or “vapor.” Used throughout the Old Testament, this can refer to either a positive or negative circumstance. In [Ecclesiastes 11:10](#), “hebel” is translated “fleeting.” It is an inherently neutral term whose meaning is determined by context. In the introductory statement of *the Preacher*, it is likely a literary device meant to be provocative and arouse interest. Were Solomon a modern English-speaker, he might have said something like this:

“Life swirls around us like a mist and passes by as a vapor. We seek to know it, but it eludes our grasp.”

In one powerful phrase, Solomon is naming the problem. How do you grab hold of something that is so intangible?

Solomon is going to address work and joy, wisdom and folly, time and death. He says upfront that it is all a vapor. Life is something we can touch, but not fully grasp. Like a *vapor*, a mist. It disappears in our hands as we try to hold it.

Life is a paradox; like vapor, it appears solid but slips through our fingers when we try to close our hand around it. It is an enigma, a mystery. The ancient reader would likely not have associated arrogance or purposelessness with a metaphor about “hebel,” mist. Hence our modern translation of *vanity* presents some additional challenges to transporting ourselves into the past and seeing through the eyes of the original audience.

The ancient reader probably would think of the enigma, the mystery, the challenge of such an image. And that seems consistent with what Solomon is trying to evoke.

The English word *vanity* has a root that echoes the vaporous content of “hebel.” The Latin word “vanitas” from which we get “vanity” could mean “unsubstantial” or “lacking permanence” as well as “useless, futile or illusory.” Since in modern English only the latter meaning continues in use, it will be necessary for us to continue to remember the fuller meaning of “hebel.”

**Biblical Text**

**Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher. Vanity of vanities. All is vanity.**