

## Ecclesiastes, Einstein, and Buddha

Rev. Gabi

There's nothing new under the sun. That's what it says in the book of Ecclesiastes. It was written approximately 400 years before the Common Era. There's nothing new under the sun. Again and again, "the realist" in this book points out that things don't seem to change.

Let me give you some examples: I have asked Monica Kruger to be the Voice of Ecclesiastes today.

In Chapter 1, verse 9 it says: *What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun.*

Or: 1:10: *Is there a thing of which it is said, "See, this is new?" It has already been, in the ages before us; ... all is vanity and a chasing after wind.*

And we all know that it is true, don't we? Mini skirts and bell bottoms go in and out of fashion; unqualified leaders are elected to office; wars are fought for absurd reasons. History repeats itself, and the rat race is the same every day.

But, you know, the opposite is true, too: there is nothing old under the sun! You will be a different person when you leave this place today.

Not only because you were drastically changed by my brilliant sermon - no, because countless molecules in your body have changed. The oxygen you inhaled here is now bound in hemoglobin, and travels through your blood. You have inhaled carbon atoms that have been around for millions of years, could theoretically have passed through the lungs of the Buddha, or Jesus, or Mother Teresa, but likely have never been in your body before!

Along the same lines: you all know that you can never step into the same river twice; and, when you look at a candle flame, not for two milliseconds will you see the same flame, because the constituents are changing: hydrocarbons in the wax are being burnt. The shape of the flame is caused by the heat, and it stretches upward because when things get heated, they rise, in a continuous process.

Every few seconds, a new human being is born under the sun (well, some are born in the dark); our planet rotates 15 degrees every hour - there really is nothing old under the sun! So - There's nothing new under the sun, there's nothing old under the sun - quite contradictory, wouldn't you say?

The book of Ecclesiastes is full of those contradictions. For example, **Monica:** In Chapter 1:verse 7 it says: *"All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow, there they continue to flow."* And in Chapter 2:verse 14: *"The wise have eyes in their head, but fools walk in darkness. Yet I perceived that the same fate befalls all of them."*

I first became aware of those contradictions when I heard an interview with Joshua

Abraham Heschel. This amazing Jewish philosopher and activist pointed out that he disagreed with Qoheleth – that’s a fancy name for the author of Ecclesiastes. Heschel said that *“there is nothing stale under the sun; everything is new. No two moments are alike. And a person who thinks that two moments are alike has never lived.”*

Okay, now this is where Einstein comes in. Even if you don’t know much about physics, you are probably aware of the wave-particle duality. For the longest time scientists thought that an entity had to either behave like a wave; or like a particle. And then they found out that a particle only behaves like a wave as long as you don’t observe it; however, as soon as you look at it, it becomes localized as a particle! When I first learned about that, I was incredulous – it didn’t make any sense, it wasn’t logical! It is totally contradictory, because a wave is extended over space—I always think of an ocean wave—while a particle—I picture it as one water molecule in the ocean—is a single point in space. I just couldn’t wrap my brains around it, that all the fundamental entities of matter and energy exhibit this wave-particle duality!

On the other hand, I see a clear parallel to the wave-particle duality in our daily living. And a parallel to Ecclesiastes! This “Royal Philosopher” discovered more than 2400 years ago what Albert Einstein confirmed in the modern era: there is no absolute frame of reference in the cosmos.

Mostly because there is no still-point in the universe! Everything is moving relative to everything else, all the time! Quantum physics even states that nothing is ever completely still. The universe has ADHD . . .

By the way, Einstein was awarded the Nobel Prize for his discovery of the photoelectric effect, not for the discovery of the dual nature of light (also called the theory of relativity); this was considered too heretical at the time.

Clearly there is duality all around us. Just look at the artificial duality of New Year’s Day. The way we treat this day is as if we are starting something new, while in reality we are plodding on with the same old same old routine of Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, etc. Getting up, going to bed. There is absolutely nothing special about this day in itself!

On the other hand – we are starting something new – as we constantly do! It seems to me that we humans need duality as markers: this was before – this is now – this will be tomorrow. But this duality does not always match what we seem to experience in reality! And I believe that this is what Ecclesiastes is all about. And he seems to be very frustrated by it. He keeps saying: *“All is vanity!”* As a matter of fact, he says it 33 times in his book! The word *vanity* has always bothered me in this context, because we have a very different use for it in everyday English language, (just like in German); a use that didn’t make much sense to me when reading Ecclesiastes. The Hebrew word

that is commonly translated as “vanity” is *hebel*. Believe it or not, whole books and countless articles have been written about the translation of this one word, and I read them all and came to the conclusion . . . no, to be honest, I didn’t read them all. But I read the book that the theologian Michael Fox wrote on the contradictions in Ecclesiastes, and I think he probably read all the others. Fox offers several suggestions on how to translate *hebel*. One of them is (the word) “absurdity”, because absurd is something that’s real but that just doesn’t make sense; at least not at the moment. Absurdity sounds better to me, because when we look around us, we see a lot of things that seem to be absurd: we see realities that are incomprehensible; just think of Tsunamis or hurricanes or earthquakes.

No matter how many scientific explanations we get for natural disasters, we still can’t comprehend the death of thousands and thousands of people. For most of us, racism and homophobia are absurd, a sad reality that is mostly incomprehensible. And I don’t even want to talk about the absurdity of the election of him who must not be named.

An example for a similar kind of absurdity is in Chapter 5:8 in Ecclesiastes: *“If you see in a province the oppression of the poor and the violation of justice and right, do not be amazed at the matter; for the high official is watched by a higher, and there are yet higher ones over them.”* Seems to me like things haven’t changed a whole lot in the last 2500 years.

Michael Fox also discusses the option to translate *hebel* differently depending on the circumstances. He argues that *“the thematic statement, ‘everything is hebel’,”* implies that there is some meaning common to the various occurrences of the term. To define the word, as commentators commonly do, he offers a list of possible translations, including “vapor”, “futile”, “empty”, “nothing”, “ridiculous”, “incongruous”, “transitory”, “illusory”, “insignificant”, “vain”, “incomprehensible”, or “absurd” or “inadequate.” Most of these options seem to fit some contexts, in fact, in some contexts several quite different translations seem to work.

Fox goes on asking, *“Since several qualities evoke the hebel-judgment, why not translate hebel variously . . . ?”*

The New Jerusalem Version of the Bible takes yet another approach, using eight different words to translate *hebel*.” The Bible translation I use most often, the Message by Eugene Peterson, has a pretty good approach. Monica will give you a brief example: *“Call me the Quester. I looked most carefully into everything, searched out all that is done on this earth. And let me tell you, there is not much to write home about! God hasn’t made it easy for us. I’ve seen it all and it’s nothing but smoke – smoke and spitting into the wind.”* However, my personal favorite translation for this single attribute, and that’s why I had the little discourse into the world of physics earlier, would be the word “relative.”

Let me illustrate my point: Qoheleth says the following in Chapter 5:verse 11

**Monica:** *“When goods increase, those who eat them increase; and what gain has their owner but to see them with his eyes?”* Well, it’s all relative - the people who get to eat the goods, are happy, the owner might be. Of course, the owner could also be happy, happy for the people who get to eat! This is one of the lessons I have learned from Buddhism, and it ties right in with Qoheleth, and with the wave-particle duality: it is all relative.

All your observations and impressions depend on how you look at it; and whether you look at it at all, or just glance and grumble.

- The laws of physics say: when you observe a particle, it behaves like a particle; when you don’t look, it behaves like a wave.
- Buddhism says that when you are mindful - or call it observant - you see things...maybe for the first time really SEE them.

Take for example our understanding of time: when you are bored, time seems to slow to the pace of a snail; but when you are really busy, time flies. In reality, our clocks always move with the same speed, so it is only our perception that changes. On the other hand, time really changes when you are in outer space, because time slows down in a gravitational field, so that a clock in outer space will actually run faster (General relativity). You are all aware that how fast or how slowly time moves depends on our perception, or on the location – if you are in outer space. It is relative to where we are, and to how mindful we are.

If you want a less Buddhist term, you can also say: “What state of mind we are in,” instead of “mindful”. So when Ecclesiastes asks in Chapter 3:verse 9 **Monica:** *“What gain have the workers from their toil?”* The answer is: It depends on how they look at it.

- They can--at the end of the day--complain about their hurting back or their tired feet;
- or they can be glad in the awareness that they have done whatever they were capable of doing, and will have earned a day’s wages which will feed their families. In other words, their reaction is relative to their mindset.

Another example: Ecclesiastes says in 6:7

**Monica:** *“All human toil is for the mouth, yet the appetite is not satisfied.”*

- This is only true if your interests are superficial.
- If you are able to find success and fulfillment in your work, all your appetites will be satisfied.

This reminds me of an important lesson I learned in a seminary class called Wonder and Wisdom in Religious Education: You can only see wonder and experience awe if you open your hearts to it. Only opening your eyes is not enough - we see all the great stuff around us all the time, but only rarely do we truly look at the awe-inspiring little details of creation. It takes a conscious effort of the mind to open some door inside your mind that allows you to see beyond the obvious. This is also true when it comes to the

experience of suffering. Victor Frankl, who wrote about his years in the Nazi Concentration Camps, saw that some people broke down very soon, whereas others held on despite the horrors of their situation. All were exposed to the same dreadfulness, but they reacted differently. Frankl writes: *“We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms -- to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.”* What causes this duality: people in the same circumstances are literally broken by their suffering, whereas others seem to get even stronger? Frankl concluded that the survivors were those who were able to see some meaning in their experience/predicament.

Let me give you a few more examples from the book of Ecclesiastes: 7:8 *“Better is the end of a thing than its beginning; the patient in spirit are better than the proud in spirit.”*

- It's a fact that things begin, and things end. Both are true.
- But in the end those are better off who have the right attitude.

7:9 **Monica:** *“Do not be quick to fly off the handle, for anger boomerangs.”*

- We feel angered by many things, or events, or actions.
- But it is up to us how we react to it. If you let anger control your actions, you might get a lot of bumps on your head.

7:10 **Monica:** *“Don't always be asking, ‘Where are the good old days’ Wise folks don't ask questions like that.”* (can you tell that these last two were a Message translation?)

- It's a fact that there are good days and there are bad days.
- In other words—it is not wise to compare the past with the present, every time has its merits and its problems.

7:11 **Monica:** *“Wisdom is as good as an inheritance, an advantage to those who see the sun.”*

- It's a fact that sun is light, which means growth, and sun is heat, which means wilting.
- Those who see the sun and enjoy it are wise. Those who just feel the heat and grumble are not wise.

7:15 **Monica:** *“In my vain life I have seen everything; there are righteous people who perish in their righteousness, and there are wicked people who prolong their life in their evildoing.”*

- And there are righteous people who are happy and successful, and there are wicked people who are unhappy.
- Yes, there are contradictions. But they exist side-by-side.

Let me close with one final quote from Ecclesiastes, again in the Message translation:

**Monica:** Chapter 5, Verse 18: *“After looking at the way things are on this earth, here’s what I’ve decided is the best way to live: Take care of yourself, have a good time, and make the most of whatever job you have as long as God gives you life.”* And that’s about it. That’s the human lot.

I rest my case.