

## Global Tides

---

Volume 12

Article 6

---

5-2-2018

# Qohelet and Camus: Answering the Absurd

Christian A. Sanchez

Pepperdine University, [christian.sanchez@pepperdine.edu](mailto:christian.sanchez@pepperdine.edu)

---

### Recommended Citation

Sanchez, Christian A. (2018) "Qohelet and Camus: Answering the Absurd," *Global Tides*: Vol. 12 , Article 6.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/globaltides/vol12/iss1/6>

This Humanities is brought to you for free and open access by the Seaver College at Pepperdine Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Global Tides by an authorized editor of Pepperdine Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [josias.bartram@pepperdine.edu](mailto:josias.bartram@pepperdine.edu) , [anna.speth@pepperdine.edu](mailto:anna.speth@pepperdine.edu).

“O my soul, do not aspire to immortal life, but exhaust the limits of the possible” (Myth 2).

The words of the ancient Theban poet Pindar launched *The Myth of Sisyphus*, one of the most defining works of the French-Algerian author Albert Camus. In this essay, Camus develops his philosophy of the absurd—the clash between man and the universe. He examines our time spent on earth and discovers something at the human core. Man desires lucidity and cohesion, life and answers, yet is met with a seemingly indifferent, silent and cruel universe. As man craves peace and order, he looks to a world that does not afford such crucial human longings.

Likewise, there was a thinker who preceded Camus by three millennia who shook his fist at the sky and arrived upon similar ideas in his own search. Indeed, the principal speaker of the book of *Ecclesiastes* found in the Hebrew Bible, Qohelet, echoed similar thoughts as the French-Algerian author. In his works, Hebrew Bible scholar Michael Fox writes that there is a “fundamental congruity” between Camus’s and Qohelet’s concept of the world’s incongruity (*Contradictions* 14).

Examining both philosophers, the scholar Justin Morgan writes, “Ultimately, through Camus and Qohelet, we can better understand how a confrontation with the absurd is an essential part of what it means to be human” (26). Though Morgan focuses on the confrontation, the response to the absurd is truly the defining aspect of each author. Camus chooses to revolt against this ubiquitous condition of life while Qohelet seeks to find purpose outside this life in God. While Morgan emphasizes that the individual encounter with the absurd has defined mankind for millennia, each individual nevertheless chooses to live in a distinctive way. Though we all live and act within the bounds of our absurd existences, our lives remain unique from one another despite the non-discriminatory absurd. Likewise, both Qohelet and Camus arrived at the same initial fundamental conclusion about the absurd essence of life, but due to their greater philosophical and religious differences, their responses to this human condition were significantly different. I propose that each man’s life is defined not by his meeting with absurd but rather by his individual response to this reality of existence, whether it is to circumvent the *hebel* reality, clinging to a belief in an omnipotent deity, as the ancient Hebrew thinker Qohelet illustrates, or to rebel against the absurd, motivated by the rejection of hope, as the French-Algerian author Albert Camus epitomizes.

#### UNDERSTANDING QOHELET

Before a thorough analysis of Qohelet’s philosophy can be completed, a brief linguistic and contextual analysis of this concept of *hebel* must be undertaken to understand the full connotations of the lexical choice. So rich with meaning, *hebel*

can be employed in many ways, giving it an appreciable depth. The word denotes “vapor” by a direct translation from Hebrew but is polysemously used—its meanings are related but nonetheless distinct from one another—in the way Qohelet describes the world (“Meaning” 411). Revealed in the first chapter of *Ecclesiastes* that he “applied his mind to seek and search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven,” Qohelet comes to the conclusion that all is *hebel* (*Eccl.* 1.12-13). After all his seeking, he is able to condense the world and everything done within the world into this single word. Traditionally translated as “vanity” or “meaningless,” *hebel* would best be left in its transliterated form, for any single translation proves to be too limiting for this central theme of Qohelet’s discourse in the book of *Ecclesiastes*. In fact, three words can be applied that can offer more sense to this dynamic word as it is used throughout *Ecclesiastes*: fleeting, incomprehensible, and futile (MacArthur 910).

“Fleeting” keeps closest to the literal meaning of “vapor,” as this sense is implied when Qohelet writes about life’s transient nature. The passage closely related to this meaning is the following: “For the fate of humans and the fate of animals is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and humans have no advantage over the animals; for all is [*hebel*]” (*Eccl.* 3.19). As Qohelet observes life, he acknowledges cursory lives and the common destiny for all living creatures: death. Being especially relevant for ancient Israel where existence itself was considered fragile, the reminder of the certainty of death was prevalent and accepted as inevitable (Rappé 236). To further emphasize the significance of life paired with death, Qohelet later writes that this ephemeral state is the reason to find pleasure in what is currently present; the fleeting nature of life is central to his notion of *hebel*.

As Qohelet examines the paradoxes of this life in *Ecclesiastes*, his usage of the word *hebel* can also be interpreted as “incomprehensible.” Qohelet affords an example of this meaning when writing, “Then I said to myself, ‘What happens to the fool will happen to me also; why then have I been so very wise?’ And I said to myself that this also is [*hebel*]” (*Eccl.* 2.15). Where can the justice in destiny be found? Perplexed by the idea that two people who lead opposite lives arrive at the same destination, he addresses the contradiction by asserting the incomprehensibility of life. This impression of his inability to understand everything eventually leads Qohelet to look for understanding outside of himself, a move which is the crux of his response to the *hebel*.

Qohelet’s third usage is most similar to “futile,” or a more ambiguous “meaningless,” and is most often paired with his numerous sections concerning toil and work. The best instance is in the second chapter of *Ecclesiastes*, where he states, “Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had spent in doing it, and again, all was [*hebel*] and a chasing after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun” (*Eccl.* 2.15). After gazing down at his hands

marked by a life of labor, his eyes rise up to view a never-ending list of tasks for both him and his posterity. He views all work as *hebel*, but nevertheless asserts later that it is, overall, good. Yet, he is left with the age old question: what work done on earth is guaranteed to last?

Now continuing with a grasp on the implications of the word *hebel*, the first section contained in chapter one, verses two through eleven of *Ecclesiastes* contains Qohelet's defense of the opening statement on which the entire book pivots: "all is *hebel*." Within these verses, the major themes of the Qohelet's view are contained relating to the consequences of the *hebel* reality in the universe; they can be condensed in four points: the futility of effort, the incomprehensible cycle of nature, the absence of satisfaction of desires, and the fleeting nature of life. These core themes of Qohelet's discourse form the basis for his views on life and also can be found pervading the work of Albert Camus as he establishes his philosophy of the absurd. It is important to grasp both authors at their core, for a deep understanding of them both provides the connections that begin to illustrate Fox's claim of the "fundamental congruity" between the two authors (*Contradictions 14*).

"What do people gain from all the toil / at which they toil under the sun?" (*Eccl.* 1.2). The futility of effort is at the forefront of Qohelet's mind as he begins his discourse on the nature of human existence. Rather than dismissing this theme as another portion of his rhetorical masterpiece of an introduction, it deserves reflection due to its reoccurrence further along in his work. Thus, what does man gain from his toil? While seeking what is gained from toil, he seems to discover the losses before finding any benefits. If one were to believe success and progress could be acquired from toil, Qohelet reminds the reader—or listener—that all things are eventually left to his successor, and "who knows whether they will be wise or foolish?" (*Eccl.* 2.19). Additionally, he concludes that work is painful and vexing, which deprives the mind of rest—giving even less of a motivation for any kind of striving (*Eccl.* 2.23). Verse eight of chapter one asserts "All things are wearisome"; even existing is burdensome. While labor remains *hebel*, Qohelet hints that there may be varying degrees of *hebel* when comparing toil for provision versus gain. In chapter four, Qohelet examines the life of "solitary" men without "any sons or brothers." Qohelet posits that, like all men, these individuals find "no end to all their toil," and "their eyes are never satisfied with riches." Unlike other men who work to provide for their kin, this toil for personal gain wrestles with a greater degree of *hebel* as well as being "depriving...of pleasure." As for any profit or riches, one is again confronted with the *hebel*: "As they came from their mother's womb, so they shall go again, naked as they came; they shall take nothing for their toil, which they may carry away with their hands" (*Eccl.* 5.15). While toil itself certainly serves a purpose, the inevitability of death negates any meaning found in human effort. While human

effort is necessary for basic survival until the we meet the grave, it has no greater meaning. Berger summarizes it neatly in saying, “For Qohelet, there is no advantage, no gain, to be found in the universe” (147).

“All streams run to the sea / but the sea is not full” (*Eccl.* 1.7). The universe is trapped in a never-ending cycle. The sun sets only to take up its course once again; the wind wraps around the earth only to repeat its journey; the streams and rivers pour into the seas and oceans only to find them never filled. For the cyclic course of nature began at creation and will continue so long as it endures. Dell argues one of Qohelet’s main points in discussing this topic is that “[t]here is a permanence about [the world] that doesn’t really change despite seeming to” (Dell 189). While there is a motion and rhythm to the universe, it does not change; it is fixed.

“The eye is not satisfied with seeing / or the ear filled with hearing” (*Eccl.* 1.8). There is a frustration fundamental to the flesh: man is not easily satisfied. When it seems that one has had his fill, he craves more. This theme is present throughout the book of *Ecclesiastes*. Qohelet states, “The lover of money will not be satisfied with money; nor the lover of wealth, with gain. This also is [*hebel*]” (*Eccl.* 5.10). Central to the *hebel* reality, chronic dissatisfaction is part of the human condition. As Fox writes, “The insatiable yearning for more . . . is another one of the absurdities that God has built into the universe” (“Meaning of Hebel” 419). In another key statement, Qohelet relates the futility of effort to this essential concept of the absence of satisfaction: “All human toil is for the mouth, yet the appetite is not satisfied” (*Eccl.* 6.7). In the course of man’s full existence, he attempts to sate his desires, yet to no avail. It is this clash of desire and dissatisfaction that is the root of *hebel*. This clear friction found in human desire reinforces the *hebel* of seeking pleasure and can be found throughout Camus’s thoughts on the absurd.

“A generation goes, and a generation comes / but the earth remains forever” (*Eccl.* 1.4). As with the literal meaning of “vapor,” the *hebel* essence of the world results in the feeling that time is against man. In fact, it is this fleeting nature of life that results in the consequence of the futility of effort. Effort is ultimately *hebel* because nothing acquired will accompany man into eternity. Berger describes it in writing, “It seems that all progress is negated by the unavoidable fact of human finitude. Our gains outlive us and, in doing so, cease to be our gains” (146). This reality is supported by Qohelet’s statement in the third chapter stating, “I know whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything be taken from it,” clearly contrasting our finite nature and the eternity of God (*Eccl.* 3.14). All the labor we strive through in this life ultimately makes no impact in light of the eternity in which God exists. This finitude of man also results in an absence of remembrance as shown in Qohelet’s introduction: “The people of long ago are not remembered, / nor will there be any

remembrance / of people yet to come . . .” (*Eccl.* 1.11). Indeed, it is this confrontation between man’s effort and ephemeral existence that creates the *hebel* reality. Analyzing this train of thought, Berger concludes:

Lack of memory is, for Qohelet, the erasure of history, toil and gain. Time is engaged in a process by which it continually washes itself out. For the human, and herein lies the source of Qohelet’s anxiety about memory, the process of forgetting—the natural effect of time—subverts all meaning found in life. After death, there is no hope for memory and this loss is a loss of everything—of love, hatred, and jealousy. (148)

Berger’s remarks display what one would regard as the deep-rooted pessimistic core of Qohelet’s discourse. However, this view of time and memory are a result of his approach to the speaker’s uncomfortably honest and realistic survey of the world.

By investigating the futility of effort, the incomprehensible cycle of nature, the absence of satisfaction of desires, and the fleeting nature of life, Qohelet brushes the surface of life’s mysteries. He finds backbreaking labor to no end, the unalterable cycle of life, never-ending discontentment, and the nullifying effect of time. To him, these are all *hebel*; because they are inseparable from human life, Qohelet’s initial claim is supported: “all is *hebel*” (*Eccl.* 1.2).

#### UNDERSTANDING CAMUS

Turning to Camus, scholar Justin Morgan writes: “In the twentieth-century, Camus captures the conflicts that have for thousands of years formed the story of man wrestling with his maker, a man turned toward the heavens and demanding justice and meaning” (Morgan 16). This examination of life turns out to be not too different from that of Qohelet. For example, Albert Camus’s notion of the absurd shares striking similarities with Qohelet in their shared views on time. For example, James Wood states:

Reading Camus, we feel that death stands at the end of our lives as an enormous negation, the assassin of memory, a kind of official torturer telling the poor citizen: "You saw nothing, you did not experience the things you thought you experienced. You did not live. You are erased. (93)

This is simply one aspect of Qohelet’s philosophy that is clearly tied to that of Camus. Nevertheless, before Camus and Qohelet’s conclusions concerning the essence of the human condition can be truly compared, Camus’s philosophy must be fleshed out. *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Stranger* are two of Camus’s works

that will be explored since the works provide his clearest, most meaningful thoughts of the absurd.

The Camusian absurd, simply put, is a divorce between the longings of man and the impassivity of the universe. Having its origins in the work of existentialist philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, the Camusian absurd forsakes its theistic roots; for Camus, a belief in God is “philosophical suicide”<sup>1</sup> (Myth 31). Kierkegaard, like Camus, presents the absurd as a given aspect of what it means to be human. He differs from Camus, however, when he ties the absurd to the relationship between an infinite God and a finite man (Morgan 134). Camus takes hold of the absurd—secularizing it—and personalizes it. Camus expresses the absurd in relation to his own struggle in understanding his daily existence and purpose while contrasting it with the universe surrounding him. His grapple with life echoes a sentiment Immanuel Kant once expressed: “Human reason has this peculiar fate, that in one of its cognitions: it is troubled by questions that it cannot dismiss...but that it also cannot answer, because they surpass human reason’s every ability” (Kant 1).

Where Kant writes “peculiar,” Albert Camus would write “absurd.” As Camus writes himself, the absurd is a comparison between “a bare fact and certain reality”<sup>2</sup> (Myth 22). For the absurd “lies in neither of the elements compared; it is born of their confrontation”<sup>3</sup> (23). He claims that the absurd rests neither “in man . . . nor in the world, but in their presence together”<sup>4</sup> (23). Due to the nature of absurdity, it cannot—by definition—be in either element, for the absurd itself means a contradiction or impossibility based on a disproportion between fact and reality (22). At its core, his notion of the absurd is the existence between the bare fact of human need and the certain reality of the universe’s indifference. In Camus’s terms, there are three certainties on which absurdism is based: what man wants, what the world offers, and what links them (23).

Camus claims he must begin in what he knows best: man (12). At the beginning, he asserts that there are contradictions which are bound to be found in a mind that studies itself, undoubtedly a result of his own introspection. This vicious cycle of finding oneself in contradictions is nestled in a mind that he claims has its first duty in distinguishing truth and falsehood (22-23). Ultimately,

---

<sup>1</sup> “suicide philosophique” (*Mythe* 63)

<sup>2</sup> “un état de fait et une certaine réalité” (*Mythe* 50)

<sup>3</sup> “Il n’est ni dans l’un ni dans l’autre élément comparés” (*Mythe* 50).

<sup>4</sup> “dans l’homme . . . ni dans le monde, mais dans leur présences commune” (*Mythe* 50)

Camus claims understanding is tied with unification of man and the universe. Finally arriving at his first certainty—what man wants—he writes:

The mind's deepest desire, even in its most elaborate operations, parallels man's conscious feeling in the face of his universe: it is an insistence upon familiarity, an appetite for clarity. Understanding the world for a man is reducing it to the human, slapping it with his seal.<sup>5</sup> (23)

Indeed, man's greatest desire is to understand, and to understand is to unify himself with the universe—to clarify his place in the cosmos. However, Camus, always bringing it to a personal level when discussing what man wants, is confronted with the limits of his man's understanding in saying, "What can [anything] outside my condition mean to me? I can only understand in human terms"<sup>6</sup>(38). An understanding of the world can only be reached if it is reduced to what is human because knowledge ends where human understanding ends—for we can only truly understand ourselves (14). The human yearning is the ability to connect with the world; for only then will it be satisfied (23). Consequently, Camus believes this means anthropomorphizing the world; he writes, "If man realized that the universe like him can love and suffer, he would be reconciled"<sup>7</sup> (23). Only through a universe in human terms can there be accord. Yet, we find no such universe. Camus claims that he cannot escape "this desire for unity, this longing to solve, and this need for clarity and cohesion"<sup>8</sup> so fundamental to his being (38). In this human want lies "the essential impulse of the human drama"<sup>9</sup>(23).

---

<sup>5</sup> "Le désir profond de l'esprit même dans ses démarches les plus évoluées rejoint le sentiment inconscient de l'homme devant son univers : il est exigence de familiarité, appétit de clarté. Comprendre le monde pour un homme, c'est le réduire à l'humain, le marquer de son sceau" (*Mythe* 34)

<sup>6</sup> "Que signifie pour moi signification hors de ma condition ? Je ne puis comprendre qu'en termes humains" (*Mythe* 75).

<sup>7</sup> "Si l'homme reconnaissait que l'univers lui aussi peut aimer et souffrir, il serait réconcilié" (*Mythe* 34)

<sup>8</sup> "ce désir d'unité, cet appétit de résoudre, cette exigence de clarté et de cohésion" (*Mythe* 75)

<sup>9</sup> "le mouvement essentiel du drame humain" (*Mythe* 34)



The second certainty is what the world offers. By the end of Camus's philosophical novel *The Stranger*, his absurd hero Meursault is condemned to death and will be executed the following day. He has one last interaction with a priest. While ending fruitlessly for the priest in his attempts to convert our convict, it allows Meursault to have a final revelation about his condition. He says, "For the first time, in that night alive with signs and stars, I opened myself to the gentle indifference of the world"<sup>10</sup> (*The Stranger* 116). This tender indifference characterizes the world man inhabits. This indifferent attitude of the world starkly contrasts to man's deep longings of understanding, satisfaction, and meaning, which typify him.

In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus expands this idea of the world's coldness in what it offers by saying, "The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world"<sup>11</sup> (20). With this unreasonable silence and its tender indifference, the universe—blind to the human condition—creates a sense of exile in the heart of man. Here, man feels "an exile, a stranger"<sup>12</sup> which is a sentiment "without remedy"<sup>14</sup> (5).

Returning to Camus's novel, Meursault is the exemplification of this sensation of exile, for he is cognizant of the fact the world offers him no place of belonging. In sum, the world offers nothing but chaos, and, ultimately, the assurance of death to each person (Myth 38). This assurance played a familiar role in Camus's own life after contracting tuberculosis at the age of seventeen (Morgan 17). He was no stranger to the occasional handkerchief spotted with blood, grimly reminding him: *memento mori*. Through the confrontation of the "chaotic world" that caused his disease and the innate desire for life, the absurd arises (16).

The third and final certainty is the chain that links the human want and the world's silence: the Camusian absurd. Perhaps the clearest portrait of the absurd is found in *The Myth of Sisyphus* where Camus writes that it is "that divorce between the mind that desires and the world that disappoints, my nostalgia for unity, this fragmented universe and the contradiction that binds them together"<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> "Devant cette nuit charge de signes et d'étoiles, je m'ouvrais pour la première fois à la tendre indifférence du monde" (*L'étranger* 181)

<sup>11</sup> "L'absurde naît de cette confrontation entre l'appel humain et le silence déraisonnable du monde" (*Mythe* 46)

<sup>12</sup> "... l'homme se sent un étranger. Cet exil est sans recours. . ." (*Mythe* 20)

<sup>13</sup> "C'est ce divorce entre l'esprit qui désire et le monde qui déçoit, ma nostalgie d'unité, cet univers dispersé et la contradiction qui les enchaîne" (*Mythe* 73)

(37). While the absurd binds them, the absurd does not and cannot exist on its own, for it is the confrontation of them both. It is simultaneously their clash and their linkage. Rather than lying in either element, the absurd is the all-encompassing feeling that permeates reality. For example, existence is only absurd because life is found in a universe that seems to have no regard for life. As Morgan writes, “[Camus] reminds us that [we] live in a world in which evil, chaos, and death are the brute facts of reality.” These defining attributes of the world are strictly opposed to the desire for clarity that Camus claims is the defining characteristic of man. Man feeds upon the absurd. For example, we absurdly live on the hope of tomorrow in the unfounded hope of discovering purpose or fulfillment. Confined to the cycle of “Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday, according to the same rhythm,”<sup>14</sup> he is chained to the longing for tomorrow, “whereas everything in him ought to reject it”<sup>15</sup> (10-11). That is the absurd— “the wild confrontation of this irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart”<sup>16</sup> (16).

#### TYING QOHELET AND CAMUS

Both Qohelet and Camus’s philosophies contain a philosophical notion that dominates their discourses: *hebel* and the absurd. While at first it may seem that two authors living three millennia apart in drastically different social contexts have little in common, an examination of both Qohelet’s and Camus’s works reveals their striking similarities—a certain kinship (*Contradictions* 15). Authors such as Berger, Morgan, and, most adamantly, Fox, have written on the linkage between the absurd and Qohelet’s *hebel*. Their approach to the problem of existence is almost identical, though Camus himself once rejected this linkage quite adamantly in *The Myth of Sisyphus* while describing his absurd hero Don Juan. Attempting to dismiss the connection, he writes, “It is quite false to try to see in Don Juan a man brought up on Ecclesiastes. For nothing is vanity to him

---

<sup>14</sup> “lundi, mardi, mercredi, jeudi, vendredi, samedi, dimanche sur le même rythme” (*Mythe* 29)

<sup>15</sup> “quand tout lui-même aurait dû s’y refuser” (*Mythe* 30)

<sup>16</sup> “C’est la confrontation de cet irrationnel et de ce désir éperdu de clarté dont l’appel résonne au plus profond de l’homme” (*Mythe* 39)

except the hope of another life”<sup>17</sup> (Myth 52). However, as Fox notes, Camus’s sensitivity arises from the traditional rendering of *hebel* as “vanity” (*Contradictions* 15). While Qohelet would argue that certain realities in life are vanity, he chooses the more-encompassing *hebel* to describe life more akin to the Camusian absurd. While Camus offhandedly denied any similarity, this is more than likely due to semantics lost in translation rather than any true principle. While arriving at unique conclusions, they shared the same essence, and their similarities certainly shine far beyond any claimed dissimilarity.

Both writing in first person, Camus and Qohelet’s pursuit of unity was first and foremost “*honest and human* [emphasis in original]” (Morgan 16,18). Setting aside almost all preconceived notions and presuppositions, these two stand alone before the insurmountable mountain that is the mystery of life. While never reaching the summit, the distinct peaks they reach certainly share the same general underlying conclusion. Firstly, *hebel* and the absurd are both essentially contradictions. For Camus, man’s want remains unsatisfied by what the world offers, thus resulting in the absurd. For Qohelet, the absence of satisfaction along with the longings of man produce a *hebel* reality. This conflict between man and the universe begins to define existence for them both.

Secondly, Camus and Qohelet found themselves in a world that was irreconcilable with their faculties for reasoning. Filled with questions of “why?”, the book of *Ecclesiastes* stands unanswered. Qohelet recognizes that some inquiries will be left unsolved and that the increase of knowledge yields only vexation and sorrow (*Eccl.* 8.17; 1:18). With the reality of the absurd hanging over his head, Camus admits the defeat of his reason in the face of a universe “divested of illusions and lights”<sup>18</sup> (Myth 5).

Thirdly, caught in the endless cycle of life, the repetitive, redundant toil experienced by man serves no end. In *The Stranger* during the last few moments with the character Meursault, as he processes the actions, choices, and emotions that have led him to his prison cell, he declares, “Nothing, nothing mattered”<sup>19</sup> (*Stranger* 115). There was nothing of import in his “absurd life”<sup>20</sup> that could have

---

<sup>17</sup> “C’est une grande duperie que d’essayer de voir en Don Juan un home nourri de l’Ecclesiastes. Car plus rien pour lui n’est vanité sinon l’espoir d’une autre vie” (*Mythe* 100)

<sup>18</sup> “dans un univers soudain privé d’illusions et de lumières” (*Mythe* 20)

<sup>19</sup> “Rien, rien n’avait d’importance” (*L’étranger* 181)

<sup>20</sup> “cette vie absurde que j’avais menée” (*L’étranger* 181)

countered the “dark wind”<sup>21</sup> rising from his future (115). Despite the way he chooses to live, Meursault recognizes he ultimately ends up with all other men in the grave. The same rings true for Qohelet in his “*hebel* life” (*Eccl.* 7.15). The disparity that exists between effort and its outcome renders it ultimately absurd (“Meaning” 416). Despite the pleasures and joys found in man’s actions, it amounts to nothing in the end (Morgan 83). These three parallels allow the French studies scholar John Cruickshank to declare, “Whatever the special character of Camus’s conclusions, the absurd itself remains a contemporary manifestation of a skepticism as old at least as the book of *Ecclesiastes*” (qtd. in “Meaning” 409-410). Nevertheless, the respective responses to their fundamentally same conclusion prove to be strikingly different—duty and revolt.

#### COMPARING THE RESPONSES TO THE ABSURD

Indeed, Qohelet undoubtedly arrived at a different reply to the absurd than Camus did due to his distinctive context, and vice versa. Rooted in the the belief of God, Qohelet’s *hebel* materializes in the harsh ancient Near East (Morgan 23). Through his theistic presuppositions, Qohelet’s response to the absurd begins to take shape. Continually emphasizing both the *hebel* nature of work and also the enjoyment that man should find in it, Qohelet adds a new layer of depth to human work with the addition of God.

This is what I have seen to be good: it is fitting to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of the life God gives us; for this is our lot. Likewise all to whom God gives wealth and possessions and whom he enables to enjoy them, and to accept their lot and find enjoyment in their toil—this is the gift of God. (*Eccl.* 5.18-19)

This reveals Qohelet’s driving mentality: man chooses life because it is what God gave him. This core belief of God’s involvement with and provision to man prompts Qohelet to shape his life around this deity. Wrapping up his discourse, he reaches a conclusion: “Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone” (*Eccl.* 12:13). For Qohelet, *hebel* is irreconcilable with what he seeks in life, yet by believing in God and responding with duty and devotion, he does not attempt to escape the *hebel* reality. Instead, Qohelet chooses to live in the tensions with the assurance that, superseding the

---

<sup>21</sup> “un souffle obscur remontait vers moi à travers des années qui n’étaient pas encore venues” (*L’étranger* 181)

meaninglessness of the world through God, he can find purpose.

The revolt—or rebellion—of Camus appears to take on a more complex shape when compared to the relative simplicity of Qohelet. Living within the atheistic framework of the twentieth century, Camus must find a solution without a transcendent being, for he rejects what is the paradox of God to him (*Myth* 41-42). In fact, this rejection goes so far as to denounce hope as well (23). Along these same lines, Wood writes, “Camus proposes that the person without God must not kill himself, but realize instead that he is condemned to death, and live his life saturated with that terrible knowledge. Camus proposes “awareness itself” to replace faith (89). The awareness of life is to be man’s guiding principle. Behind this is each man’s *raison d’être*. As the French scholar and biographer Bellos put it, “[Camus]...tells us that life is worth living because it is all we have” (xxii). This awareness proposed by Camus leads man to his revolt against the absurd in the form of a struggle, which is one of the only coherent positions to take for Camus (*Myth* 40). Simply put, the rebellion takes its form as “a total absence of hope (which has nothing to do with despair), a continual rejection (which must not be confused with renunciation), and a conscious dissatisfaction (which must not be compared to immature unrest)”<sup>22</sup> (23). Later elaborating on it, he emphasizes once again the absence of hope: “It is not an aspiration, for it is devoid of hope. That revolt is the certainty of a crushing fate, without the resignation that ought to accompany it”<sup>23</sup> (40). It is this revolt that gives life its value (40). Hope remains absent because the facts have not changed. Man takes nothing from this life empty of purpose. What remains are the consequences one draws from the absurd; for Camus, he writes that it is “my revolt, my freedom, and my passion”<sup>24</sup> (47).

The fundamental ideas of Qohelet and Camus’s view of the essence of life prove to be remarkably similar; their varying religious and philosophical bases—theism and atheism—prove nonetheless to be the deciding factor for their reactions. However, their respective beliefs in God had powerful consequences on the tone of their responses. While Qohelet believed he could find purpose in devotion to God, Camus is never able to find true purpose—only a fruitless revolt.

---

<sup>22</sup> “l’absence totale d’espoir (qui n’a rien à voir avec le désespoir), le refus continu (qu’on ne doit pas confondre avec le renoncement) et l’insatisfaction consciente (qu’on ne saurait assimiler à l’inquiétude juvénile)” (*Mythe* 51-2)

<sup>23</sup> “Elle n’est pas aspiration, elle est sans espoir. Cette révolte n’est que l’assurance d’un destin écrasant, moins la résignation qui devrait l’accompagner” (*Mythe* 79)

<sup>24</sup> “ma révolte, ma liberté et ma passion” (*Mythe* 90)

In Camus's novel *The Plague*, the principal character Rieux is a physician in a city ravaged by a terrible pestilence. Questioned where the source of his devotion to medicine arose, the following dialogue with his answer ensued. This best illustrates the tone of the Camusian approach.

'It's something that a man of your sort can understand most likely, but, since the order of the world is shaped by death, mightn't it be better for God if we refuse to believe in Him, and struggle with all our might against death, without raising our eyes towards the heaven where He sits in silence?'

Tarrou nodded.

'Yes. But your victories will never be lasting; that's all.'

Rieux's face darkened.

'Yes, I know that, but it's no reason for giving up the struggle.'

'No reason, I agree. . . Only, I now I can picture what this plague must mean for you.'

'Yes. A never-ending defeat.' (*Plague* 115)

Even the most noble life in Camus's philosophy amounted to nothing more than a never-ending series of defeats.

#### CONCLUSION

For Camus, life was a revolt, a rebellion against the force of a masterless world which man has no chance of defeating. To him, it was nonetheless worth the struggle because life is all we truly have. For Qohelet, life was a gift from God, and each man's toils were to be enjoyed in Him. It was the duty of man to take what God gave and also to fear Him. Through examining both thinkers, one can learn how each man is defined, not by the common absurd essence of life, but by his individual response to this absurdity. While Camus and Qohelet both viewed what it means simply to be alive through the lens of the absurd, their individual responses clearly distinguish the French pessimist from the God-fearing Israelite. One responded in hopeless, passionate revolt, and the other in unshakeable duty towards his deity. Ultimately, their lives were marked by their conscious response to their understanding of existence.

#### WORKS CITED

Alexander, David & Pat, ed. *Eerdmans' Concise Bible Handbook*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1980. Print.

- Aronson, Ronald. "Albert Camus." *Stanford University Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Stanford University, 27 Oct. 2011. Web. 05 Aug. 2016.
- Berger, Benjamin Lyle. "Qohelet and the Exigencies of the Absurd." *Biblical Interpretation* 9.2 (2001): 141-179. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 9 Aug. 2016.
- Camus, Albert. *Le Mythe De Sisyphe*. Gallimard, 1985.
- . *L'étranger*. Gallimard, 1942.
- . *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Trans. Justin O'Brien. *The Plague ; The Fall ; Exile and the Kingdom ; and Selected Essays*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004. Print.
- . *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Trans. Justin O'Brien. New York: Random House, 1955. Print.
- Dell, Katharine J. "The Cycle of Life in Ecclesiastes." *Vetus Testamentum* 59.2 (2009): 181-189. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 24 Dec. 2016.
- Ecclesiastes*. The Holy Bible, New International Version. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005. Print.
- Fox, Michael V. "The Meaning of Hebel for Qohelet." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 105.3 (1986): 409. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 10 Aug. 2016.
- . *Qohelet and His Contradictions*. Decatur, GA, U.S.A.: Almond, 1989. Print.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Translated by Werner S. Pluhar, Hackett, 1996.
- Morgan, Justin Keith. "Living in the Tensions: Camus, Qohelet, and the Confrontation with the Absurd." Order No. 1491790 Liberty University, 2011. Ann Arbor: *ProQuest*. Web. 5 Aug. 2016.
- Rappé, Donald. "Fragility, Insecurity, Vulnerability: Life in Ancient Israel." *Bible Today* 51.4 (2013): 233-236. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 2 Jan. 2017.
- The MacArthur Study Bible*. Edited by John MacArthur, Thomas Nelson, 2006.
- Wood, James. "The Sickness unto Life." *New Republic* 221.19 (1999): 88-96. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 30 June 2016.