A REEXAMINATION OF "ETERNITY" IN ECCLESIASTES 3:11

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HE PHRASE "GOD HAS PLACED ETERNITY IN THE HUMAN HEART" (Eccles. 3:11)[1] has become cliché in contemporary missiology and a repeated refrain from many Christian pulpits today. In his popular work, *Eternity in Their Hearts*, missiologist Don Richardson reports on stories that reveal a belief in the one true God in many cultures around the world. Based on Qoheleth's words Richardson proposes that God has prepared the world for the gospel of Jesus Christ.[2] In support of his thesis Richardson appeals to the words of the late scholar Gleason Archer, "Humankind has a God-given ability to grasp the concept of eternity."[3] While commonly accepted by scholars and laypersons alike, this notion is curiously absent from the writings of the early church fathers[4] as well as the major theological treatise of William Carey, the founder of the modern missionary movement.[5] In fact modern scholars have suggested almost a dozen different interpretations for this verse. In

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[1] Unless noted otherwise, all Scripture quotations are those of the present writer.

[2] Don Richardson, *Eternity in Their Hearts* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1981), 28.

[3] Personal interview cited by Don Richardson, "Redemptive Analogy," in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*, ed. Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2000), 400.

[4] The writings of the Ante-Nicene, Nicene, and Post-Nicene church fathers lack any reference to Ecclesiastes 3:11 or any form of the phrase "God has placed eternity in their hearts" (A. Roberts, J. Donaldson, and A. C. Coxe, eds., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vols. 1–10 [Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1997]; Philip Schaff, ed., *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers First Series*, vols. 1–14 [Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1997]; and idem, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Second Series*, vols. 1–14 [Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1997]).

[5] William Carey, *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens* (reprint, Dallas: Criswell, 1988).

their commentaries both Longman and Shields label this verse as one of the most difficult to interpret in Ecclesiastes.[6] Therefore the obvious question must be raised, What was Qoheleth's intended meaning for this enigmatic phrase? The purpose of this article is to evaluate the current interpretive options in light of the context and theology of Ecclesiastes and to explore the practical implications for this passage.

The verse may be translated, "He has made everything appropriate in its time, yet He has also placed הָעֹלָם in their hearts so that[7] people cannot discover the work which God has done from beginning to end."

INTERPRETIVE OPTIONS

The *crux interpretum* in this passage is the word הָעֹלָם. Scholars have proposed no less than ten interpretive options to resolve the enigma of this verse. (1) "He has also set *the eternal work* (creation in its widest sense) in the hearts of men."[8] (2) "God has set *perpetuity* (consciousness of memory) in their heart."[9] (3) "God has given mankind *an awareness of remotest time*."[10] (4) "He has also placed

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[6] Tremper Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 118; and Martin A. Shields, *The End of Wisdom* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 139.

[7] Scholars have debated whether the compound preposition בְּלִי אֲשֶׁר should be rendered with an exceptive/restrictive force "except, yet" or as introducing a purpose/result clause "so that, in order that." Its precise meaning cannot be determined since this is the only occurrence of this collocation in the Old Testament. "Its exact function depends on the general interpretation of the verse and particularly on the meaning of עֹלָם" (A. Schoors, *A Study of the Language of Qoheleth,* vol. 1 [Leuven: Peeters, 1992], 147–48).

[8] Bo Isaksson, *Studies in the Language of Qoheleth* (Stockholm: Uppsala University, 1987), 176–89.

[9] James Barr, *Biblical Words for Time*, 2nd ed. (London: SCM, 1969), 124.

[10] Ernst Jenni, "Das Wort 'ōlām im Alten Testament," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 65 (1953): 24–27; idem, "עֹלָם," in *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, ed. Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann, trans. M. E. Biddle (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997), 2:861; Thomas Krüger, *Qoheleth*, trans. O. C. Dean Jr. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 87; Roland E. Murphy, "The Faith of Qoheleth," *Word and World* 7 (1987): 256; idem, "On Translating Ecclesiastes," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 53 (1991): 573; idem, *Ecclesiastes*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1992), 34–35; Craig G. Bartholomew, *Reading Ecclesiastes*, Analecta Biblica (Rome: Pontificio Instituto Biblico, 1998), 243; Iain Provan, *Ecclesiastes/Song of Songs*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 90; Thomas Krüger, *Qoheleth*, trans. O. C. Dean Jr., Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 87; and A. Schoors, *A Study of the Language of Qoheleth*, vol. 2 (Leuven: Peeters, 2004), 223–25; and Shields, *The End of Wisdom*, 139–42.

in them *a desire to know the future.*"[11] (5) "God has put *a desire for permanence* in their heart."[12] (6) "He has also placed *a consciousness of the eternal* in their heart."[13] (7) "God has put the *world* in the human heart."[14] (8) "He has placed *knowledge* in their heart."[15] (9) "God has placed *darkness/ignorance* in the human heart."[16]

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[11] Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 1610.

[12] Christian D. Ginsburg, *The Song of Songs and Coheleth* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans & Roberts, 1857), 308; and D. M. Eichhorn, *Musings of an Old Professor* (New York: Jonathan David Publishers, 1963), 49–59.

[13] Franz Delitzsch, *Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, trans. M. G. Easton, Commentaries on the Old Testament, by C. F. Keil and Franz J. Delitzsch (Edinburgh: Clark, 1877), 687–88; Michael Eaton, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1983), 81; Donald R. Glenn, "Ecclesiastes," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, Old Testament*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1985; reprint, Colorado Springs: Cook, 1996), 984; Graham S. Ogden, *Qoheleth* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1987), 55; Roy B. Zuck, "A Biblical Theology of the Wisdom Books and the Song of Songs," in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1991), 246; Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1993), 299; J. Stafford Wright, "The Interpretation of Ecclesiastes," in *Reflecting with Solomon*, ed. Roy B. Zuck (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 23; Graham S. Ogden, *A Handbook on Ecclesiastes*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1997), 99–101; Choon-Leong Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1997), 163; Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 118–21; William P. Brown, *Ecclesiastes* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 43–44; and Daniel J. Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 313–14.

[14] Ludwig Levy, *Das Buch Qoheleth. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Sadduzäismus* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1912), 82; Morris Jastrow, *A Gentle Cynic* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1919), 210–11; Robert Gordis, *Koheleth: The Man and His World* (New York: Schocken, 1968), 231–32; *Ecclesiastes Rabbah*, trans. A. Cohen (New York: Soncino, 1983), 91–92; and T. A. Perry, *Dialogues with Kohelet* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 90–91.

[15] Ferdinand Hitzig, Ernst Bertheau, and Wilhelm Nowack, *Der Prediger Salomo's*, 2nd ed., Kurzgefasstes Exegetisches Handbuch zum Alten Testament (Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1883), 229.

[16] George A. Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: Clark, 1971), 105–6; James L. Crenshaw, "Qoheleth's Understanding of Intellectual Inquiry," in *Qoheleth in the Context of Wisdom*, ed. A. Schoors (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1998), 221; Mitchell J. Dahood, "Canaanite-Phoenician Influence in Qoheleth," *Biblica* 33 (1952): 206; *Ecclesiastes Rabbah*, 92–94; Paul Haupt, *Ecclesiastes* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1905), 24, 42; Peter S. Knobel, *The Targum of Qohelet*, Aramaic Bible (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1991), 28–29; Marvin H. Pope, "Darkness and Eternity" (unpublished paper, Yale Divinity School, New Haven, CT, n.d.); O. S. Rankin, "Ecclesiastes," in *The Interpreter's Bible*, ed. George A. Buttrick (New York: Abingdon, 1956), 5:47–49; R. B. Y. Scott, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*, Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985), 221; R. N. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 73–74; and Ronald F. Youngblood, "Qoheleth's Dark House," in *Essays on the*

(10) "He has also placed *toil* in their hearts."[17]

EVALUATION OF INTERPRETIVE OPTIONS

The term עוֹלָם is used over four hundred times in the Hebrew Bible, describing ages past and times to come. In his exhaustive study on the meaning of this term Jenni concludes, " '*ôlām* in the Old Testament (as in the contemporary Northwest Semitic inscriptions), has the basic meaning 'most distant time,' either with a view to the past, to the future, or to both."[18] However, when this notion is applied to the context of Ecclesiastes 3:11, the problem becomes evident. What does the author mean in saying that "God has also placed 'most distant time' in the human heart?" Biblical scholars utilize three approaches to explain this enigma: metonymy, revocalization, and emendation.[19]

METONYMY

Some interpreters seek to resolve this problem with different metonymical nuances of הָעֹלָם, all with some sort of temporal connotation. Four factors lead these scholars to support a time-related meaning. First, translating הָעֹלָם as defectively written עֹלָם, these interpreters follow the ordinary meaning of the noun עֹלָם as "eternity."[20] Ginsburg aptly states that this term "invariably signifies *time past or present, unmeasured time,* or *eternity,* and is so used in all the other passages of this very book (1:4, 2:16, 3:14, 9:6, 12:5)."[21] Second, any reader would no doubt associate הָעֹלָם in 3:11 with the

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Old Testament, ed. Walter C. Kaiser Jr. and Ronald F. Youngblood (Chicago: Moody, 1986), 217–19.

[17] D. B. MacDonald, "Old Testament. Notes," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 18 (1899): 212; H. L. Ginsberg, "The Quintessence of Koheleth," in *Biblical and Other Studies,* ed. A. Altmann (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1963), 50; Michael V. Fox, *Qoheleth and His Contradictions,* JSOT Supplement (Sheffield: Almond, 1989), 194; idem, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 210–12; and idem, *Ecclesiastes,* JPS Bible Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004), 23.

[18] Jenni, "עוֹלָם," 2:854.

[19] These labels are admittedly imperfect as the imagery forces scholars to interpret the passage metonymically. However, the latter two categories suggest that simple metonymy is not sufficient, proposing revocalization or emendation in addition.

[20] Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1955), 762; and Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *A Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 789–99.

[21] Ginsburg, *The Song of Songs and Coheleth,* 310.

occurrence of עוֹלָם later in verse 14, "I know that whatever God does will endure forever [לְעוֹלָם]." Seow comments, "It is difficult to believe that *hāʿōlām* in v 11 could be radically different in meaning from *lěʿōlām* 'eternal' only three verses later in v 14."[22] Third, since the term עֵת, "time," is used no less than twenty-eight times in the first part of the chapter (vv. 1–8) and occurs again (בְּעִתּוֹ) in the preceding line (v. 11a), it would be difficult to deny that הָעֹלָם has some kind of temporal nuance in this context. Again Seow notes, "No one can avoid the immediate contrast between *hāʿōlām* 'eternity' (3:11b) and *běʿittô* 'in its time' (3:11a)."[23] While not adopting a temporal meaning, Crenshaw admits, "The contrast between *ʿēt* and *hāʿōlām* is a strong argument in favor of reading 'eternity' in 3:11."[24] Fourth, the qualification "from beginning to end" in the following line (v. 11c) also suggests a time-related connotation for this phrase. Though the normal usage of עוֹלָם as "eternity" and the time-related terms in the context (vv. 1–8, 11a, 14) may support a temporal meaning, each of the options in this category must be evaluated on the basis of its own strengths and weaknesses.

In the first proposed interpretation, Isaksson, while admitting that עוֹלָם is used almost exclusively with a temporal meaning, interprets the term as "eternal work," translating the expression, "He has also set *the eternal work* in the hearts of men." Isaksson correctly recognizes Qoheleth's emphasis on the work of God and humanity's inability to understand this work as well as the time-related terms used in the context. However, he makes an unjustified leap from generic references to the work of God in the context to creation, describing this "eternal work" as "creation in its widest sense, in time and space, the created and ongoing history."[25] Despite the few examples of God placing something in the heart (1 Kings 10:24; Jer. 31:33), Isaksson neither validates this broad

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[22] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 173.

[23] Ibid.

[24] James L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), 98.

[25] Isaksson, *Studies in the Language of Qoheleth*, 180–83. Contrary to the frequent connection of the expression "He made everything" (3:11a) to creation, Fox argues, "The first part of this verse does not refer to God's original act of creation but to His sovereign work in providence throughout human history. 'Everything' in v. 11 resumes 'everything' in v. 1, and that, as the pairs in vv. 2–8 show, comprises the range of events and actions in human life rather than the major constituents of creation, as described in Genesis 1. The pairs of events in 3:2–8 did not come into being at the act of creation. But God continues to 'make' things at all times" (*A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up*, 209).

meaning of עוֹלָם nor supports the notion that God put all this in the hearts of humans. Rather he seems to import the concept of "work" from the latter part of the verse back into the term הָעֹלָם. Therefore this proposed meaning can be deemed unlikely.

A second interpretive option, proposed by Barr, has this translation: "Also He has set *perpetuity* in their heart." "The reference to perpetuity would mean the consciousness of memory, an awareness of past events. The predicament of man is that he has this awareness, and yet cannot work out the total purpose of God."[26] While Qoheleth used the term עוֹלָם earlier in the book to describe "ages long ago" (1:10), the notion of past time is not explicit but is derived from the context. Jenni notes that a past meaning for עוֹלָם can be recognized only when the surrounding context contains a temporal indicator.[27] Yet Qoheleth gives no such indication in this context. However, more problematic for this position is the inconsistency created with Qoheleth's own words in 1:11. "No one remembers the former events, nor will anyone remember the events that are yet to happen; they will not be remembered by the future generations." Does God give humanity this awareness and yet no one remembers past events? This option also seems improbable.

The third view, reflected in a number of modern English translations (NEB, NJB, NRSV, REB), renders the sentence as a metonymy of association: "God has put *an awareness of the remotest time* in the human heart." Contrasting this term with עֵת, meaning a definite period of time, Jenni and Murphy suggest the meaning of "a sense of duration" for עוֹלָם.[28] Krüger defines the word as "distant time," noting that "the term may refer to a concept or idea of a 'distant time' that extends far beyond the life of an individual human being in the direction either of the past or the future or both."[29]

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[26] Barr, *Biblical Words for Time*, 124.

[27] Jenni, "עוֹלָם," 2:855.

[28] Jenni, "Das Wort 'ôlām im Alten Testament," 24–27; Murphy, "The Faith of Qoheleth," 256; idem, "On Translating Ecclesiastes," 573; and idem, *Ecclesiastes*, 34–35.

[29] Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 87. Schoors comes to the same conclusion. "Human beings have an awareness of (almost) unlimited time, of a lastingness, and yet they cannot fathom God's work from beginning to end, in its totality" (*A Study of the Language of Qoheleth*, 224–25). However, this statement does not seem to make sense in light of the author's later conclusion that such an endeavor is futile. As Fox aptly critiques, this translation "has Qoheleth complaining about the impossibility of knowing the entirety of God's work. Such a complaint would be trivial, because it would be senseless to hope for absolute knowledge of everything. Rather, Qoheleth is saying that man can *in no way* apprehend ma'ăśeh ha'ĕlohim. To be sure, Qoheleth

Appealing to the temporal usage of this term elsewhere in the book to denote virtually unlimited time past or future, Provan states, "Mortals share with God a sense of the whole sweep of time, but their sense of time past and future is insufficient for the task of understanding the times; it is always slipping away from them (1:11, 2:16)."[30]

Bartholomew describes the plight of humanity similarly. "In a timed world humans recognize that 'there is a time and a place' and that in order to discern this they need a sense of the larger picture, what philosophers might call origin and telos. However, they cannot get access to this 'duration.'"[31] Though proponents of this view claim that עוֹלָם normally means "duration" or "an awareness of unlimited time," this view extracts much from this one term that is not attested elsewhere. Also other statements from Qoheleth that humanity does not remember past events (1:11) and cannot know the future (3:22; 6:12; 7:14; 8:7; 9:12; 10:14), combined with the sheer ambiguity of this "awareness," weighs against the likelihood of this position.

In the fourth position in this category of metonymy, the term הָעֹלָם is viewed purely as a reference to the indefinite future "the things to come" (1 Kings 8:13; Pss. 77:8, 145:13; Dan. 9:24).[32]

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does have things to say about divine activity, but he does not define that knowledge as 'apprehending' (lit. 'finding') or 'understanding' . . . all that God does or makes happen" (*Qoheleth and His Contradictions*, 194, italics his).

[30] Provan, *Ecclesiastes/Song of Songs*, 90. Shields defines the term similarly. "In the present context, the term most likely has roughly the same meaning as in v. 14 and so refers to the entire expanse of time—from beginning to end." However, in contrast to the majority of commentators, Shields proposes a positive reading of the final clause of this verse: "without which human beings cannot discover the work that God has done from beginning to end." Shields continues, "Qoheleth appears to be asserting that human beings ought to be able to discover the work that God has done from beginning to end precisely because God has placed עֹלָם in their hearts. . . . Indeed, Qoheleth proceeds to summarize what God does from beginning to end in vv. 14–15. . . . Clearly he could not have meant that human beings are able to attain a full understanding of what God has done and plans to do, because elsewhere he has denied that we can. Nonetheless, Qoheleth does demonstrate some awareness of what God has done beyond the immediate, from beginning to end, as it were" (*The End of Wisdom*, 142). Though certainly creative, this view creates a contradiction and then makes an assumption to alleviate the tension. Viewing Qoheleth's comments in this verse as an affirmation of man's ability to discern the divine program contradicts later comments concerning the futility of such an endeavor (8:17). Thus in order to solve this new problem Shields suggests that this ability to discern the plans of God is merely partial. But this is not found in the text. Such a positive reading seems to create rather than solve problems in this verse.

[31] Bartholomew, *Reading Ecclesiastes*, 243.

[32] Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 762; and Koehler and Baumgartner, *A Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 799.

Though rarely adopted by modern commentators, a few English translations follow this interpretation, rendering the phrase as "a desire to know the future" (CEV, GNT, NCV, TEV). Berlin and Brettler give the clearest elucidation of this view in their marginal reading, "God preoccupies man with the attempt to discover the times of future events."[33] According to this view God has not only ordained all the events that will take place in life (Eccles. 3:1–8); He also preoccupies humanity with the desire to discover the orchestration and timing of future events (vv. 9–11). Despite fitting perfectly with the description of God's sovereignty over the timing of human events (vv. 1–10) and man's ignorance of the future (v. 11c; cf. 3:22; 7:14; 8:7; 9:12; 10:14), this option proposes a new meaning for עֹלָם. Admittedly this term does refer elsewhere in biblical Hebrew to the indefinite future, especially in the common refrain עַד־עֹולָם "until forever." As Jenni states, "*ad-'ôlām* almost always indicates successive temporal continuation in the future."[34] However, no other passage in the Old Testament supports the metonymical usage, "a desire to know the future." Therefore this rendering seems to be based more on the subsequent result, "so that man cannot discover the work of God from beginning to end" (v. 11c) than a meaning inherent in the word עֹלָם. This semantic nuance based on a contextual reading, unattested elsewhere in biblical Hebrew, seems unconvincing.

Proponents of the fifth interpretation render the sentence, "He has also placed *a desire for permanence* in their hearts." "Everything in creation fulfills its purpose at the appropriate time and then disappears. Absolutely nothing on or of the Earth exists permanently. Mankind foolishly clings to the idea that there is immortality of one kind or another for humans or animals. This idea, this hope 'makes it impossible for mankind to comprehend what God has done from beginning to end.'"[35]

Ginsburg also seems to support this meaning. "In addition to this excellent order of things, he has also implanted in the hearts of men a desire for that which is beyond time, and that the failure of man's efforts to secure lasting good, is owing to his ignorance of the works of God."[36] In contrast to the "times" of life—opposite events

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[33] Berlin and Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible,* 1610.

[34] Jenni, "עֹלָם," 2:855.

[35] Eichhorn, *Musings of an Old Professor,* 50.

[36] Ginsburg, *The Song of Songs and Coheleth,* 308.

that cancel each other out (vv. 2–8)—people long for this "lasting good," a sense of permanence. However, they gain nothing from all their activity because nothing ever lasts (v. 9). In contrast the term עוֹלָם is used only a few verses later (v. 14) to describe what is permanent and unalterable: "I know that whatever God does will endure forever [לְעוֹלָם]; nothing can be added to it, and nothing taken away from it."

This temporal rendering "a desire for permanence" fits nicely with the catalog of opposites (vv. 2–8) and the futility of human toil (v. 9) and aligns with the time-related terms in the context. Yet there are two major problems. First, this metonymical nuance imports into this term much that is not found elsewhere in the Old Testament. Second and more problematic, this notion of "a desire for permanence" is difficult to explain in light of the parallel line, "so that they cannot find out, from beginning to end, the work which God has done" (v. 11c). How does humanity's "desire for permanence" relate to their inability to discover the divine program? Some may suggest that God has given people a desire for permanence to divert them from seeking to understand His work in the world, suggesting that such a pursuit might be successful without this distraction. However, this proposal contradicts Qoheleth's conclusion later in the book that such an endeavor would be futile. "Then I discerned all that God has done: No one really comprehends what happens on earth. Despite all human efforts to discover it, no one can ever grasp it. Even if a wise man claimed that he understood, he would not really comprehend it" (8:17). If such an endeavor is ultimately futile, why would God need to divert the efforts of man with such a distraction? This interpretation raises questions rather than providing answers, and therefore it is an improbable way to resolve this enigmatic verse.

The sixth position in this category is the perspective advocated by Richardson in his aforementioned book *Eternity in Their Hearts*. Similar to the preceding options, this view translates הָעֹלָם as a metonymy with a temporal nuance, rendering the phrase "a sense of eternity." This is the most frequent translation among the English versions: "the timeless" (NAB), "eternity" (ASV, ESV, HCSB, NASB, NIV, NKJV, RSV), or "an awareness of eternity" (CJB), in addition to many scholars and commentators.[37]

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[37] The Septuagint and Peshitta cannot be used as support for any one interpretive option as the Greek αἰών and the Syriac *'ālmā* are as ambiguous as the Hebrew עֹלָם (Henry G. Liddell, Robert Scott, and Henry S. Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1996], 45; Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F.

Delitzsch gives the clearest elucidation of this view, describing the meaning of הָעֹלָם in light of the surrounding context with the phrase *desiderium aeternitatis*.

> He has also established in man an impulse leading beyond that which is temporal toward the eternal. It lies in his nature not to be contented with the temporal, but to break through the limits which it draws around him, to escape from the bondage and the disquietude within which he is held, and amid the ceaseless changes of time to console himself by directing his thoughts to eternity. . . . In fact, the impulse of man shows that his innermost wants cannot be satisfied by that which is temporal. He is a being limited by time, but as to his innermost nature he is related to eternity. . . . It is not enough for man to know that everything that happens has its divinely ordained time. There is an instinct peculiar to his nature impelling him to pass beyond this fragmentary knowledge and to comprehend eternity; but his effort is in vain, for "man is unable to reach unto the work which God accomplisheth from the beginning to the end."[38]

Tomasino arrives at the same conclusion. " 'Eternity' here can well be understood as a circumlocution for 'the idea of eternity,' . . . and so the phrase can be understood to mean that God has given humanity an innate sense of eternity."[39] Other scholars have described this concept as "a capacity for eternal things,"[40] "an awareness of one's extra-temporal significance,"[41] "a longing for eternity,"[42] or "a consciousness of the eternal."[43]

Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed., rev. Frederick W. Danker [Chicago: University of Chicago, 2000], 32–33; and Robert Payne Smith, ed., *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1994], 415). Though early witnesses, these translators, similar to any interpreter, were forced to make an exegetical decision regarding the meaning of this term.

[38] Delitzsch, *Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, 687–88.

[39] Anthony Tomasino, "עֹלָם," in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 3:350.

[40] Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 81. Even beyond a capacity for the eternal Wright opines, "God has given us a longing to know the eternity of things, the whole scheme; but, try as we will, we cannot see it" ("The Interpretation of Ecclesiastes," 23).

[41] Glenn, "Ecclesiastes," 984. Zuck defines הָעֹלָם as "a sense of eternal existence" ("A Biblical Theology of the Wisdom Books and the Song of Songs," 247).

[42] Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 299.

[43] Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 55. In another work Ogden states, "We assume that Qoheleth is arguing that God has placed an 'awareness of things eternal' into the human mind. TEV says 'He has given us a desire to know the future' but we feel there is a difficulty with this, for although it is a general statement, it can be thought of as confined to this life only. Our position is that Qoheleth is even daring to think beyond this life as well" (*A Handbook on Ecclesiastes*, 100). Estes writes, "Humans are

Seow also supports this view and contrasts this position with previous options. "The noun does not refer to what one would call 'timing,' 'a sense of time,' or the like (so NRSV: 'a sense of past and future'). It simply means 'eternity'—that which transcends time. It refers to a sense of that which is timeless and, as such, stands in contrast to 'ittô 'its time.' "[44] Seow further explains, "The word *hā'ōlām* 'eternity' refers probably to a consciousness of or yearning for that which transcends the present—it includes everything 'from beginning to end.' . . . Qoheleth is thinking here of the effort of people to bypass the moment in order to grasp the totality of existence. Mortals cannot discover that sort of thing, however. Humanity knows of eternity, but can only cope with activities in their time. The eternity in human hearts only serves to underscore the ephemerality of the moment that each person experiences."[45]

Though the Old Testament does include a few places where something is said to be put (נָתַן) in the human heart (Exod. 35:34; 36:1; 1 Kings 10:24; 2 Chron. 9:23; Ezra 7:27; Ps. 4:7), "it makes little sense in Hebrew," as Whybray notes, "to say that God put (or, more probably puts) eternity into man's mind, since the Hebrew language hardly allows such an expression to be understood as an ellipsis for 'the notion of eternity.' "[46] While Longman claims that the rendering "a sense of eternity" fits the context quite well,[47] this idea is actually foreign to the book. Qoheleth shows no interest in an afterlife. As Fox notes, "At most he may be said to be skeptical toward it (3:21), but in practice he sees nothing but darkness beyond the grave (3:19–20; 9:10; 11:8)."[48] With the recurring refrain "under the sun" (twenty-nine times), the author evaluates life on this earth within the bounds of time. Thus a notion of eternity makes little sense in this context. Despite its traditional acceptance, this option is alien to Qoheleth's worldview and must be judged as an unsatisfactory explanation.

In a seventh view a few versions (Vulgate, Luther, ASV margin, JPS, KJV) connect הָעֹלָם to the noun עוֹלָם ("world"), rendering the de-

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bound by time, but they are wired for eternity" (*Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms*, 313).

[44] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 163.

[45] Ibid., 173.

[46] Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 73.

[47] Tremper Longman, "Ecclesiastes," in *Job, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, Cornerstone Biblical Commentary (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2006).

[48] Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up*, 210.

bated phrase, "He hath set the *world* in their heart." While this may seem unrelated to the basic temporal meaning, "most remote time," such a nuance may have arisen because of the blended concept of time and space during the second temple period, as evident both in the Greek term αἰών ("eternity, age, or world")[49] and the Mishnaic expression הָעוֹלָם הַזֶּה ("this age/world") and הָעוֹלָם הַבָּא ("the age/world to come").[50] Proponents of this view have suggested various nuances for this term in the present context: "pleasures of the world" (Jerome), "problems or affairs of the world" (Vulgate), "wisdom of the world" (Rashi), "desires of the world" (Ibn Ezra, Perry), "the whole world" (Jastrow), or "love of the world" (Gordis).[51] While certainly evident in later Jewish literature, such a meaning is unattested in biblical Hebrew.[52] As Koehler and Baumgartner note, "עוֹלָם meaning 'world' occurs first in post-Biblical Hebrew."[53] Even if the linguistic evidence is explained by a postexilic date of composition, this option relies heavily on subjective interpretation to explain the meaning of the "world" God has placed in the human heart, and it struggles to relate this "world" to humanity's inability to discern the divine program. In light of these problems this option can be judged as unlikely.

REVOCALIZATION

In contrast to the preceding positions that support the Masoretic vocalic tradition, the first proposal in this category does not view

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[49] Liddell, Scott, and Jones, A Greek-English Lexicon, 45; Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, 32–33; Hermann Sasse, "αἰων," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–1974), 1:203–4.

[50] *m. 'Abot* 4:16–17; *m. Pe'ah* 1:1; *m. B. Meṣi'a* 2:11.

[51] Ginsburg, *The Song of Songs and Coheleth*, 309; Perry, *Dialogues with Kohelet*, 90; Jastrow, *A Gentle Cynic*, 210–11; and Gordis, *Koheleth—The Man and His World*, 231–32. Gordis, following the German scholar Levy, suggests an occurrence of this noun in Ben Sirach, מכל גדולות עולם ("Restrain thyself *from all the glories of this world*," 3:18). However, a closer examination reveals that this verse is full of textual uncertainty, with conflicts in the extant Hebrew manuscripts. In fact many scholars and translations regard this text as corrupted and they emend the text to read בכל גדולה ("Humble yourself in all greatness," Douay, KJV, Knox, LXX, NAB, NJB). See R. H. Charles, *Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1913), 159; and Patrick W. Skehan and Alexander Di Lella, *The Wisdom of Ben Sira*, Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1987), 158.

[52] Marcus Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005), 1084.

[53] Koehler and Baumgartner, *A Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 799.

הָעֹלָם as defectively written עוֹלָם but connects this term to the Arabic 'ilam ("knowledge") and translates the clause, "that *knowledge* He has put in their heart."[54] This interpretive option certainly is intriguing. "God has placed knowledge in the human heart, yet not enough to discover the features of His divine program." However, while this root is commonly attested in Arabic, there is some question about its presence in both Ugaritic and Hebrew. While the root עלם, connected to the Arabic 'alima, "to know," may be in a Ugaritic letter (*KTU* 2.14:14), its meaning is uncertain in the context. Moreover the evidence in the Hebrew Bible is even more problematic. In Job 42:3 the term מַעְלִים may describe Job's attempt to teach God without knowledge, but the parallel term מַחְשִׁיךְ, "to darken" (38:2), weighs against this derivation.[55] Though this interpretive option is admittedly possible, its questionable attestation prompts hope for a better explanation.

Proponents of a second option in this category suggest revocalizing הָעֹלָם to הָעֶלֶם, deriving this term from a segholate noun עֶלֶם, "darkness" (literal) or "ignorance, obscurity" (figurative) and translating the sentence, "He has also placed *darkness/ignorance* in their hearts" (Coverdale, Smith-Goodspeed, NET, Moffatt). While this noun does not occur elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible,[56] the re-

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[54] Hitzig, Bertheau, and Nowack, *Der Prediger Salomo's*, 229. Hitzig suggested that the noun עלם ("wisdom") was attested in the then-undiscovered *Vorlage* of Ben Sirach, "How very unpleasant is wisdom (עלם) to the unlearned, and the unwise will not remain with her" (6:20), proposing a wordplay on the participle נעלם ("concealed") later in the context (v. 22). However, this assumption was invalidated by the subsequent discovery of the scrolls at Qumran, as fragment *2Q18* contains neither of these Hebrew terms (*Discoveries in the Judaean Desert* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1962], 3:76).

[55] The etymology and root division of עלם in Koehler and Baumgartner, *A Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament,* 834–35, must be reevaluated. There is no clear attestation of the Arabic 'alima ("to know"); rather, all the occurrences of עלם in the Old Testament share the meaning "to conceal, be(come) dark" and can be related to the Akkadian ṣalāmu and the Ugaritic ǵlm. This connection to the Ugaritic ǵlm, which may have merged into the biblical Hebrew עלם ("eternity"), is supported by many Ugaritic scholars (e.g., John Huehnergard, *Ugaritic Vocabulary in Syllabic Transcription* [Atlanta: Scholars, 1987], 99; Gregorio del Olmo Lete and Joaquín Sanmartín, *A Dictionary of the Ugaritic Language in the Alphabetic Tradition,* trans. Wilfred G. E. Watson [Boston: Brill, 2003], 320–21; and Mark S. Smith, *Untold Stories* [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2001], 217).

[56] Appealing to Mesopotamian, Ugaritic, and Phoenician textual parallels, Youngblood argues for an occurrence of the noun עלם later in the book (12:5), translating בית עוֹלָם as "dark house" rather than "eternal home" ("Qoheleth's Dark House," 211–22). However, the construct phrase בית עוֹלָם is more likely an idiom referring to the grave (Koehler and Baumgartner, *A Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament,* 799). This euphemism for the tomb also appears in Egyptian literature, an ancient Moabite text from Deir 'Allā, as well as Punic, Phoenician, Palmyrene,

lated noun הַעֲלָמָה ("hidden thing, secret") and the verb עָלַם ("to conceal") are both used throughout the Old Testament (Lev. 4:13; 5:2–4, 20:4; Num. 5:13; 1 Kings 10:3; 2 Kings 4:27; 2 Chron. 9:2; Job 28:21; Pss. 10:1, 90:8; Prov. 28:27; Isa. 1:15; Ezek. 22:26; Nah. 3:11). The book's final verse (Eccles. 12:14) uses the niphal participle from this root: "God will evaluate every deed, including every *secret thing* [נֶעְלָם]." In addition the existence of this term is supported by the Ugaritic noun *ģlmt* ("darkness, concealment") and the Akkadian verb *ṣalāmu* ("to be [become] black, blackish, dark"). Jastrow also notes the existence of this term in postbiblical Hebrew, meaning "secret, forgetfulness,"[57] while the Targum and rabbinic Midrash, relating this verse to "the Ineffable Name," understood the term as "concealed."[58]

Despite its merits many scholars have dismissed this option based on the temporal use of עוֹלָם throughout Ecclesiastes (1:4, 10; 2:16; 9:6; 12:5), particularly later in the context (3:14), as well as the term עַד in the previous line (v. 11a). However, in an unpointed text there is no reason why this term might not have another meaning in 3:11. In support of this possibility the term הָעֹלָם in this verse would be the only one of the 440 occurrences in the Hebrew Bible in which the noun עוֹלָם is used as the subject or object of a verb.[59] In addition the orthography may also be significant. Of the five other occurrences of עוֹלָם in Ecclesiastes, four record the term in its *plene* spelling, with a lone use of the defective form containing a preposition and a plural suffix (לְעֹלָמִים, 1:10).[60] Thus the dif-

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Nabataean, and Syriac inscriptions (John F. Healey, "Death in West Semitic Texts: Ugarit and Nabataea," in *The Archeology of Death in the Ancient Near East,* ed. S. Campbell and A. Green (Oxford: Oxbow, 1995), 190.

[57] Marcus Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature,* 2nd ed. (New York: Judaica, 1982), 1084.

[58] *Ecclesiastes Rabbah,* 92; and Knobel, *The Targum of Qohelet,* 28–29. Rendering this term "an enigma," Scott proposes the occurrence of a related term in the Babylonian Theodicy, line 256, "The mind of the god, like the center of the heavens, is remote; his knowledge is difficult" (*Proverbs and Ecclesiastes,* 221). W. G. Lambert records the transliteration of these lines (256–57), "*[l]i-ib-bi ili ki-ma qí-rib šamê né-si-ma // le-é-a-us-su šup-šu-qat-ma nišīmeš la lam-da*" (*Babylonian Wisdom Literature* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1967], 86). Since Scott's proposal is based on a conceptual parallel rather than an Akkadian cognate, this supporting evidence must be judged as weak and inconsequential.

[59] Tomasino, "עוֹלָם," 3:350.

[60] The significance of this form is supported by the classification of Ecclesiastes among the books with the fullest orthography (Francis I. Andersen and A. Dean Forbes, *Spelling in the Hebrew Bible,* Biblica et Orientalia [Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1986], 316). However, in his study of spelling variations James Barr attributes the defective spellings of *'ōlām* in Ecclesiastes 1:10 and 3:11 to the "affix ef-

ference in form between עלם (3:11) and עולם (v. 14) raises the question whether the term in verse 11 is "eternity" (עֹלָם) or "darkness" (עֶלֶם). In light of the reader's expectation for a temporal nuance in this context, the author may have been using an explicit homonymic wordplay to contrast human ignorance (v. 11b) with God's sovereignty (v. 14). Ironically, while the work of God will endure forever (v. 14), the human mind will never be able to discover this work because it has been obscured or divinely concealed. While God has made everything appropriate in its time (v. 11a), He has placed darkness in the human heart (v. 11b) so that people cannot discover all God has done (v. 11c). Haupt paraphrases this verse in this way: "He has veiled their mental vision, so that no man can ever find out what He has done from first to last."[61]

Barton concludes that the context requires that הֵעֵלֶם be rendered as "ignorance."[62] While this assertion seems overstated, the etymological connections to other Hebrew terms and Semitic cognates, the defective spelling in contrast to the later *plene* spelling, as well as its congruency within the surrounding context support the likelihood of this interpretation. Compared with the previous positions this interpretive option better correlates with the overall argument of Qoheleth and the immediate context, specifically its

fect," in which the addition of prefixes, prepositions, or the article produces a short spelling (*The Variable Spellings of the Hebrew Bible* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989], 27). While the affix effect may explain the evidence in the Torah, the spelling of this term in other books contradicts Barr's explanation. When the term '*ôlām* occurs with the preposition lamed, the defective form occurs less than twenty times while the *plene* spelling is used over 150 times. Similarly, when the definite article is attached, the defective form is used only twice while the *plene* spelling occurs a dozen times. Emmanuel Tov notes that Barr's affix effect "is basically correct, as it pertains only to the Pentateuch . . . but the information concerning other books is imprecise" ("Review of *The Variable Spellings in the Hebrew Bible,* by James Barr," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 35 [1990]: 312–13). As the evidence above plainly demonstrates, the affix effect simply does not explain the spelling variation of this term outside the Pentateuch and thus cannot be used to explain the form in Ecclesiastes 3:11.

61   Haupt, *Ecclesiastes*, 24. Rankin renders the term הָעֹלָם figuratively. "God has made everything excellent in its time, but as he has placed in man's heart the inability to remember [forgetfulness] and record all the generations of human history as well as the events and experiences pertaining thereto; God's work and purpose from beginning to end—i.e., in their entirety—remain to man forever incomprehensible and inexplicable" ("Ecclesiastes," 49).

62   Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, 105. "When its real thought is perceived, however, the vs. fits admirably into Q's system of thought. The activities of life may be suited to their seasons, but they are vain and give no proper return, for man cannot understand them" (ibid., 106). Stephen Kaufman also supports this position. "A simple vocalic emendation is preferable, taking it from the root meaning 'to be hidden,' i.e., we desire to know what we do not" (personal correspondence).

explanation of the relationship between what God has placed in the heart of humanity and their inability to discern His work in the world (3:11c).[63]

EMENDATION

Whereas the previous interpretive options accept the authenticity of the consonantal text, this view argues that the Masoretic reading is "corrupt"[64] and "eminently out of place."[65] According to Fox, "The *'olam* in man's heart is a theologically fertile notion, but it is probably a mistake."[66] Therefore despite the unanimity of the extant Hebrew manuscripts, the difficulty of this enigmatic passage has led several scholars to suggest a conjectural emendation from הָעֹלָם ("eternity") to הֶעָמָל ("toil"), appealing to metathesis of the final two consonants.[67] This emendation was also suggested in Rudolph Kittel's *Biblia Hebraica* (Stuttgart: Bibelanstalt, 1951).

For a conjectural emendation to be considered a valid option, it must adequately explain the rise of the textual reading in the transmission process, demonstrate congruency with the surrounding context, and bring an added clarity to the entire passage. In support for this proposed emendation Fox and Ginsberg appeal to the similarities between 3:11 and 8:17.[68]

"He made everything appropriate in its time, but He has also placed *toil* [העמל] in their hearts, without man being able to grasp [לֹא־יִמְצָא הָאָדָם] what God has brought to pass" (3:11). "I saw that

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[63] The syntactical function of the article would be classified as generic. Abstract terms, referring to attributes, qualities, and states, can take the generic article (Wilhelm Gesenius, *Gesenius Hebrew Grammar* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1910], 407; and Bruce K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* [Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990], 245–46). A. B. Davidson specifically states that physical elements such as fire and darkness can take the article (*Davidson's Introductory Hebrew Grammar: Syntax,* 4th ed., ed. J. C. L. Gibson [Edinburgh: Clark, 1994], 28–29). The synonym חֹשֶׁךְ ("darkness") also occurs in Ecclesiastes 5:16 and 6:4 with the generic article.

[64] Ginsberg, "The Quintessence of Koheleth," 50.

[65] "It does not matter whether we take it as 'world' or 'worldliness' or 'eternity' in any connotation or denotation; we are left with an idea that is in place with Emerson's 'Sphinx' as 'the fiend that man harries,' but which is eminently out of place in a book written in Biblical Hebrew, however late" (MacDonald, "Old Testament Notes," 212).

[66] Fox, *Qoheleth and His Contradictions,* 194; and idem, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up,* 211.

[67] MacDonald, "Old Testament Notes," 212.

[68] Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up,* 211; and Ginsberg, "The Quintessence of Koheleth," 50.

man cannot grasp [לֹא יוּכַל הָאָדָם לִמְצוֹא] anything that God makes happen, that is to say, the events that occur under the sun, for even if a man seeks *arduously* [יַעֲמֹל הָאָדָם], he will not grasp them" (8:17; cf. 11:5).

Both verses emphasize humanity's hopeless attempt to grasp what God has brought to pass. However, there is a slight distinction in the author's perspective in these two passages. In 3:11 Qoheleth emphasized God's active role ("He has placed *toil* in their hearts"), whereas 8:17 simply notes the hopelessness of this endeavor without attributing the cause to God ("Even if man seeks *arduously* he will not grasp them"). A precedent for this varying perspective is evident elsewhere. In his lament of futility in the opening chapter Qoheleth wrote, "What is bent cannot be straightened, what is missing cannot be supplied" (1:15). Then in a parallel statement later in the book the author attributed the cause of this action to God. "Consider the work of God: For who can make straight what He has bent?" (7:13).

In further support of the emendation Fox cites Isaiah 53:11a, "as a result of the toil [עָמָל] of His soul," to show that a soul can have toil, as well as Psalm 73:16, "when I pondered to understand this, it was troublesome [עָמָל] in my sight" which states that an endeavor to understand something can be called "toil." This toil is a mental labor, similar to the "heart's thoughts" mentioned alongside עָמָל earlier in the book (Eccles. 2:22).[69] However, as Fox admits, the phrase "toil in the heart" does not occur elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible.[70] Though עָמָל occurs frequently in Qoheleth (thirty-five times), it is never used elsewhere with God as the intermediate agent in the sense of giving עָמָל to man. When the author lamented "God has given people a burdensome task to keep them occupied," he consistently used the term עִנְיָן ("busyness, activity, task," 1:13; 2:26; 3:10) rather than עָמָל ("toil"). However, the absence of this collocation elsewhere may have caused a scribe to "correct" the text, changing הֶעָמָל ("toil") to הָעֹלָם ("eternity"). If הֶעָמָל was the original reading in 3:11, the clause "He has placed toil in their hearts," simply continues the description from the previous verse of the burden with which God has given people to busy themselves (v. 10; cf. 1:13).

In reference to the aforementioned criteria for evaluating a proposed emendation, an error of metathesis must have occurred

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69 Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up*, 211.

70 Ibid.

early in the transmission process. Such a transposition of letters is attested elsewhere in the Old Testament, specifically involving lamed and mem (שלמה/שמלה, Exod. 22:8; Josh. 9:5; 1 Kings 11:29; Song 4:11; Neh. 9:21) as well as lamed and he (האלה/האהל, 1 Kings 7:45), in addition to other letters (Lev. 5:6; 2 Sam. 22:46/Ps. 18:46 [Heb]; 2 Sam. 23:12/1 Chron. 11:14). This interpretive option is congruent with the immediate context as well as the overall argument of the book, adding a degree of clarity to the passage. In Ecclesiastes 3:11 Qoheleth continued his previous description of the arduous task that God has given people to keep them occupied (v. 10), and then he revealed its divine purpose, "so that they cannot discover the work of God from beginning to end" (v. 11c). Also this proposal aligns with Qoheleth's emphasis on life "under the sun" as well as his skepticism about the afterlife (vv. 19–21; 9:10; 11:8). In light of the above evidence this proposal is certainly possible. However, the problem with any conjectural emendation is the lack of textual support. Obviously the likelihood of this proposal would be increased immensely by the presence of even one attesting manuscript.

CONCLUSION

Three interpretive approaches to resolve the enigma of Ecclesiastes 3:11 have been evaluated. First, many proponents retain the Masoretic consonants and vowels, viewing the term הָעֹלָם as a metonymy. Though the ordinary meaning of עֹלָם as "eternity" and the time-related terms in the context favor a temporal meaning, these nuances either import too much into the term or directly contradict the words of Qoheleth elsewhere in the book. The interpretation of many scholars and translations, "a consciousness of or yearning for that which transcends the present," seems foreign to Qoheleth's focus on life "under the sun" and in conflict with his skepticism about the afterlife. Though *lectio difficilior* would favor this reading as original, in that it is the most difficult, the above-mentioned factors mitigate against this conclusion. Thus the traditional interpretation, "God has set *eternity* in their hearts," must be questioned.

Second, a few commentators propose an emendation in which הָעֹלָם ("eternity") is changed to הֶעָמָל ("toil"). In this case a scribal error must have occurred early in the transmission of the text between the date of composition and the translation of the Septuagint. Though no external evidence can be offered in support of this view, the presence of the textual reading can be easily explained by metathesis. Also this option is congruent with the surrounding con-

text as well as the overall theology of the book, and it certainly adds greater clarity to the entire passage. According to this view God has given humanity an arduous task to keep them occupied so that they cannot discover His divine work. The possibility of the conjectural emendation is acknowledged. However, the lack of textual evidence combined with a respect for the consonantal text preserved in the extant manuscripts, as well as the litany of evidence in support of revocalization, weighs against this option.

Third, some scholars suggest retaining the original consonants and altering the Masoretic vowel pointing. In this approach the best explanation involves revocalizing the term הָעֹלָם ("eternity") to הָעֵלֶם ("darkness"). Though this option creates a *hapax legomenon* of the noun form, the etymological connections to other Hebrew terms and ancient Semitic cognates as well as its congruency in the context support this interpretation. This option offers a better explanation of the relationship between what God has put in the human heart and humanity's inability to discern the work of God. In this reading God has intentionally obscured people's knowledge so that they cannot discover certain features of His program. Though the Masoretes have preserved the traditional system of pronunciation, the late date and fallibility of their work must be acknowledged. For a term used only once in the Hebrew Bible to be misread by scribes at least a thousand years after its composition should not be surprising. Therefore this enigmatic phrase may best be read, "He has also placed *darkness/ignorance* in their hearts."

This conclusion is revolutionary for understanding the meaning of this passage and its application. In times of tragedy many people ask, "How could a good God allow this to happen?" However, understanding this passage and its surrounding context in light of the above analysis affirms that people are asking the wrong question. While God has created all the "times" of life (3:2–8), each appropriate in its time (v. 10), He has obscured humanity's knowledge, placing darkness in their hearts, so that they cannot discover His divine program (v. 11). But why? Because God wants humanity to enjoy the work He has given them (vv. 12–13), to trust in His sovereignty and fear Him (v. 14). Thus Qoheleth wisely urged his readers, "Rather than trying to discover the mysteries of God's unrevealed will, trust Him and joyfully pursue the work He has given you to do."