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THE MEANING OF הַעֲלִים IN ECCLESIASTES 3:11

by

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Hebrew Exegesis of Ecclesiastes: 153, 7:30 A.M.

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Introduction

It is the goal of this paper to explain the meaning of the word עֲלֵזָה in the context of Ecclesiastes 3:11. A thorough explanation is necessary in light of the variety of translations and explanations that are offered by commentators for the word. Some of the translations include *eternity*, *world*, *darkness*, and *labor*.¹

The paper will proceed to accomplish its task in four major sections. First, it will give a translation of 3:9–14 and briefly explain the context leading up to verse 11. Second, various translation options for עֲלֵזָה will be discussed and critiqued. Third, the precise meaning of עֲלֵזָה will be discussed, along with some theological implications. Finally, some concluding remarks will be made.

Text and Context

Though this paper will focus on Ecclesiastes 3:11, it is necessary to study it in its context, specifically Ecclesiastes 3:9–15. The author’s translation follows.

² What profit has the worker in that which he labors? ¹⁰ I have observed the task which God has given the sons of men to keep them occupied. ¹¹ He has made everything appropriate in its time. Also He has placed eternity³ in their hearts. ¹² Yet even so,⁵ man cannot figure

¹ Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman, 1993), p. 299 offers a very brief summary and critique of these options in footnote 72.

² Some Hebrew fragments from Cairo Geniza show a Piel infinitive construct form instead of the MT’s Qal infinitive construct. The difference comes from changes in vocalization. The final ׁ refers to the task in which God has appointed men to be occupied. It is not translated by several versions (NIV, NKJV), though the KJV does translate “in it” at the end of the verse.

³ The Masorah parva in BHS notes that eternity, עֲלֵזָה, is twice written defectively in the OT; the other occurrence is the second use of עֲלֵזָה in 1 Chronicles 16:36.

⁴ One Hebrew MS and LXX have the reading “in his heart” instead of “in their hearts.” BHS suggests emending the text to simply “him.” For a comment on this, see Choon-Leong Seow, *Ecclesiastes: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), p. 163.

out that which God has done from beginning to end. ¹² I know that there is nothing better for them⁶ than to rejoice and to do good in their lives. ¹³ And also that every man should eat and drink and enjoy the good from all his labor. It is a gift from God. ¹⁴ I know that everything that God does will be forever. To it there is nothing which can be added, nor from it is there anything which can be taken away. And God does this so that men might fear before Him. ¹⁵ What is already has been, and that which is to be has already been, and God seeks that which he sought before.

The eight verses before this passage consist of the famous “there is a time for everything” poem. There are fourteen pairs of opposite activities given, each of which has its own time. It is in verses 9 to 15 that we learn that these “times” are not random, but are woven together by God in an appropriate way. The question about man’s profit in verse 9 expects a negative answer: man does not achieve any ultimate gain from his labor. This is true in light of the preceding verses, namely that there will always be a time when death, war or some other loss erases anything gained.

It is also true that man has no ultimate profit in that he cannot determine the meaning or purpose of things. This is taught in the subsequent verses, 10 and 11. Qohelet has observed the work in which man is occupied. He notes that not only has God given this burden to men, but He has arranged all of life’s events in an appropriate way.⁷ He has also given men לִּבְהָרִי in their hearts. Even so, they cannot fit the puzzle of life together (“man cannot figure out”). They may be able to fit together a few pieces here and there, but it is impossible for man to put them all in

⁵ This difficult phrase is translated by *HALOT* as “without the possibility of.” See *HALOT*, s.v. “בְּלִי”, p. 133. This phrase is in contrast to the previous one. This fact is used by Todd to support the notion that the placement of לִּבְהָרִי in the human heart is positive rather than negative in nature. See Stephen Todd, “Ecclesiastes 3:11” (Hebrew Exegesis of Ecclesiastes, Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, 24 April 1990), p. 11.

⁶ BHS notes “for man” has been proposed here instead of “for them” to match the opening phrase of 2:24.

⁷ Not all the events in verses 1–8 are “good” or “nice” events. But they have their appropriate (תִּפְסָדִי) and God-ordained place in life. The point is that things are fitting and necessary *in their time*, not that they are beautiful themselves (e.g., death, killing, destruction, weeping, mourning, hatred, and war).

their proper relationship to one another, and to put the border on it and to be able to appreciate the whole puzzle from beginning to end.

In light of these facts, Qohelet again reminds us that we should make the most of living in “the now” with the gifts God has given (verses 12–13) while maintaining a proper reverence for God who arranges everything into its appropriate time (verses 14–15). God’s sovereign direction over the affairs of life is the foundation upon which this enjoyment can be built, since God allows enjoyment in its proper time. Even though man would desire to know more, this is prevented by his limitations from doing so.

Translation Options for עָלַם

It is verse 11, particularly the middle phrase of it, that has given interpreters the most difficulty. How should the phrase be translated? And what precisely does it mean? These two questions will be answered in turn. First, we will examine several possible translation options for עָלַם in this section.⁸

Toil

Fox’s commentary on Ecclesiastes uses the New JPS translation of the TANAKH which takes 3:11b as “He also puts eternity [ha-‘olam] in their mind.”⁹ However, Fox asserts that *ha-*

⁸ Other commentators take different translations which I have deemed to be of less interest and will only mention them here. Ernest W. Hengstenberg, *A Commentary on Ecclesiastes* (Evansville, IN: Sovereign Grace Publishers, 1960), p. 107 lists “philosophy” and “worldly mind” without reference to any commentators who take these translations.

⁹ Michael V. Fox, *The JPS Bible Commentary Ecclesiastes* (Philadelphia, The Jewish Publication Society, 2004), p. 23. He says the NJPS English translation notes that eternity indicates that God “preoccupies man with the attempt to discover the times of future events.”

'olam never means eternity¹⁰ and that the NJPS idea of men desiring eternity is irrelevant to the context.¹¹ Thus, he supports emending the text to *העמל* instead of *העלם* (note the reversal of the final two consonants).¹² This “minor emendation... produces a meaningful text: ‘but he also placed toil in their hearts.’”¹³ He says this fits the context’s theme, which is toil.

There are several problems with this approach. First, Fox gives no external support for his emendation, and neither does BHS. Such a change is totally conjectural. Second, he makes no attempt to align the un-emended text with the context. Since much of the context has to do with time (3:1–8), it is not totally unexpected that another time-related word would occur in the context. Third, his assertion that *ha-’olam* never means eternity is simply false.¹⁴ It obviously has a time element in its semantic range, and basically all of its uses lean heavily upon that meaning. Assigning a meaning outside of this range is extremely tenuous.

Darkness, Obscurity, or Ignorance

Several scholars support the translations “darkness” or “ignorance”¹⁵ that originate from the Ugaritic root *glm*, or the translation “obscurity” from the Hebrew root *’lm*, which means ‘that

¹⁰ Fox, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 23: “Nowhere else, however, does *ha-’olam* (‘world, aeon, forever’) mean ‘eternity.’”

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 23: He doubts that “God made humans *desire* eternity or made us imagine that we will live forever.”

¹² See Todd, “Ecclesiastes 3:11,” p. 13 for a brief discussion of two other sources that support emendation.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 23. This view is also defended in Michael V. Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions* (Decatur, GA: Almond Press, 1989), p. 194.

¹⁴ The OT contains several articular uses of *’olam* which can be translated as ‘eternity’ or as close synonyms. Hengstenberg, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 107 notes, “*עולם* is never used in the entire Old Testament in any other sense than of ‘unmeasured time,’ and of ‘eternity:’ and in this book above all is it employed in the signification ‘eternity.’”

¹⁵ BBE has “made their hearts without knowledge.”

which is hidden.” Using a complex etymological argument, Youngblood ties these two approaches together by arguing that “any occurrence of the root *‘lm* can theoretically represent either **‘lm* or **ǵlm*, since the phonemes *‘* and *ǵ* both became *‘* in Hebrew,” though “if and when Hebrew *‘lm* means ‘darkness’ it probably should be referred to **ǵlm* (rather than to **‘lm*) on the basis of the Ugaritic evidence.”¹⁶ Hence, he does not have to resort to emendation to arrive at the translation “darkness” or “ignorance” in Ecclesiastes 3:11.¹⁷ The NET BIBLE follows this translation.¹⁸

In response to these suggestions for the translation of עֵלְמָה, it should first be noted that such linguistic gymnastics are not necessary when the meaning of the word is clearly attested throughout the OT. And עֵלְמָה is such a word: *HALOT* does not allow for any meaning other than a time-based word (long time, duration, future time, times to come, a long time back).¹⁹ Second, this approach assumes a negative tone to the עֵלְמָה phrase in Ecclesiastes 3:11 (“God placed ignorance in their hearts”), when in fact, as will be argued later, the עֵלְמָה placed in men’s hearts is not in itself a negative thing.

¹⁶ Ronald F. Youngblood, “Qoheleth’s ‘Dark House’ (Eccl 12:5),” *JETS* 29 (December, 1986): 406–7.

¹⁷ Though Ogden says that to suggest the root is *glm* is indeed based on textual emendation. See Graham Ogden, *Qoheleth* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987), p. 55.

¹⁸ See the NET BIBLE’s extensive footnote at Ecclesiastes 3:11 for a survey of approaches to this verse, as well as their reasoning for their translation. Their translation is interesting in several other respects: it translates the connective וְ with a contrastive “but” and makes the final clause a result; it casts God’s provision in a totally negative light; it also limits “beginning to end” to a person’s lifetime.

¹⁹ *HALOT*, s.v. “עֵלְמָה,” p. 798–99. So *BDB*, s.v. “עֵלְמָה,” p. 761–63.

Knowledge

Gordis points out the possibility that the translation could be “knowledge,” based on an Arabic cognate,²⁰ a rendering used in the late nineteenth century by Young’s Literal Translation²¹ and by Moses Stuart in his commentary.²²

Against this view is the same difficulty that attends the translation “darkness,” namely that the reliance upon cognates from other languages is certainly not foolproof. Furthermore, it would be the only use of the word in the OT that would need to be translated this way.

World

Following the tradition of the KJV,²³ which translates the *ha-olam* as “world,” Gordis suggests “the love of the world.” This translation of *olam* is also found in the KJV of Psalm 73:12. Gordis further says that “world” is legitimate based on the word’s later Hebrew meaning. He admits this sense is Mishnaic and not Biblical, but boldly states that world “is the only meaning of the noun attested to in any period of the language”²⁴

The main problem with Gordis’ argument about the meaning of the noun, as we will

²⁰ Robert Gordis, *Koheleth*, 3rd aug. ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), p. 231. See also R. N. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, The New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), p. 73 and James M. MacDonald, *The Book of Ecclesiastes Explained* (reprint ed., Minneapolis: Klock & Klock Christian Publishers, 1982), pp. 200–202.

²¹ Robert Young, *Young’s Literal Translation of the Bible*, rev. ed. (reprint of 1898 Edinburgh ed., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977), p. 416.

²² Moses Stuart, *A Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, ed. and rev. D. C. Robbins (Boston: Dreper and Halladay, 1880), p. 174–75.

²³ The English Darby Bible (1884/1890), the Douay-Rheims American Edition (1899), the Jewish Publication Society Old Testament (1917) follow the KJV. Interestingly, of these four translations, the JPS OT is the only one that translates *olam* differently at Ecclesiastes 3:11 and Psalm 73:12—it translates *olam* as “world” in the first case and as “always” in the second.

²⁴ Robert Gordis, *Koheleth*, p. 156, 231. See also Ralph Wardlaw, *Exposition of Ecclesiastes* (reprint ed., Minneapolis: Klock & Klock Christian Publishers, 1982), pp. 86–87 for more support of the translation “world.”

show later, is that the noun form of עוֹלָם does *not* have the idea of “world” in its semantic range.

It is also difficult to understand in what sense the world has been placed in the heart of man.

Loader’s view is not significantly different, in that he says eternity has to do with the temporal world order and man’s thought about all of God’s works. He explains the whole section 3:10–15 under the heading “The Futility of Thought.” He writes, “. . . for God forces man to occupy himself with the temporal world order by putting it in his heart. . . . If then God has set the temporal world order in the human center of reflection, that means he forces man to occupy himself, in his mind, with the unceasing succession of the fixed dispensations of fate that come upon him. But there is a problem: of all the things God does, man understands absolutely nothing. From beginning to end there is not a single aspect human beings can comprehend. . . . Man cannot escape the torment of his fate, for God has made it a part of his nature to think about it; yet he gains nothing from all his reflections because God’s work remains his own mystery.”²⁵ The statement “part of his nature” refers to the fact that the temporal world order, eternity, has been built into the nature of man and causes him to think about God’s works, but without the corresponding ability to make sense of it all.

This view has much to commend it. It highlights a cognitive element of the idea of עוֹלָם, ties it in with the “profit” idea mentioned in 3:9, and also suggests that it is part of man’s innate being to have this capacity to think about God’s works. However, Loader’s statement that man understands absolutely nothing is way overstated.

²⁵ J. A. Loader, *Ecclesiastes*, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), pp. 39–40. Ardel B. Caneday, “Qoheleth: Enigmatic Pessimist or Godly Sage?” in *Reflecting With Solomon: Selected Studies on the Book of Ecclesiastes*, ed. Roy B. Zuck (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), p. 105 agrees that the search for meaning and purpose “entirely eludes” man.

Eternity and Related Translations

By far the most common view of עֲלָמֵי is that it should be translated as “eternity.” Kaiser represents this view²⁶ which is also followed in the LXX, RSV, NASB, NIV, ESV, NKJV, and NLT, as well as Delitzsch,²⁷ Kidner²⁸ and Wright.²⁹

Because commentators and translators differ in their understandings of the precise meaning of עֲלָמֵי, they offer various expanded renditions of “eternity.” Leupold suggests that by eternity we could translate *the long past and interminable future*.³⁰ Provan and the NRSV offers the translation *a sense of time past and future*.³¹ The New American Bible uses *the timeless*³²

²⁶ Walter C. Kaiser, *Ecclesiastes: Total Life* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1979), pp. 66–67. “The key word in 3:11 is ‘eternity’: ‘God has put *eternity* into their heart’ (emphasis added).”

²⁷ Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on The Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, trans. M. G. Easton (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), p. 261–62. “God has not only assigned to each individually his appointed place in history...but that He has also established in man an impulse leading him beyond that which is temporal toward the eternal...”

²⁸ Derek Kidner, “The Search for Satisfaction: Ecclesiastes 1:12–2:26,” in *Reflecting With Solomon: Selected Studies on the Book of Ecclesiastes*, ed. Roy B. Zuck (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), p. 255. People have an “ability to stand clear of our condition and to weigh it up. To be outraged at what is universal and unavoidable suggests something of a divine discontent, a hint of what the great saying in 3:11 will call ‘eternity’ in man’s mind.” See also Derek Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes: A Time to Mourn, and a Time to Dance* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1976), p. 38–39.

²⁹ J. Stafford Wright, “The Interpretation of Ecclesiastes,” in *Reflecting With Solomon: Selected Studies on the Book of Ecclesiastes*, ed. Roy B. Zuck (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), p. 23. “A number of commentators adopt the R.V. marginal rendering here, and translate the Hebrew *ha-‘olam* as ‘eternity’ instead of ‘the world,’ and, as this makes better sense, we may adopt it.”

³⁰ Herbert C. Leupold, *Exposition of Ecclesiastes* (reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), pp. 90–91 says God has given man “the faculty of appreciating the lasting import of things; how, namely, the present builds itself upon the long past that precedes it (*‘olam*, ‘eternity’) and how the present is built with an eye to the interminable future that is to come (‘eternity’).”

³¹ Iain Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), p. 90. He takes the NEB translation of eternity, “a sense of time past and future.”

³² *The New American Bible*, Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1983.

while the New Jerusalem Bible translates it as *an awareness of the passage of time*.³³ Krüger translates the word as *distant time*.³⁴ Ogden proposes that eternal means *a consciousness of the eternal*³⁵ but he also mentions others take the meaning to be *the sum total of time*.

There are other commentators that do not offer a precise translation, but one may be deduced from their writing. Caneday would suggest something like *inquisitiveness and yearning for purpose*.³⁶ Loader might say eternity is *a link to heaven*.³⁷ Zuck suggests *an awareness of his being an eternal creature*.³⁸ Murphy would say *the whole of time* as distinguished from the little parts that make up the whole.³⁹ Fredericks would say *the realm of the eternal*, and would differ from Murphy in that this *eternal realm* is the total opposite of the parts of time that make up the whole: it is on an entirely different plane.⁴⁰

³³ The *New Jerusalem Bible*. New York: Doubleday, 1999.

³⁴ Thomas Krüger, *Qoheleth*, trans. O.C. Dean Jr., ed. Klaus Baltzer (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), p. 81.

³⁵ Ogden, *Qoheleth*, p. 55: “Thus, in addition to observing the order of moments of time, we have also been given, according to Qoheleth, an awareness that there is something which transcends these limits, namely the eternal.” On p. 24 he says, “it does appear clear that it must be distinguished from those moments of time...the meaning approximates to the traditional ‘for ever.’”

³⁶ Caneday, “Qoheleth,” p. 105. “The ‘eternity’ which God has put into the hearts of men is a certain inquisitiveness and yearning after purpose. It is a compulsive drive, a deep-seated desire to appreciate order and beauty...”

³⁷ J. A. Loader, “The Grip of Time: Ecclesiastes 3:1–9,” in *Reflecting With Solomon: Selected Studies on the Book of Ecclesiastes*, ed. Roy B. Zuck (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), p. 266. He writes, “...*man’s life is linked to eternity* (v. 11)...He has ‘eternity [‘the world,’ κJV] in his heart’ and is linked to heaven.”

³⁸ Roy B. Zuck, “God and Man in Ecclesiastes,” in *Reflecting With Solomon: Selected Studies on the Book of Ecclesiastes*, ed. Roy B. Zuck (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), p. 217, fn. 19. “That is, God has given man an awareness that he is an eternal creature.”

³⁹ Roland E. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word Books, 1992), p. 34–35. He quotes E. Podechard, “כָּל־זְמַן means the whole, of which זְמַן designates each part; it is the whole of duration or the totality of the particular times that were mentioned in the preceding vv 1–8.”

⁴⁰ Daniel C. Fredericks, *Coping With Transience: Ecclesiastes on Brevity in Life* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield, 1993), p. 27. “Time” denotes segments of time, which are “set in direct opposition to eternity that God instills in the hearts of humanity (3.11).” Later (p. 93), Fredericks writes, “Qoheleth is aware of both realms too, the tran-

This view certainly avoids the problems of the other translations that have been cited. It is supported by the lexical sources, by local context, and by wider OT context, as the following sections will demonstrate. External text-critical evidence also supports this view: there is no warrant for emending the text.

The Lexical Sources Support “Eternity”

We have already cited *HALOT* and *BDB* in support of the fact that basically all the uses of עוֹלָם are translated as eternity or some other time related word indicating a long duration.⁴¹ Jenni and Westermann⁴² and Harris et al.⁴³ agree.

The Local Context Supports “Eternity”

The local context supports the translation “eternity” at 3:11 as well. First and of most import is the use of the same word in 3:14, “I know that whatever God does, it shall be forever.”⁴⁴ There is no question here that the word refers to a long duration of time and as such lends strong evidence to a time-related nuance to the word in 3:11.

sient and the eternal. All that he sees is fleeting, though he affirms the eternal as the gift of God, put in man’s heart (3.11).”

⁴¹ *HALOT*, s.v. “עוֹלָם,” p. 798–99. See *BDB*, s.v. “עוֹלָם,” p. 761–63. *BDB* suggests for Ecclesiastes 3:11 the translation “the age of the world.” By “age” is meant duration, but it is hard to see how “the duration of the world” fits the context. Qohelet has already told us that the earth endures “forever” in 1:4. And by “age of the world” is almost certainly not meant the length of time the earth has existed, i.e. some thousands of years.

⁴² Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann, *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1997), pp. 852–62 (hereafter cited as *TLOT*). While agreeing that עוֹלָם refers to a long duration of time usually in the future, they do give a little caveat at Ecclesiastes 1:10 where the word refers to a long time in the past.

⁴³ *TWOT*, s.v. “עוֹלָם,” pp. 672–3. It refers to “indefinite continuance into the very distant future” as well as to times long past.

⁴⁴ All the major English translations translate it this way. The only exception among current translations is the NLT’s “whatever God does is final.”

Second, the emphasis on time in the surrounding text supports the translation “eternity.” Verses 1 to 8 use the word for “time” 29 times, and the word for “appointed season” once. Verse 11 again uses the word for time. The synonymous notion of “beginning to end” is in verse 11, the idea of lifetime is used in verse 12, and the concept that “what is already has been” is in verse 15.

Third, all of the other uses of עולם in Ecclesiastes refer to a concept of duration, i.e. forever or eternity. It is logical to expect the same concept to be present in 3:11, as the following table of the uses of the עולם in Ecclesiastes will demonstrate. Certainly the word should have a meaning oriented around the concept of time, rather than a place (the world),⁴⁵ or a lack of intelligence (ignorance), or the opposite of light (darkness).

Verse	Prefix	Number	Meaning
1:4	ל	Singular	The earth remains forever
1:10	ל	Plural	It existed already in ancient times .
2:16	ל	Singular	There is no remembrance of the wise in the future
3:11	ה	Singular	(The meaning under examination in this paper)
3:14	ל	Singular	All that God does lasts forever .
9:6	ל	Singular	They will never have a share in anything done...
12:5	none	Singular	Man goes to his eternal home. ⁴⁶

The OT Context Supports “Eternity”

There are 12 plural uses and 427 singular uses of root word עולם in the OT, for a total of

⁴⁵ Leupold, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 91 notes “that nowhere in the Bible does *‘olam* mean “world.” The three verses other than Ecclesiastes 3:11 where the KJV translates עולם as “world” are better understood as conveying a time concept, such as “forever,” “always,” or “ages” (Psalm 73:12, Isaiah 45:17, Isaiah 64:4).

⁴⁶ Despite the suggestion “dark house” in Youngblood, “Qoheleth’s ‘Dark House,’” pp. 397–410.

439 uses.⁴⁷ Provan notes that עולם is “usually used adverbially...to denote virtually unlimited time past or future.”⁴⁸ But in 3:11 the prefixed direct object marker and article make the word a substantive. Thus, though the word still conveys a time-oriented meaning, it must be translated slightly differently (as a noun, “eternity,” instead of as an adverb, “forever”).

The use in 3:11 has a prefixed direct object marker ׀. This is a singular occurrence in the OT, so there are no other similar uses that might shed light on this one.⁴⁹ We can also consider all the uses of ׀עולם which have the article prefixed. There are only 11 verses in the OT that use an articular ׀עולם (a total of 15 occurrences). They are shown in the following table.

Verse	Author’s Translation of Relevant Portion
1 Chronicles 16:36	Blessed be the LORD God of Israel from eternity to eternity (forever). (note min...ad combination)
1 Chronicles 17:14	I will establish him in my house and in my kingdom forever , and his throne will be established forever . (note ad twice) ⁵⁰
Nehemiah 9:5	...Bless the LORD your God from eternity to eternity . (note min...ad combination).
Psalms 28:9	...Carry them forever (until eternity). (note ad)
Psalms 41:14	Blessed be the LORD God of Israel from eternity to eternity . (note min...ad combination).

⁴⁷ According to both BibleWorks 6 and Accordance 6. See the software BibleWorks for Windows, Windows98/XP Release, version 6.0.012n (BibleWorks, LLC, 2003); with the Groves-Wheeler Westminster Morphology and Lemma Database, version 4000 (Philadelphia: Westminster Theological Seminary, no date). For Accordance, see the software Accordance 6.1, version 6.1.2.68k (OakTree Software, Inc. 2004); with the Groves-Wheeler Westminster Hebrew Morphology, version 4.1 (Philadelphia: Westminster Theological Seminary, 2004).

⁴⁸ Iain Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, p. 90, fn. 2. He goes on to say, “it is difficult to imagine that the same notion of ‘foreverness’ is not intended here, esp. in view of the close proximity of 3:14. The point is that mortals share with God a sense of the whole sweep of time, which has been given them by God himself, but that they cannot move on to comprehend it or control it; it is always slipping away from them.”

⁴⁹ According to BibleWorks 6, the search command ׀עולם *1אח@Po* finds no other places where ׀עולם is immediately preceded by a direct object marker. Jenni and Westermann, *TLOT*, p. 852 also mention this lone text where ׀עולם is used as an object.

⁵⁰ As far as the use of the article, this verse is interesting because the first use of ׀עולם is articular and the second is not. Otherwise, they seem synonymous.

Verse	Author's Translation of Relevant Portion
Psalms 106:48	Blessed be the LORD God of Israel from eternity to eternity . (note min...ad combination).
Psalms 133:3	The LORD commanded a blessing...life forever (until eternity). (note ad again).
Ecclesiastes 3:11	The verse we are studying.
Jeremiah 28:8	The prophets which were before me and you from past ages ...(note min, from the past)
Daniel 12:7	...and swore by him that lives forever .
Joel 2:2	...A people numerous and mighty, the likes of which have never been, nor will be...(note min from the past).

All the uses are related to time. Most of them can be satisfactorily translated as “eternity” or “forever” or “past ages” to qualify a statement or expand on its meaning. Most of the uses are preceded by a $\text{בְּ} \text{מִן}$ or עַד indicating that the word refers to a distant “end point.” Certainly to assign a time-related meaning in Ecclesiastes 3:11 is consistent with these uses.

Meaning of הָעֶלְמָה

We have seen that “eternity” is the best translation for הָעֶלְמָה because of the important role of time-related words both before and after 3:11 and the consistent translation of עֶלְמָה with eternity-related words in Ecclesiastes and throughout the OT. But that does not exhaust the task of this paper, for once the translator has settled on the idea of “eternity” as the best translation of הָעֶלְמָה , there is still the question of precisely what Qohelet meant with this word, a question which the following sections will undertake to answer.

חַיְיִת is Given to Man and is Part of God’s Image in Man

The text tells us that God has placed eternity “into *their* hearts.”⁵¹ The antecedent of “their” is “men” from verse 10, where God is said to have given a task or burden to the sons of men. This *eternity* is not placed into the heart of animals. Though this is a conclusion from silence, as far as Qohelet is concerned, animals do not have the same kinds of capacities that men do.⁵² While it is true that Qohelet reminds us that men are like animals, this is only in the sense that both die (3:18–21). Men have eternity in their hearts, but animals do not, yet both ultimately suffer the same fate—death. This sameness of outcome is frustrating to Qohelet in view of the obvious differences between man and animals. Though man and animals are on totally different planes, man’s advantage seems to be totally leveled by death. Even so, *eternity* is a distinguishing feature between men and animals.

Since *eternity* was given by God to all men, it is logical that it would have to be part of God’s endowment of man in the image of God (Genesis 1:26–27, 5:1, 9:6; James 3:9) and in the intuitive information built into man (e.g., Rom. 2:15). Qohelet is not teaching that God has placed a substance in man’s heart; rather, he is discussing a metaphysical entity.

Longman comments that the placement of eternity into man’s heart is analogous to the creation account’s reference to the image. This statement goes too far, for the image of God is

⁵¹ Notwithstanding the minor textual problem at בְּלִבָּם. This was discussed briefly above in a footnote.

⁵² This would seem to be a necessary conclusion based on the fact that Qohelet does demonstrate an understanding of the early chapters of Genesis. His comprehension of the dominion mandate would require that animals are on a lower plane than man. See Robert V. McCabe, “The Message of Ecclesiastes,” *DBSJ* 1 (Spring 1996): 95–99. See also Robert V. McCabe, “Hebrew Exegesis of Ecclesiastes” (class notes, Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, Fall 2005), pp. 26–28.

more than just *eternity*.⁵³

הַעֲלֵם is not the Same as the Knowledge in Romans 1:19–20

Hengstenberg seems to equate the idea of eternity to “an intellectual intuition of God’s eternal power and Godhead.”⁵⁴ While it is true that man possesses such an intuition according to Romans 1:19–20, and this is built-in to his conscience, the context in Ecclesiastes does not convey this concept. It is not a knowledge of *God* that Qohelet is concerned about, but the knowledge of God’s *works* (which assumes the knowledge of God beforehand) and how these works fit together. In other words, though the word “eternity” is in Ecclesiastes 3:11 and “eternal” in Romans 1:20, this does not justify equating the concepts.⁵⁵ Romans is concerned with an implanted knowledge of God, while Ecclesiastes is concerned with a time concept.

הַעֲלֵם is Cognitive in Sense

In addition to the fact that eternity is given to all mankind, it has been placed into their *hearts*. The heart in the OT refers to the seat of thought or reflection, the will, the mind, the inner being, and the like. “The heart was where a person’s thinking was done, where the intelligence resided. The heart was also linked with the will.”⁵⁶ In Malachi 2:2, for instance, the phrase “take

⁵³ Tremper Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 119.

⁵⁴ Hengstenberg, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 106–7.

⁵⁵ Caneday, “Qoheleth,” p. 105 does not equate them, but comes close when he writes, “Yet, הַעֲלֵם must...also must include a residual knowledge of God’s eternal power and divine nature which God has placed in every man (cf. Rom. 1:19), for it is this knowledge which gives man his sense that there is purpose and meaning (though it entirely eludes him).”

⁵⁶ Graham Ogden and Lynell Zogbo, *A Handbook on Ecclesiastes*, (New York: United Bible Societies, 1997), p. 41. Note Loader, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 39: “In the thought world of the Old Testament the heart was considered the organ of reflection, not of emotion as with us.”

it to heart” really means to make serious consideration. In Ecclesiastes 1:13, Qohelet says that he “set [his] heart to seek and search out by wisdom” (NKJV), or he “devoted [himself] to study and to explore by wisdom” (NIV). He devoted all his faculties to the task.

There are 42 uses of the word *heart* in Ecclesiastes. A survey of them will demonstrate that they use the word in a cognitive sense.⁵⁷ Since this is the case, it would be strange for 3:11 to be the only exception. Furthermore, seven of those verses use the verb נָתַן with לֵב in the sense of applying one’s heart to the consideration or study of some topic. 3:11 also uses the verb נָתַן with לֵב and so we would expect it to mean that God has given mankind some faculty or ability in a cognitive sense.⁵⁸

Also, the verb נִצַּח is used a number of times in the book to express that man cannot discover what God is doing in His universe. The first of these uses is in 3:11.⁵⁹ This “finding” certainly reflects a cognitive activity, albeit a futile one.

Therefore, because of the relationship of הָעֵלֶם to the heart (it is placed there) and to the activity of finding (it is related to a search for the meaning of God’s work), both of which are activities of cognition, we understand that there is a strong cognitive sense to הָעֵלֶם. This sug-

⁵⁷ All 42 uses of “heart” in Ecclesiastes can be understood at some level in the cognitive sense: 1:13, 1:16 (2x), 1:17, 2:1, 2:3 (2x), 2:10 (2x), 2:15 (2x), 2:20, 2:22, 2:23, 3:11, 3:17, 3:18, 5:2, 5:20, 7:2, 7:3, 7:4 (2x), 7:7, 7:21, 7:22, 7:25, 7:26, 8:5, 8:9, 8:11, 8:16, 9:1, 9:3 (2x; the second use is from לֵבָב), 9:7, 10:2 (2x), 10:3, 11:9 (2x), 11:10.

⁵⁸ Ogden, *Qoheleth*, p. 55: “Of the seven other occasions upon which Qoheleth uses the verb *nātan* with *lēb* (1:17; 7:2, 21; 8:9, 16; 9:1), the meaning is ‘to ponder’, ‘take cognizance of’, with *lēb* denoting one’s ‘mind’.”

⁵⁹ The other uses of נִצַּח referring to this idea in Ecclesiastes are found in 7:14, 7:24, 7:29, 8:17 (3x). (None of 7:26–29, 9:10, 9:15, 11:1, or 12:10 speak of the inscrutability of God’s work in the world, though they use the same verb.)

gests that $\square\text{על}\square$ is the concept and consideration of eternity.

$\square\text{על}\square$ is a Capacity and Desire

There are several OT texts that are helpful in determining the meaning of $\square\text{על}\square$ in man's heart. For instance, there are texts that indicate that God places other things into the heart of an individual or group of individuals. Exodus 35:34 says that God filled Bezalel and Aholiab with the Spirit of God so that they would have wisdom, understanding, knowledge, skill, and particularly the ability to teach, which He put in their hearts.⁶⁰ 1 Kings 10:24⁶¹ says that God put wisdom into Solomon's heart. God made the heart of Artaxerxes favorable toward Ezra so that he would allow Ezra to build the temple and restore its worship (Ezra 7:27). The text says that God "put such a thing as this" into the heart of the king, referring to the disposition to allow for and supply for the rebuilding of the temple. A similar idea occurs in Nehemiah 2:12 where God put it into Nehemiah's heart to repair the wall. It was this desire that God placed there. In Nehemiah 7:5 God gave another idea to Nehemiah, to record the people's genealogy. 1 Samuel 10:26 records that God touched the hearts of certain men who were aides to Saul. In Jeremiah 31:33⁶² God promises that He will put His law in the minds and hearts of His people as part of the New Covenant. Though not in the OT, Revelation 17:17 says that God put it into the hearts of the 10 kings to fulfill His divinely ordained purpose. The same idea occurs without a specific reference to the "heart." For instance, God puts fear into men in Deuteronomy 11:25.

⁶⁰ See also Exodus 31:6, 36:1–2.

⁶¹ See also 2 Chronicles 9:23.

⁶² See also Hebrews 8:10, Isaiah 51:7.

These passages are of some help in our attempt to understand the idea of eternity in Ecclesiastes 3:11. They speak of either a capability or a desire to do something that is placed into one's heart. For instance, Bezalel had a capacity or ability to teach; Solomon had great abilities in the area of wisdom; Nehemiah had a desire to rebuild the wall around Jerusalem. Unfortunately, none of these references have to do with all men in general, which is the scope conveyed in Ecclesiastes 3:11. However, it seems like a valid extension of these passages to say that God has put certain general cognitive abilities and desires in men's hearts, including the ability and desire to consider matters of time and eternity.⁶³ These have been corrupted by the fall, but were nonetheless placed there by God and are operative in some sense to this day.

הַעֲלֵם Allows Man to Reflect on the Arrangement of Events in Life

The context of chapter 3 leads us to the conclusion that man can, at least theoretically, understand the interaction of all kinds of events (3:1–8) and their proper placement in a grand scheme of things. The believer can see that God makes all these things appropriate in their time (3:11a) and that God sovereignly arranges them (3:14, “whatever God does”), though he cannot fathom the depth of the God's design. This is a capacity that no other creature possesses.

Even though all men have this capacity, the unbeliever may deny everything taught in Ecclesiastes 3 about the appropriate arrangement of events, because to admit this would require an admission of the existence of God who is active in the affairs of His universe. The unbeliever's reliance upon evolutionary thought or random chance would be destroyed. The unbeliever

⁶³ Todd, “Ecclesiastes 3:11,” p. 15. God has placed “a capacity or curiosity for eternity” in man's heart. Michael A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary* (Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press, 1983), p. 81 writes, “We have a capacity for eternal things, are concerned about the future, want to understand ‘from the beginning to the end’, and have a sense of something which transcends our immediate situation.”

would not even think in terms of “the work that God does from beginning to end” because he denies God for one thing, and believes things “just happen.” This suggests that even though unbelievers have this capacity for “eternity,” it is corrupted by sinfulness.⁶⁴ A reading of any news source on a given day will demonstrate this—scientists are investing all kinds of energy into a search for origins and the meaning of the universe, yet apart from any recognition of God. That they also have the capacity to understand things outside of themselves is readily apparent. They go about the search in the wrong way, and do not want to admit their limitations.

The concept and consideration of eternity, then, includes the ability and desire to understand something of the arrangement of affairs in life.

הָעֵלְאִים Allows Man to Reflect on What is Before and After Him

One of the most interesting facets of the “eternity” placed in man’s heart is that it allows man to think in terms of time that is outside of himself and his own life. He is not bound to think only of “time,” but can also think of “eternity” in the sense of time outside of his own life. This notion of eternity is suggested in the immediate context of 3:11, where 3:9 asks the programmatic question about ultimate profit (after death), where 3:11 mentions the idea that God does something “from beginning to end,” something that certainly exceeds man’s short lifespan, and the “forever” idea of 3:14 that teaches that what God does is lasting, as opposed to the ever repeating cycle in which man finds himself (1:3–11).

But beyond the immediate context, Qohelet’s whole book is permeated with the ideas of time that existed before and after one’s lifetime. The passing of generations (1:4), the lack of an-

⁶⁴ This “eternity” is corrupted along with every other faculty of man. See Ecclesiastes 7:29.

anything new under the sun (1:9–10, 3:15), the lack of memory of bygone times (1:11, 2:16, 4:16), the ability to engage in a comprehensive program to search out “all that is done under the sun” (1:13, 8:9), the frustration at the lack of ultimate gain in life’s endeavors (2:11, 5:15–16), the recognition of the same ultimate fate for all—wise, fool, and animal (2:15, 3:19), the idea that all of life’s work will be left to some man of unknown character after one’s death (2:18–21), the ability to ask questions or otherwise know about life after death (3:21, 12:7), the relative value of never even having existed (4:3, 6:3), and the benefit of reflecting on what comes after one’s life (7:2)—all of these things reflect that Qohelet and people in general have a capacity to understand and evaluate the passage of time and events outside of their own existence.

The significance of this all is to say that the idea of eternity encompasses an ability to reflect on things outside of our lifetime. Building then on our earlier definition, eternity has to do with a capability and desire to understand not only the arrangement of the affairs of life but also of those things that come before and after life. As would be expected for the term “eternity,” it is comprehensive in scope. This is where the “time” concept of eternity really comes into play—that we can consider things gone by and things future and how they impact the present.

אֱלֹהִים is Limited

However, even though this ability has been given to mankind by God, it is not possible for man to figure out the whole of God’s work. While we see in אֱלֹהִים something of the likeness of man to God, at the same time we see something of their difference. This difference is part of the creator-creature distinction, in which God has communicated some of His characteristics to mankind, but others he has withheld. Ecclesiastes 3:11 and 8:17 tell us specifically that it is not possible for man to figure out God’s sovereign and wise arrangement of all things.

But in saying that “eternity” is limited, it is not meant that it is itself a limitation, as if

God had placed a bad thing in man’s mind. The very notion of eternity is expansive. Lexically, the word itself does not seem to denote a limitation, but rather the following phrase (3:11c) specifies the limitation, as if to say “in spite of the impressive ability to understand events and times which God has given to man, he still is limited in that he cannot fathom God’s work.”

Said another way, the context seems to correlate two positive things in 3:11a and 3:11b using the connective **גַּם**⁶⁵ and to contrast that with the limitation in 3:11c by means of the phrase **מִבְּלִי אֲשֶׁר**.⁶⁶ It seems that the final phrase is not a result as it is so much a limitation or concession that, though man has this eternity, he still cannot figure out all he wishes he could. Eternity is not therefore a limitation in itself.

הָעֵלָם is Related to the **הִבְלֵ** Idea in Ecclesiastes

The cognitive sense demonstrated above for **הָעֵלָם** is closely related to the cognitive sense of **הִבְלֵ** in Ecclesiastes.⁶⁷ The capacity of eternity that God has given to man gives rise to the search for meaning in life, a search which goes far beyond the limits of one man’s life, and

⁶⁵ James L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), p. 97 points out that eternity is a positive concept because of the “gam” between 3:11a and b.

⁶⁶ Todd, “Ecclesiastes 3:11,” pp. 14–15. Ogden, *Qoheleth*, p. 55 says it this way: “The problem for Qoheleth, however, lies not in the word ‘*ōlām*’ itself, but in the fact that knowing such a ‘time’ exists, we can discover nothing about it.” Longman, in contrast, takes it that eternity is basically a negative thing because of the frustration that it produces. See Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 121. Because it seems strange that God’s only purpose would be to put frustration into men’s hearts, I take the positive view while recognizing at the same time the negative side-effect of frustration, as the next subsection will explain.

⁶⁷ McCabe, “The Message of Ecclesiastes,” p. 93. In this paper, we assume the definition of **הִבְלֵ** as given by McCabe, namely that it reflects a cognitive search for meaning in life, which search enters into the realm of a frustrating enigma or puzzle that cannot be fully fathomed. This allows for the parallel with the phrase “a chasing after the wind,” the role of the heart (mind) in this search, and the positive evaluation of life that is given in many passages of the book. It also presupposes a positive approach to the book, in contrast to many who have taken a negative outlook on it. See also McCabe, “Hebrew Exegesis of Ecclesiastes,” pp. 20-22, 24–26.

extends into a search for meaning of the whole. It is doubtful that such a search would be undertaken at all if God had not given man (Qohelet included), the capacity and desire to reflect on the arrangement of events in man's life and beyond. Without הָעֵלֶם , it seems that all men would be stuck living in the "now" with no hope of escaping, at least in their thoughts, to something outside of themselves.⁶⁸

Furthermore, the limitation of הָעֵלֶם which we also described above is what gives rise to the frustrating nature of the search for meaning in life.⁶⁹ Man cannot discover all the ins and outs of God's work. It is impossible to do so, Qohelet tells us. Though we have a capacity to understand eternity, we are not omniscient. Therefore, anyone who undertakes a search for meaning in life will be able to do a lot of work in that area, but because he is limited in his understanding, he will never be able to escape the frustrating inability to put the puzzle pieces together into a cohesive whole. Only God has the capability to fit it all together.

So in summary, without הָעֵלֶם there would be no הִבְבֵּל , that is, no recognition of the enigmatic character of life, no inquiry into that enigma, and no limitation which would cause such a search to be frustrating. הָעֵלֶם is a big part of what gives rise to the search for meaning, and thus gives הִבְבֵּל its frustrating quality.

⁶⁸ For a similar evaluation of *eternity* as "a longing or desire to know the extratemporal significance of themselves and their deeds" see Donald R. Glenn, "Ecclesiastes," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), p. 984.

⁶⁹ Longman agrees, though he takes a very negative view of Ecclesiastes as a whole, "God has done something else that sounds marvelous on the surface but, in the final analysis, is the source of much human frustration." See Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 120.

Conclusions

This paper has reviewed the context of Ecclesiastes 3:11, surveyed various translations of עֶלְמָה, and offered some explanation of the meaning of the word in its context. The translation “eternity” best fits the lexical and contextual data. As for the meaning of the term, it is evident that eternity cannot be limited to just a yearning, nor to a specific kind of time (like just time past, or just time future). It is not just a sense of time that is past or future, or that time is passing, or that we have self-consciousness.

The placement of this entity in man’s mind distinguishes him from animals. It is not the whole of the image of God (which is man’s personal, spiritual, and moral likeness to God), but it must be *part* of it. It is a cognitive capability that allows man to reflect on the arrangement of events in his own life, as well as to go beyond his own time and to consider that *which was*, and that *which will be*. However, the final phrase of Ecclesiastes 3:11 states a limitation on this capability which stems from the basic distinction between God and His creation. As such, the idea of eternity is integrally related to the frustrating nature of Qohelet’s search for meaning and purpose in life. Qohelet has both the ability to think about meaning in life, yet also the limitation that makes it impossible to complete his search in a truly satisfying way.

It is important for man to recognize both of these truths: that God has endowed man with eternity as part of His image, yet also that this eternity is limited. Recognizing that we are creatures, then, we can enjoy God’s gifts with the proper attitude toward God—not one of total resignation to some negative lot in life, but one of humility that we are not God and cannot explain the way all things fit together. God is incomprehensible in the final analysis, as are His ways. We can be thankful for the capabilities He has given and information that He has revealed, but must leave that which is unrevealed in His hands (Deuteronomy 29:29, 1 Corinthians 2:11–12).

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