

QOHELETH'S "DARK HOUSE" (ECCL 12:5)*

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The Semitic root *'-l-m* has given rise to a range of semantic developments in the various Semitic languages. It is evident that, in general, the derivatives of the root cluster around a number of central ideas which do not appear to be related. This leaves open the possibility that some words for long understood as belonging to one semantic group may in fact belong to another. If the context suits an alternative meaning just as well as, or even better than, the traditional sense, we have grounds for proposing a new understanding of some well known terms.¹

The above paragraph serves to remind us that striking the proper balance between etymology on the one hand and context on the other² is an important prerequisite for breakthroughs in Biblical interpretation. The purpose of the present paper is to suggest the possibility of just such a breakthrough in Eccl 12:5 by providing a new understanding of the phrase *bêt 'ôlām*³ there.

I. THE TRANSLATION "ETERNAL HOME" IN ECCL 12:5

It goes without saying that *byt 'wlm* is almost universally translated "eternal home" or its equivalent by commentators and in English versions.⁴

The use of **byt*, "house," in the sense of "tomb, netherworld" is common enough in the Semitic languages generally⁵ and is not in dispute here. An

*From chap. 13 of *A Tribute to Gleason Archer: Essays on the Old Testament*, ed. W. C. Kaiser, Jr., and R. F. Youngblood. Copyright 1986 by The Moody Bible Institute of Chicago. Used by permission of Moody Press.

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¹J. A. Thompson, "The Root *'-l-m* in Semitic Languages and Some Proposed New Translations in Ugaritic and Hebrew," in *A Tribute to Arthur Vööbus: Studies in Early Christian Literature and Its Environment, Primarily in the Syrian East* (ed. R. H. Fischer; Chicago: Lutheran School of Theology, 1977) 159.

²Cf. esp. J. Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (London: Oxford University, 1961); *Comparative Philology and the Text of the Old Testament* (London: Oxford University, 1968).

³Although the full phrase is *bêt 'ôlāmô*, the suffix *-ô* simply personalizes what in any event is a metaphorical abstraction. Curiously enough, only in Eccl 12:5 does *'ôlām* appear with a pronominal suffix in the OT, as observed e.g. by E. Jenni, "Das Wort *'ôlām* im Alten Testament," *ZAW* 64 (1952) 203, 222, 245.

⁴A notable exception is "the house of his reward" in G. M. Lamsa, *The Holy Bible from Ancient Eastern Manuscripts* (4th ed.; Philadelphia: A. J. Holman, 1957) 694—a translation based, however, on Syriac Peshitta MSS that do not predate the fifth century A.D.

⁵See e.g. N. G. Tromp, *Primitive Conceptions of Death and the Nether World in the Old Testament* (BibOr 21; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1969) 77-79, for a comprehensive treatment.

unexceptionable OT example is Job 30:23: "I know you will bring me down to death, / to the 'house' appointed for all the living." Another possible example—one that at first blush would seem to clinch the traditional rendering of *byt 'wlm* in Eccl 12:5—is Ps 49:11 (MT 49:12): "Their tombs will remain their houses forever (*btymw l'wlm*), / their dwellings for endless generations (*mšknmtm ldr wdr*), / though they had named lands after themselves." But the relevance of Ps 49:11 is considerably weakened by the observation that "tombs" in the above translation is based on the LXX and Syriac and that the MT is better translated as follows: "In their thoughts their houses will remain forever, / . . . for they have named lands after themselves."⁶

That *'ólām* means "long time, eternity" in the vast majority of its OT occurrences is also not at issue here. I wish only to question whether it means that in the phrase *byt 'wlm* in Eccl 12:5. It will not do simply to refer to passages like Ezek 26:20⁷ to shed light on our text, since if *(w)lm* means something else in Eccl 12:5 it may well have the same nuance in Ezek 26:20 and elsewhere. In fact, the combination *byt 'wlm* may turn out to be the key that, *mutatis mutandis*, unlocks the significance of other parallel texts in the OT.

In any case, the traditional translation "eternal home" or the like is understood variously by its host of adherents. Most commonly it is taken to signify "tomb, grave," whether defined as the "permanent home" of the dead (as during the rabbinic period)⁸ or as reflecting "the perception of death as eternal, in other words, the association of the concrete notions of death and the netherworld with the abstract idea of endless time."⁹ Leupold, however, understands the phrase quite differently:

In determining what "the eternal home" (*beth 'olam*) means it is not accurate enough to say that it is the grave and then to cite many very apt parallels from antiquity . . . This first assigns a man to a place that is to be his *permanent* habitation ("eternal") and then presently (v. 7) informs us that at least a part of his being does not stay there but goes back to God who gave it. A most peculiar kind of *eternal* home! . . . the term "eternal home" refers to a state of being.¹⁰

But if by "state of being" Leupold is referring to an early foregleam of the later full-blown doctrine of eternal life, Derek Kidner would politely demur: "The expression, *his eternal home*, speaks here only of finality; not of the Chris-

⁶See Ps 49:11 NIV (text and footnotes).

⁷"I will bring you down with those who go down to the pit (*bôr*), the people of long ago (*'am 'ólām*). I will make you dwell in the earth below (*'eres tahtyôt*), as in ancient ruins (*hrbw't m'lm*), with those who go down to the pit (*bôr*), and you will not return or take your place in the land of the living (*'eres hayyim*)."

⁸Cf. e.g. L. A. Olan, *Judaism and Immortality* (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1971) 51.

⁹A. Cooper, "Ps 24:7-10: Mythology and Exegesis," *JBL* 102 (1983) 42. Cooper sets forth the provocative thesis that in Psalm 24 the *pithê 'ólām*, which he translates as "gates of eternity," are "none other than the gates of the netherworld" (pp. 42-43).

¹⁰H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Ecclesiastes* (Columbus: Wartburg, 1952) 282 (italics his).

tian's prospect of 'a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens' (2 Cor. 5:1)."¹¹

The "parallels" that Leupold refers to above are indeed numerous,¹² but they must not be used uncritically. It is quite common, for example, to cite the Egyptian phrase "house of eternity," implying (if not directly stating) that Qoheleth's phrase is dependent on it.¹³ Recent studies, however, have demonstrated that Egyptian influence on the book of Ecclesiastes and on Qoheleth's conceptual world was relatively minimal when compared to the impact of other ancient cultures on the book and its author.

II. QOHELETH'S MESOPOTAMIAN/UGARITIC/PHOENICIAN BACKGROUND

Tremper Longman finds in Akkadian "didactic autobiographies" the closest ancient parallels to the overall structure of Ecclesiastes.¹⁴ Anson Rainey states that the mercantile interests expressed in the book lead him to conclude that "Qoheleth would appear to be rooted in the commercial tradition of Mesopotamian society."¹⁵ It has long been recognized that one of the most impressive external literary parallels to a passage in Ecclesiastes is the barmaid Siduri's advice to Gilgamesh as compared to Qoheleth's advice to his readers. The relationship between the two texts is striking indeed:

*Gilg. X iii 3-14*¹⁶

When the gods created mankind,
Death for mankind they set aside,
Life in their own hands retaining.
Thou, Gilgamesh, let full be thy belly,
Make thou merry by day and by night.
Of each day make thou a feast of
rejoicing.
Day and night dance thou and play!

Ecll 9:7-9

Go, eat your food with gladness,
and drink your wine with a joyful
heart,
for it is now that God favors what you
do.

¹¹D. Kidner, *A Time to Mourn, and a Time to Dance* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1976) 103. The TEV ("final resting place") nicely captures Kidner's interpretation.

¹²For a typical list see R. Gordis, *Koheleth—The Man and His World* (3d ed.; New York: Schocken, 1968) 347.

¹³See e.g. Cooper, "Ps 24:7-10" 42 n. 32; R. B. Y. Scott, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes* (AB 18; Garden City: Doubleday, 1965) 255; cf. also Jenni, "Das Wort 'ôlâm" 208.

¹⁴T. Longman, III, "Comparative Methods in Old Testament Studies: Ecclesiasties [sic] Reconsidered," *TSF Bulletin* 7/4 (March-April 1984) 9.

¹⁵A. F. Rainey, "A Study of Ecclesiastes," *CTM* 35 (1964) 152.

¹⁶The line count is that of the cuneiform text of the Old Babylonian version as transliterated in R. C. Thompson, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1930) 53-54; the translation is that of E. A. Speiser in *ANET* (2d ed., 1955) 90.

Let thy garments be sparkling fresh,
Thy head be washed; bathe thou in
water.

Pay heed to the little one that holds on
to thy hand,
Let thy spouse delight in thy bosom!

For this is the task of [mankind]!

Always be clothed in white,
and always anoint your head with oil.

Enjoy life with your wife, whom you
love, all the days of this meaningless
life that God has given you under the
sun—all your meaningless days.

For this is your lot in life and in your
toilsome labor under the sun.¹⁷

A large number of additional parallels from the Akkadian horizon can easily be adduced, and several will be referred to below.

Rainey has proposed a north Israelite origin for the book of Ecclesiastes, citing linguistic and dialectal peculiarities that have affinities with Ugaritic and Phoenician.¹⁸ Mitchell Dahood has collected numerous cogent Phoenician and Ugaritic parallels to various passages in Qoheleth,¹⁹ while Ernst Jenni (among others²⁰) has noted precise Punic and Palmyrene cognates to *byt 'ulm* in Eccl 12:5, the contexts of which cognates point to the meaning "grave"²¹ for this colorful phrase.

An especially intriguing parallel to *byt 'ulm* is the term *b'lm*, found at the end of the first line of the tenth-century-B.C. Phoenician inscription on the Aḥiram sarcophagus. The *b-* is almost surely not the preposition "in" here, since *'lm* is never prefixed with *b-* in Northwest Semitic (including the OT). As Hayim Tawil suggests, citing Aramaic *by 'lm*, "cemetery," as a parallel, *b'lm* in Aḥiram is most likely an abbreviation of *b(y)t ('w)lm*.²² The Babylonian Talmud uses Aramaic terms like *bē midrāšā* (cf. Hebrew *bēt hammidrāš*) and *bē rab* in the sense of "school." An OT example is *bē'estērā* (Josh 21:27), contracted from *bēt 'estērā*.²³ In Aḥiram, then, **b'lm*, abbreviated from *bt 'lm*, stands for **bb'lm*, "in the grave" (the preposition *b-* does not have to be written

¹⁷G. L. Archer understands the phrase "under the sun" throughout Ecclesiastes to indicate "that the author's perspective is that of this present, earthly life only, as distinct from the life beyond and the heavenly realm above" ("The Linguistic Evidence for the Date of 'Ecclesiastes'," *JETS* 12 [1969] 177). Cf. the explanation of Longman, who states that the phrase means basically "apart from the revelation and knowledge of God" ("Comparative Methods" 9).

¹⁸Rainey, "Study" 148–149.

¹⁹M. J. Dahood, "Canaanite-Phoenician Influence in Qoheleth," *Bib* 33 (1952) 201–221. Archer ("Linguistic Evidence" 167–181) refers frequently to Dahood's seminal paper, usually with appreciation (especially as concerns the Canaanite-Phoenician linguistic parallels to Ecclesiastes).

²⁰Cf. e.g. H. Tawil, "A Note on the Aḥiram Inscription," *JANESCU* 3/1 (Autumn 1970–71) 35.

²¹Jenni, "Das Wort 'ōlām" 211, 217.

²²Tawil, "Note" 35–36.

²³BDB 129b; KB 123b. "This contraction of Beth-ashterah is like that of Beth-shan to Beisan," the modern Arabic name of the site (*WDB* 64; see also *A Dictionary of the Bible* [ed. J. Hastings; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1898], 1. 166; Jenni, "Das Wort 'ōlām" 208 n. 3).

when it precedes a word beginning with the same letter).²⁴ Less plausible is the proposal of Dahood, who sees in the *ʿlm* of *bʿlm* an (elliptical) equivalent of *bt ʿlm* and reads the *b-* as the preposition.²⁵

III. LIFE AS "LIGHT" AND DEATH AS "DARKNESS"

Weep for the dead,
for he lacks the light (Sir 22:11a).²⁶

As the title of this article suggests, I am proposing that "dark house" is a better contextual translation of *byt ʿwlm* in Eccl 12:5 than is "eternal home" or the equivalent. I should therefore like to proceed step by step toward the likelihood of the rendering.

In the ancient world, "light" and "darkness" were ubiquitous symbols of life and death respectively. Referring to Egyptian descriptions of the afterlife, Hellmut Brunner writes: "As in the OT, conditions in the realm of the dead are presented in negative terms: if light is a feature of earthly life, then the dead are in gloom and darkness."²⁷ In Mesopotamia, the situation was much the same, since to live was to experience daylight rather than darkness. A passage from the Gilgamesh cycle is typical:

Is it so much—after wandering and roaming
around in the desert—
to lie down to rest in the bowels of the
earth?

I have lain down to sleep full many
a time all the(se) years!
(No!) Let my eyes see the sun
and let me sate myself with daylight!

*Is darkness far off?
How much daylight is there?*

When may a dead man ever see the
sun's splendor?²⁸

²⁴See e.g. Tawil, "Note" 35 n. 16.

²⁵M. Dahood, *Psalms III: 101–150* (AB 17A; Garden City: Doubleday, 1970) 323.

²⁶Ecclesiasticus' fondness for and interaction with Ecclesiastes has often been noted; see e.g. G. A. Barton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes* (ICC; New York: Scribner's, 1908) 53–56; G. T. Sheppard, "The Epilogue to Qoheleth as Theological Commentary," *CBQ* 39 (1977) 186–189; W. O. McCready, "Ben Sirach's Response to Koheleth—The Challenge of Change in the Ancient World," in *Religion's Response to Change* (ed. K. J. Sharpe; Auckland: University Chaplaincy Publishing Trust, 1985). In fact, it is not impossible that the title Ecclesiasticus was eventually given to Sirach in conscious imitation of the title Ecclesiastes (which had been conferred on Qoheleth as an attempt to bring out the "convening" or "convoking" implications of the root *qhl*).

²⁷H. Brunner in *Near Eastern Religious Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (ed. W. Beyerlin; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978) 11 (see also p. 16).

²⁸The translation is that of T. Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness* (New Haven: Yale University, 1976) 204 (italics mine). The crucial line in the Akkadian text (Gilg. M. i 14) reads: *rēqet ekletum ki maši nawirtum*, "Far away is the darkness (of death); how much daylight (remains)?" Cf. *CAD*, 7. 60.

Or, from the Dumuzi cycle:

"It [*sic*] it is demanded, O lad, I
will go with you the road of no return. . . ."
She goes, she goes, to the breast of the nether world.
The daylight fades away, the daylight fades
away, to the deepest nether world.²⁹

The Akkadian language, like Hebrew, has an especially rich vocabulary to express the concept of darkness. Derivatives of the verbs *da'āmu*, *ekēlu* and *eṭū*, all of which mean "to be dark," are attested in contexts of death and the grave. A few examples:

*binātišu ussappihū zumuršu da'ummatu umtalli*³⁰
His limbs are torn apart; darkness fills his body.

*ina ekleti qereb qabrim*³¹
In darkness, in the midst of the grave. . . .

*niširtašu šanūmma ikkal ekliš ittanallak*³²
His treasure someone else will enjoy; in darkness he will walk about.

The parallels to Ecclesiastes of this last excerpt are striking. For the first clause see Eccl 6:2;³³ for the second, we need only to note that *ekliš ittanallak* is the semantic equivalent of *baḥōšek yēlēk*, "in darkness he walks" (Eccl 6:4).

OT examples of light = life and death = darkness are common throughout, but especially in Job (e.g. Job 10:21–22; 15:22; 17:13; 18:18; 38:17). Typical is Job 33:30, where Elihu portrays God as one who desires "to turn back [a man's] soul from the pit, that the light of life may shine on him."

IV. "DARKNESS" AS A POETIC NAME FOR SHEOL

The subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matt 8:12).

Job 33:30, quoted above at the end of the previous section, implies that "the pit" (one of the names for Sheol, "the grave," "the netherworld")³⁴ is a place of darkness and in fact may be described in terms of darkness itself. "The darkness

²⁹The translation is that of T. Jacobsen in *Toward the Image of Tammuz* (ed. W. L. Moran; Cambridge: Harvard University, 1970) 99.

³⁰*Cuneiform Texts from Babylonian Tablets in the British Museum* (hereinafter *CT*), 17. 31:27–28. Cf. *CAD*, 3. 123.

³¹*CT*, 17. 36:84–85. Cf. *CAD* 7. 60.

³²*CT*, 39. 4:34. Cf. *CAD*, 4. 70. An example using *eṭū* will be cited below.

³³That 'kl often means "to enjoy" in Qoheleth is clear from 2:25, where *mī yō'kal* is parallel to *mī yāḥūš*.

³⁴This is not the place to enter the debate concerning whether Hebrew *šē'ōl* means "the grave" or "the netherworld." Neither translation fits comfortably every occurrence of the word, and in any event the allusive language of the OT can easily embrace pictorial descriptions of the netherworld without buying into the mythology that was part and parcel of the ancient pagan understanding of it.

actually becomes the characteristic term for the realm of the dead."³⁵ The song of Hannah says (1 Sam 2:9) that God "will guard the feet of his saints, but the wicked will be silenced³⁶ in darkness."

Although *hōšek* (used here) is by far the most common Hebrew word for the "darkness" of Sheol (see e.g. Job 10:21; 15:22, 23, 30; 18:18; 20:26; Ps 88:12 [MT 88:13]; Isa 45:19), other terms are attested as well: *maḥšāk* (Ps 88:18 [MT 88:19]), plural *maḥšakkim* (88:6 [MT 88:7]); *ḥāšēkâ* (Isa 8:22); *mā'ûp* (ibid.); *'āpēlâ* (ibid.; Jer 23:12); *'ōpel* (Job 10:22 twice); *'ēpâ* (ibid.); and, last but not least, *šalmāwet* (10:21, 22).³⁷

As is well known, the Hebrew word *šlmwt* has been analyzed in two quite distinct ways. The traditional understanding is that of the MT: *šalmāwet*, "shadow of death," the rendering shared almost throughout by the LXX (see n. 37). This analysis seems to be supported also (if not clinched) by Job 38:17, where "gates of death (*māwet*)" is paralleled by "gates of the shadow of death (*šalmāwet*)." But since the LXX paraphrases *šlmwt* as *Ḥadēs* here, and since a rabbinic tradition states that *šlmwt* is one of the seven names of Gehenna,³⁸ Job 38:17 is not definitive for the vocalization *šalmāwet*.

The other major analysis of *šlmwt* is to read it *šalmût* or the like, understanding it as an abstract noun from the root *šlm* (**šlm*), "to be dark."³⁹ Akkadian *šalāmu* means "to become dark, black," and the adjective *šalmu* means "black, dark." Arabic *šalama* IV likewise means "to be dark," while *zulmat* (plural *zulumât*) means "darkness." Ugaritic *złmt*, though appearing only as a proper name, probably means "Darkness" (as will be shown below). The eminent Jewish scholar Rashi, in commenting on Ps 23:4, says simply that "*šlmwt* always means *ḥškr*."

An interesting position on this matter is that taken by D. Winton Thomas,⁴⁰ who decides that *šalmāwet* (which he prefers to translate literally as "a shadow of death") is correct as over against *šalmût* but that it nevertheless means "(deep) darkness" in the light of the superlative force (so he claims) often borne by **mw̄t*. He was anticipated to some degree by Franz Delitzsch (who, however,

³⁵J. Pedersen, *Israel: Its Life and Culture, I-II* (London: Oxford University, 1926) 464; see also M. Dahood, *Psalms I: 1-50* (AB 16; Garden City: Doubleday, 1965) 211. For a concise yet comprehensive treatment of Sheol, Sheol as the grave, light as life versus darkness as death, etc., see Pedersen, *Israel* 460-470.

³⁶The deathly (no pun intended!) silence of the tomb or netherworld is also a common motif among the ancients. Cf. e.g. Vergil, *Aeneid* 2.755: *Horror ubique animo simul ipsa silentia terrent*, "Dread everywhere dismays my heart; also does the very silence (of the night of death)."

³⁷In Job 10:22 LXX, *šlmwt* is rendered *aiōniou*—possibly misreading *šlmwt* as *'wlm*, but more likely making the common connection between "darkness" and "eternity" (see below). In Ps 88:6 (MT 88:7) the LXX translates *bmšlwt* as though it were *bšlmwt*—namely, *en skia thanatou*.

³⁸*Erub.* 19a.

³⁹Cf. e.g. E. Dhorme, *A Commentary on the Book of Job* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1967 [repr. 1984]) 26-27.

⁴⁰D. W. Thomas, "Šalmāwet in the Old Testament," *JSS* 7 (1962) 191-200.

in a somewhat convoluted argument, cannot seem to make up his mind between *šalmût* from the root *šlm/zlm* and *šalmāwet* from *š[l[l]/z[l[l]* plus *mw*).⁴¹

V. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN "DARKNESS" AND "ETERNITY"

Conceptually, the idea of experiencing eternal darkness in the regions below suggested itself readily to the minds of the ancients. Mesopotamian man sought to understand why the beneficent fresh waters were "banned to live in eternal darkness below the earth."⁴² Similarly, in an ancient Egyptian song a widow laments her husband's death: "One cannot recount one's experiences but one rests in one place of eternity in darkness."⁴³

Linguistically, it has often been proposed that the Semitic root *'lm* in the nominal sense of "long duration," "eternity" is the same as *'lm* in the verbal sense of "to conceal," "to be dark."⁴⁴ That the Hebrew root *'lm* may be used as a synonym for the root *ḥšk*, "to be dark," is confirmed by comparing Job 38:2, "Who is this that darkens my counsel" (*maḥšik 'ēšā*), with 42:3, "Who is this that obscures my counsel" (*ma'lim 'ēšā*). The recognition of the parallelism between *ḥšk* and *'lm* leads to the possibility that *'wlm* means "darkness" in texts like Lam 3:6 = Ps 143:3 (*mētē 'ōlām*, "the dead who live in darkness"?).

VI. THE ROOT 'LM IN ECCLESIASTES

Of the eight occurrences of *'lm* in Ecclesiastes, five are preceded by the preposition *lē-* (*l'wlm*: 1:4; 2:16; 3:14; 9:6; *l'lmym*: 1:10) and have the usual meaning "for a long time," "forever." A sixth is *ne'lām*, "hidden thing" (12:14), demonstrating that Qoheleth knew the use of the root *'lm* in the sense of "to be concealed/dark."

Each of the other two attestations is somewhat unique and presents its own problems of interpretation. The form *hā'ōlām* (3:11), with the definite article and written defectively (*h'lm*), has been called "the most disputed word in the book."⁴⁵ The form *'ōlāmō* (12:5) is the only occurrence in the OT of *'ōlām* with a pronominal suffix (see n. 3); it is written *plēnē* (*'wlmw*) in the Leningrad MS but defectively (*'lmw*) in the Ben Ḥayyim tradition.

⁴¹F. Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Psalms* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 1. 330–331.

⁴²The expression is that of T. Jacobsen in H. and H. A. Frankfort *et al.*, *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man* (Chicago: Chicago University, 1946) 164 = H. and H. A. Frankfort *et al.*, *Before Philosophy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1949) 178.

⁴³H. Frankfort, *Ancient Egyptian Religion* (New York: Harper, 1948 [repr. 1961]) 108.

⁴⁴Thompson, "The Root *'l-m*" 161, 162; Jenni, "Das Wort *'ōlām*" 199. R. L. Alden has kindly supplied me with a copy of his unpublished paper, "The Root *'lm* and Its Derivatives," in which he also connects *'lm*, "long time," with *'lm*, "hide." Cf. also G. A. Barton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes* (ICC; New York: Scribner's, 1908) 105. The Hebrew root *'lm*, however, represents two different original roots (see below).

⁴⁵D. C. Fleming in *The New Layman's Bible Commentary* (ed. G. C. D. Howley *et al.*; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979) 743.

VII. *LM* IN ECCL 3:11

James Crenshaw nicely summarizes the history of the interpretation of *hā'ōlām* in Eccl 3:11 when he reminds us that "four basic solutions to the meaning of this word have inevitably suggested themselves: (1) eternity, (2) world, (3) course of the world, and (4) knowledge or ignorance."⁴⁶ Although Crenshaw himself chooses "eternity," he does so with more than one grain of salt.⁴⁷ Hans Walter Wolff, on the other hand, renders *hā'ōlām* in a closely related way ("the most distant time") and vigorously defends his translation.⁴⁸

The renderings "world" (see *KJV*) and "course of the world" (or the like) have attracted numerous proponents as well, primarily on the basis of the well-attested "world" for *'ōlām* in post-Biblical Hebrew. "Knowledge" has had somewhat fewer supporters,⁴⁹ resting as it does on a supposed Arabic cognate.

The translation "ignorance" in Eccl 3:11, however, has a long and distinguished history. The Bible of Miles Coverdale (1535), for example, renders as follows: "He hath planted ignoraunce also in the hertes of men, that they shulde not fynde out the grounde of his workes, which he doth from the beginninge to the ende."⁵⁰ Smith-Goodspeed's "ignorance" demonstrates their respect for their worthy predecessors, and Moffatt's "mystery" is in the same tradition.

Among OT commentators the translation "ignorance," "darkness" in various nuances is gaining favor as well. George A. Barton is typical:

To say that "God has put eternity in their heart, so that they cannot find out the work of God from beginning to end," makes no sense. . . . From this same root '*elem*, frequently used in the Talmud . . . , means "that which is concealed," "secret," etc. The context in our verse compels us to render it "ignorance."⁵¹

⁴⁶J. L. Crenshaw, "The Eternal Gospel (Eccl. 3:11)," in *Essays in Old Testament Ethics* (ed. Crenshaw and J. T. Willis; New York: Ktav, 1974) 40. Cf. similarly Fleming in *New Layman's Bible Commentary* 743-744.

⁴⁷Crenshaw, "The Eternal Gospel" 39, 42-43. G. von Rad suggests "distant future" but, like Crenshaw, makes his proposal with reservations (*Wisdom in Israel* [London: SCM, 1972] 230). A. Heidel, who also appears to prefer "eternity," nevertheless confesses that Eccl 3:11 is "not clear" to him (*The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels* [2d ed.; Chicago: Chicago University, 1949] 149 n. 37).

⁴⁸H. W. Wolff, "The Concept of Time in the Old Testament," *CTM* 45 (January 1974) 41-42. W. C. Kaiser, Jr., gives an equally vigorous defense of "eternity" in *A Tribute to Gleason Archer: Essays on the Old Testament* (ed. Kaiser and R. F. Youngblood; Chicago: Moody, 1986) 204-205. See, however, n. 51 below.

⁴⁹E.g. Thompson, "The Root '*l-m*' 165.

⁵⁰The popular Great Bible, published a few years later, reproduces Coverdale's translation of Eccl 3:11 (apart from minor spelling differences, a common phenomenon in the sixteenth century) almost verbatim (the only change is "comprehend" for "fynde out").

⁵¹Barton, ICC 105. Barton has, perhaps unwittingly, put his finger on a fatal flaw in the translation "eternity" here: In order to justify it, *mibbēllī 'āšer lō*, "so that not," has to be rendered "yet so that not"—a subtle but inadmissible change. "Ignorance" is the choice also of A. J. Grieve in *A Commentary on the Bible* (ed. A. S. Peake; London: Thomas Nelson, 1937) 413. After a lengthy discussion of the alternatives, O. S. Rankin states his preference for "forgetfulness" or "ignorance" (*IB*, 5. 48-49). R. B. Y. Scott chooses "enigma" or "darkness" or "obscurity" (*Proverbs, Ecclesiastes* 221).

John Gray makes the observation that "the word *'ôlām* is translated [here] in [early editions of] the RSV not as 'eternity', which ill accords with the general sense of the context, but as 'darkness', meaning thereby 'ignorance'."⁵²

The discovery of the Ugaritic corpus of texts at Ras esh-Shamra in Syria beginning in 1929 has given welcome (if unexpected) support to the translation "darkness" or "ignorance" for *'ôlām* in passages where such a rendering is contextually suitable. Mitchell Dahood's preference for "darkness" in the sense of 'ignorance' in Eccl 3:11 gains strength in the light of his observation that a Ugaritic cognate means "to grow dark," "to cover over."⁵³ Dahood has subsequently pointed out that *'ôrah 'ôlām* probably means "way of ignorance" in Job 22:15.⁵⁴

In the consonantal text of the OT, any occurrence of the root *'lm* can theoretically represent either **'lm* or **'glm*, since the phonemes *'* and *g* both became *'* in Hebrew. As it so happens, **'* and **g* remained distinct in Ugaritic, and *'lm* and *glm* both appear in its lexicon. Ugaritic *'lm* is well attested with the meaning "long duration," "eternity." And while it is true that Ugaritic *glm* and its feminine counterpart *glmt* normally mean "young man" and "young woman" respectively,⁵⁵ it is also true that *glm* can mean "dark," "to be dark" and that *glmt* can mean "darkness."

In I K i 19–20, *glm ym* (admittedly a difficult phrase) probably means "a dark day" (literally "the darkness of the day"), paraphrased by H. L. Ginsberg as "*calamity*."⁵⁶ Hebrew semantic parallels include Job 3:4, "May that day turn to darkness" (*hōšek*); 15:23, "the day of darkness" (*yôm-hōšek*); Ezek 30:18, "Dark will be the day" (*hāšak hayyôm*); and, last but not least, Eccl 11:8, "the days of darkness" (*yēmē haḥōšek*).

In II K i–ii 50, *[t]k mgyh wglm* is translated by Ginsberg as "[E]ven as he arrives, it grows dark."⁵⁷

In fragment b of the Baal cycle, *glmt* and *zlm* are parallel, treated as proper names (Ghulumat and Zulumat) by Ginsberg but defined by him as both mean-

⁵²J. Gray, *The Legacy of Canaan: The Ras Shamra Texts and Their Relevance to the Old Testament* (VTSup 5; Leiden: Brill, 1957) 200.

⁵³M. J. Dahood, "Canaanite-Phoenician Influence in Qoheleth," *Bib* 33 (1952) 206. Rainey, "Study" 155 n. 78, takes exception to Dahood's argument for two reasons: "(1) there is already a noun derived from *'lm*, viz., *ta'ulumā*, meaning 'hidden thing'." But other words for "darkness" in Hebrew are multiple derivatives from the same root—e.g., cf. *hšk*, *hškh*, *mhšk*; *'pl*, *'plh*; *'yph*, *m'wp*. Such a phenomenon is exceedingly common in Hebrew as well as in other Semitic languages. "(2) The Ugaritic form he cites is not a verb but the common Ug. noun *glm*, 'lad'." But, although *glm* often means "lad" in Ugaritic, it almost certainly means "to be dark" in the passages cited by Dahood (Rainey's renderings to the contrary notwithstanding), as we shall attempt to demonstrate below.

⁵⁴M. Dahood, "Qoheleth and Northwest Semitic Philology," *Bib* 43 (1962) 353–354.

⁵⁵The most famous occurrence of the Hebrew cognate of the feminine form is the celebrated *'almā* of Isa 7:14.

⁵⁶H. L. Ginsberg in *ANET* 143.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, p. 147. Cf. also M. D. Coogan, *Stories from Ancient Canaan* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978) 69.

ing "darkness."⁵⁸ G. R. Driver understands the words as common nouns and translates them "gloomy darkness" and "dark gloom" respectively.⁵⁹

In summary, if and when Hebrew *'lm* means "darkness" it probably should be referred to **g'lm* (rather than to **'lm*) on the basis of the Ugaritic evidence. The conceptual connection between "eternity" and "darkness" is not thereby necessarily broken, of course. In fact, it may well be that **g'lm*, a relatively rare word for "darkness," tends to be used when the author wishes to conjure up the idea of **'lm*, "eternity," at the same time.

VIII. "DARKNESS" IN ECCLESIASTES 1-11

Although Qoheleth was not overly preoccupied with the subject of darkness,⁶⁰ his frequent references to it lend a somber note to his writing. He tells us that "light is better than darkness" (2:13; see also 11:7) and that "the fool walks in darkness" (2:14). "All his days (a man) eats in darkness" (5:17). A stillborn child "departs in darkness, and in darkness its name is shrouded" (6:14). A man should enjoy however many years he lives—but "let him remember the days of darkness, for they will be many" (11:8).

In each of these verses Qoheleth uses *hōšēk*, the most common Hebrew word for "darkness."

IX. "DARKNESS" IN ECCL 12:1-8

Students of Qoheleth have often commented on the lengthening shadows that cast their pall over Eccl 12:1-8. H. Wheeler Robinson notes that Ecclesiastes reaches its climax "in an eloquent but sombre picture of death."⁶¹ Gerhard von Rad agrees: "In the great allegory of 12.2-6, (Qoheleth) mercilessly reveals how the manifestations of human life diminish with age, how it grows darker and darker around a man until 'the silver cord snaps and the golden bowl breaks'."⁶² The pertinent lines of 12:1-8 read as follows:

Remember your Creator⁶³ . . .
before the sun and the light
and the moon and stars grow dark (*thššk*),

⁵⁸Ginsberg in *ANET* 131 n. 11.

⁵⁹G. R. Driver, *Canaanite Myths and Legends* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956) 121.

⁶⁰Ironically, however, the early rabbis almost consigned the entire book to a darkness of its own; cf. *b. Šabb.* 30:72.

⁶¹H. W. Robinson, *Inspiration and Revelation in the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1946) 258.

⁶²G. von Rad, *Wisdom* 228. See also J. L. Crenshaw, "The Shadow of Death in Qoheleth," in *Israelite Wisdom: Essays in Honor of Samuel Terrien* (ed. J. G. Gammie et al.; Missoula: Scholars, 1978) 208-209.

⁶³E. Jenni, "Das Wort 'ōlām in Alten Testament," *ZAW* 65 (1953) 27 n. 4, wants to read *burk*, "your pit," here instead of *burk*, "your Creator" (see also *BHS*). Attractive though such a reading might be, however, the consonantal text is against it.

and the clouds return . . . ;
 when . . . those looking through the windows grow dim (*hškw*); . . .
 Then man goes to his *byt 'wlm*. . . .
 Remember him—before the silver cord is severed,
 or the golden bowl is broken; . . .
 and the dust returns to the ground it came from. . . .

That the severed cord and the broken bowl represent the final extinguishing of the light of life in the temple of the human body has often been demonstrated.⁶⁴

It remains, then, only to show how *byt 'wlm* fits into such a context.

X. THE TRANSLATION "DARK HOUSE" IN ECCL 12:5

Commentators who have been willing to entertain the possibility of translating *byt 'wlm* as "dark house" or the like are few indeed. Gray sees the possible relationship between the *lm*, "ignorance/darkness," in 3:11 and the (*w*)*lm* in 12:5 and is tempted to translate *byt 'wlmw* as "his dark house." But the supposed parallel Egyptian expression for grave—"house of eternity"—makes him uncertain.⁶⁵ Although Hans Walter Wolff translates the Hebrew phrase as "his secluded house,"⁶⁶ indicating at the very least that he prefers the semantic range "hidden, concealed, dark" to "permanent, eternal," he too fails to see the potential of "dark house" as a rendering of *byt 'wlm*.

Occasional attempts have been made to find Akkadian parallels to Qoheleth's *byt 'wlm* and its Northwest Semitic cognates. Tawil, for example, suggests *šubat dārât(i)*, "dwelling place of eternity"—but surely he exaggerates in referring to it as an "exact semantic equivalent."⁶⁷ A phrase like **bīt dārât(i)* would deserve such a description, but unfortunately no such phrase is attested (to my knowledge). Another suggestion is that of Franz Delitzsch, who long ago proposed that "Assyr. *bīt 'idii* = *byt 'd* of the under-world,"⁶⁸ connecting "*'idii*" with Hebrew *'d*, often a synonym of *'wlm* in the sense of eternity. As it so often happens in the commentaries of the venerable Delitzsch, he may have been writing better than he knew.

One of the best-known Akkadian descriptions of the netherworld is found in the Gilgamesh epic:

*iredanni ana bīt ekleti šubat Irkalla*⁶⁹
ana bīti ša ēribūšu lā āšū. . . .

⁶⁴Cf. e.g. E. H. Plumptre, *Ecclesiastes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1885) 221–222.

⁶⁵Gray, *Legacy* 200.

⁶⁶H. W. Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974) 124.

⁶⁷Tawil, "Note" 36.

⁶⁸F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970) 418.

⁶⁹Sumerian *IR.KAL.LA* = *IR.KAL.A(K)* = *IRIGAL*, "big city"—i.e., the netherworld. *IR.KAL.LA* became a Sumerian loanword in Akkadian.

*nūra lā immarāma ina eṭūti ašbā*⁷⁰

He brings me down to the "house of darkness," the dwelling place of Irkalla, to the "house" whose entrants do not leave. . . . Light they do not see; in darkness they dwell.

In the parallel section of the story of the descent of Ishtar into the netherworld, *ana bīt ekleti* ("to the 'house of darkness'") is replaced by *ana bīti eṭē* ("to the 'dark house'"), the latter part of which was misread by Delitzsch. The parallels demonstrate that the concept "dark house" was not restricted to one form of expression but could be evoked by either *bīt ekleti* or *bītu eṭū*. Similarly, in Hebrew one can say, "If my home (*bēti*) for which I hope is the grave (*šē'ōl*), if I spread out my bed in darkness (*hōšek*) . . ." (Job 17:13), or one can speak of going to "his 'dark house' (*bēt 'ōlāmō*)" (Eccl 12:5). One can "go about in darkness (*bahōšek hōlēk*)" (Eccl 2:14; cf. also *bahōšek yēlēk* in 6:4), "go (*hōlēk*)" to "the grave (*šē'ōl*)" (9:10), or "go to his 'dark house' (*hōlēk . . . 'el-bēt 'ōlāmō*)" (12:5). The varied lexicon of Hebrew wisdom literature is seen to match that of the Akkadian epics. If *bēt 'ōlām* means "dark house"—and I am here proposing that it does—then the Akkadian equivalents are *bīt ekleti* and *bītu eṭū*. The Akkadian milieu of Qoheleth lends additional plausibility to such a rendering.

R. B. Y. Scott, then, may well be missing the mark in his insistence that the use of *'ōlām* meaning "darkness" in Eccl 3:11 "is unique in the OT."⁷¹ Later interpretation of *bēt 'ōlām* as "eternal home," in which sense it is alleged to have migrated into various Greek and Latin expressions,⁷² would thus be based on popular misunderstanding of the linguistic and cultural origins of the phrase.

XI. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

It is here argued that conceptual and philological antecedents for Qoheleth and his world should be sought in a Mesopotamian/Ugaritic/Phoenician orbit rather than from Egypt or some other horizon; that "light" and "darkness" frequently serve as metaphors for life and death respectively in Ecclesiastes as well as in other OT books; that "darkness" is often a poetic name for Sheol in Ecclesiastes, as elsewhere; that the obvious relationship between "eternity" and "darkness" can easily lead to confusion and/or differences of opinion when the reader encounters the Hebrew root *'lm*, which can point to either; that in Ecclesiastes the five occurrences of *'lm* preceded by *lē-* (1:4, 10; 2:16; 3:14; 9:6) bear the meaning "long duration, eternity," whereas the other three occurrences (3:11; 12:5, 14) are to be interpreted in the sense of "concealment, dark-

⁷⁰Gilg. VII iv 33–34, 39, paralleled in Ishtar's Descent i 4–5, 9 (CT, 15. 45:4–5, 9).

⁷¹Scott, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes* 221. It is tempting to see another example of *'ōlām*, "darkness," in 1 Kgs 8:12–13 (= 2 Chr 6:1–2), where "dwell (*škn*) in a dark cloud (*'ārāpel*)" is parallel to "dwell (*yšb*) *'ōlāmtm*."

⁷²So Jenni, "Das Wort *'ōlām*" 28.

ness"; that the former derive from an original *'lm* and the latter from an original *glm*, as differentiated also in Ugaritic; and that the near and remote contexts of Eccl 12:5 prefer "dark house" rather than "eternal home" for *bêt 'ôlām*, especially in the light of Akkadian parallels.

In any event, all would agree that OT references to the afterlife are, for the most part, shrouded in darkness when compared to the fuller revelation of the NT. Clearer understanding could come only with the arrival of the Messiah, "our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel" (2 Tim 1:10).