

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Journal of Biblical Literature* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_jbl-01.php

Old Testament Notes.

PROF. D. B. MACDONALD.

HARTFORD, CONN.

1. Ecclesiastes 3¹¹: נם את העלם נתן בלבם מבלי אשר לא : ימצא האדם את המעשה אשר עשה האלהים מראש ועד סוף :
 "What unsophisticated Hebrew writer could possibly have understood this saying?" asks Cheyne in his *Jewish Religious Life after the Exile*, p. 198. The question is to the point and applies to every translation that accepts the reading העלם. It does not matter whether we take it as 'the world' or 'worldliness' or 'eternity' in any connotation or denotation; we are left with an idea that is in place in 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. Yet, so far as the text of the saying is concerned, there does not seem to be a particle of evidence pointing to a different reading; the versions all support the Massorettes.

In spite of this unanimity of attestation, the difficulty of the passage is so great that I venture to suggest a conjectural emendation. The argument for any such change must consist in the new reading's fitting the context perfectly, and, if possible, moving the whole section into a new and clear light. An emendation must be not only satisfactory in point of sense but also illuminative; only so can it prove its truth. The reading which I would suggest here is הַקָּמַל, and I would then translate the whole passage, "Also toil He has appointed for their heart (or mind), so that man cannot find out from beginning to end the work which God has done." In translating ב 'for' I base on Qôhéleth's own usage. In 2²⁴ we read אין טוב באדם, 'There is no good for mankind'; and in 3¹² ידעתי כי אין טוב בם, 'I know that there is no good for them.'

The careful reader of Ecclesiastes cannot fail to notice how great must have been the influence of the early chapters of Genesis with the stories of the creation and the fall on the mind of its writer. What was his attitude towards these stories may be a large and doubtful question; but that they attracted him and roused his thought seems certain. They may only have played for him the

part that the myth of Prometheus, for example, does for us, or they may have been literally true stories of the childhood of the world as they were to our fathers. However that may be, he comes back to them again and again ; they are starting points for him and his thinking, fundamental puzzles full of exasperation and attraction. His God is largely their God, the Creator and Appointer of all things. He has made all things beautiful ; He has made mankind and beasts from the ground ; they are made from the dust and return to the dust again. Before Him mankind and the beasts of the field are alike ; only, man knows good and evil ; he can think of life and weary himself trying to read its moral riddles. How he has reached this, Qôhéleth does not say ; but it is clear that God for him was constantly limiting man in his aspirations and strivings, had indeed found it necessary to limit him. Thus God is jealous of man lest he should attain too far, and read his whole work from beginning to end. What we understand, we are ; and the man who can read all God's workings is God. Therefore man is driven out of the Garden ; toil is appointed for him, — to eat his bread in the sweat of his brow ; so God has willed, that he may weary himself out there-with. Thus all man's work, of body or of mind, is but a means of drawing his fetters closer and reducing him again to the level of the beasts of the field. Qôhéleth's worldly wisdom is that man should recognize this ; he should cease to struggle, and should accept the barriers set by One who is stronger than he.

But how does 'toil' suit the immediate context ? The thought of the first part of the chapter is that the whole world consists of parts fitting together, each into each, each at its own season, and each balancing each. There is love, there is also hate ; there is war, there is also peace. As the one thing exists, so the other exists, — in its season. But when a man works, what gain has he in his toil ? What balances his toil, coming in its season ? That God has given a wearying toil to man is a fixed thing that must be accepted. But He has also made everything beautiful, that is, good, in its season ; and so, too, it is with toil. It is true that it has been appointed by God for a purpose, and that is to prevent man from reading God's working as a whole, but there is also a gain for man in it, something that comes to balance it, and that is the pleasure that man has in toil. That, too, is the gift of God, and man should accept it and use it, should rejoice and be good to himself, eat, drink, and enjoy his toil. Enjoyment in toil (2²⁴) is the only certain good in life that Qôhéleth has found.