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

Ronald F. Youngblood**

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 'ôlâm 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.³

The use of "byt, "house," in the sense of "tomb, netherworld" is common enough in the Semitic languages generally⁴ and is not in dispute here. An


**Ronald Youngblood is professor of Old Testament and Hebrew at Bethel Theological Seminary West in San Diego, California.


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

⁴A notable exception is "the house of his reward" in G. M. Lambsa, 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 (mškntm 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.”

That ‘olām 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 variably 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 rabbinc 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 (bōr), the people of long ago (‘am ‘olām). I will make you dwell in the earth below (‘eres tahstyôt), as in ancient ruins (hrbwt m’lm), with those who go down to the pit (bōr), and you will not return or take your place in the land of the living (‘eres haya’yim).”


⁹A. Cooper, “Ps 24:7–10: Mythology and Exegesis,” JBL 102 (1983) 42. Cooper sets forth the provocative thesis that in Psalm 24 the pitthé ‘olām, 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).”

The “parallels” that Leupold refers to above are indeed numerous, 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. 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. 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.” It has long been recognized that one of the most impressive external literary parallels to a passage in Ecclesiastes is the bardmaid Siduri’s advice to Gilgamesh as compared to Qoheleth’s advice to his readers. The relationship between the two texts is striking indeed:

\[
\text{Gilg. X iii 3–14}^{16}
\]

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!

\[
\text{Eccl 9:7–9}
\]

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

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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.


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 ‘olām” 208.


16The line count is that of the cuneiform text of the Old Babylonian version as transliterated in R. C. Thompson, The Epic of Gilgamish (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.\(^\text{17}\)

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.\(^\text{18}\) Mitchell Dahood has collected numerous cogent Phoenician
and Ugaritic parallels to various passages in Qoheleth,\(^\text{19}\) while Ernst Jenni
(among others\(^\text{20}\)) has noted precise Punic and Palmyrene cognates to \(byt \ 'ulm\)
in Eccl 12:5, the contexts of which cognates point to the meaning "grave"\(^\text{21}\) for
this colorful phrase.

An especially intriguing parallel to \(byt \ 'ulm\) is the term \(b'l\)m, found at the
end of the first line of the tenth-century-B.C. Phoenician inscription on the
Ahiyam 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, \(b'l\)m
in Ahiyam is most likely an abbreviation of \(b(y)\text{t} \ 'ulm\).\(^\text{22}\) The Babylonian
Talmud uses Aramaic terms like \(b\)\(é\) \(midr\)\(â\)(cf. Hebrew \(b\)\(é\) \(hamm\)\(idr\)\(â\)) and
\(b\)\(é\) \(rab\) in the sense of "school." An OT example is \(b\)\(é\)\(è\)\(è\)\(è\)\(è\)\(è\)\(è\)(Josh 21:27),
contracted from \(b\)\(é\)\(è\)\(è\)\(è\)\(è\)\(è\)\(è\).\(^\text{23}\) In Ahiyam, then, \(*b'lm\), abbreviated from \(bt \ 'lm\),
stands for \(*b'b'lm\), "in the grave" (the preposition \(b\)- does not have to be written

\(^{17}\)G. 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
Cf. the explanation of Longman, who states that the phrase means basically "apart from the revelation
and knowledge of God" ("Comparative Methods" 9).

\(^{18}\)Rainey, "Study" 148–149.

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


\(^{21}\)Jenni, "Das Wort 'ôlâm" 211, 217.

\(^{22}\)Tawil, "Note" 35–36.

\(^{23}\)BDB 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; Edin-
burgh: T. & T. Clark, 1898], 1. 166; Jenni, "Das Wort 'ôlâm" 208 n. 3).
when it precedes a word beginning with the same letter). Less plausible is the proposal of Dahood, who sees in the 'lm of b'lm an (elliptical) equivalent of bt 'lm and reads the b- as the preposition.

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

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

As the title of this article suggests, I am proposing that "dark house" is a better contextual translation of byt ‘wlm 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." 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?

See e.g. Tawil, "Note" 35 n. 16.


Ecclesiasticus' 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 Qoheleth—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 q(hl).


The 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: réqet ekletum ki maši nāwirum, "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 daʾāmu, ekēlu and etū,
all of which mean "to be dark," are attested in contexts of death and the grave.
A few examples:

binātišu ussappihū zumuršu daʾummatu umtalli30
His limbs are torn apart; darkness fills his body.

ina ekleti qereb qabrīm31
In darkness, in the midst of the grave. . . .

niširtašu šanūmma ikkal ekliš ittanallak32
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 bahōšek 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

CAD, 3. 123.
31CT, 17. 36:84–85. Cf. CAD 7. 60.
32CT, 39. 4:34. Cf. CAD, 4. 70. An example using etū will be cited below.
33That "kūl 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 šēʾōl 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.”

The song of Hannah says (1 Sam 2:9) that God “will guard the feet of his saints, but the wicked will be silenced 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: mahšāk (Ps 88:18 [MT 88:19]), plural mahāšakkīm (88:6 [MT 88:7]); hāšēkā (Isa 8:22); māʿāp (ibid.); ‘āpelā (ibid.; Jer 23:12); ‘ēpel (Job 10:22 twice); ‘ēpā (ibid.); and, last but not least, sālmāwet (10:21, 22).

As is well known, the Hebrew word sālwut has been analyzed in two quite distinct ways. The traditional understanding is that of the MT: sālmāwet, “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 (sālmāwet).” But since the LXX paraphrases sālwut as Ḥadēs here, and since a rabbinic tradition states that sālmāwet is one of the seven names of Gehenna, Job 38:17 is not definitive for the vocalization sālmāwet.

The other major analysis of sālwut is to read it sālmūt or the like, understanding it as an abstract noun from the root sīlm (*sīlm), “to be dark.” Akkadian sālamu means “to become dark, black,” and the adjective sālmu means “black, dark.” Arabic zālama IV likewise means “to be dark,” while zalmat (plural zulumāt) means “darkness.” Ugaritic zīlm, 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 “sīlmūt always means ḥšk.”

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


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, sīlmūt is rendered aîōniou—possibly misreading sīlmūt 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 bmslwut as though it were bēlwut—namely, *en skia thanaton.*

38Erub. 19a.


in a somewhat convoluted argument, cannot seem to make up his mind between *salmāt* from the root *šlmlm* and *salmāwet* from *šlmlzlmlm* plus *mwt*.

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.”

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.”

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.” That the Hebrew root * lm* may be used as a synonym for the root *šk*, “to be dark,” is confirmed by comparing Job 38:2, “Who is this that darkens my counsel” (*maḥšēk ḫsg*), with 42:3, “Who is this that obscures my counsel” (*ma’līm ḫsg*). The recognition of the parallelism between *šk* and * lm* leads to the possibility that * wlm* means “darkness” in texts like Lam 3:6 = Ps 143:3 (*mēlē ḥlām*, “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 *l*- (* lwm*: 1:4; 2:16; 3:14; 9:6; *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’lām* (3:11), with the definite article and written defectively (*hlm*), has been called “the most disputed word in the book.” The form *’lāmō* (12:5) is the only occurrence in the OT of *’lām* with a pronominal suffix (see n. 3); it is written *plēnē* (*wlmw*) in the Leningrad MS but defectively (*lmw*) in the Ben Hayyim tradition.


VII. *LM* IN ECCL 3:11

James Crenshaw nicely summarizes the history of the interpretation of *hā‘olām* 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‘olām* 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 *‘olām* 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 ignorance also in the hertes of men, that they shulde not fynde out the grounde of his workes, which he doth from the begininge 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.”\(^{51}\)

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\(^{49}\) E.g. Thompson, “The Root ‘-l-m’” 165.

\(^{50}\) The 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”).

\(^{51}\) Barton, ICC 105. Barton has, perhaps unwittingly, put his finger on a fatal flaw in the translation “eternity” here: In order to justify it, *mibbêl t’āser lò*, “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 “obsccurity” (*Proverbs, Ecclesiastes* 221).
John Gray makes the observation that “the word ʿālām 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’.”

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 ʿālām 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.” Dahood has subsequently pointed out that ʿārāḥ ʿālām probably means “way of ignorance” in Job 22:15.

In the consonantal text of the OT, any occurrence of the root ʾlm can theoretically represent either *ʾlm or *ʾglm, since the phonemes ʾ and ʾ both became ‘ in Hebrew. As it so happens, *ʾ and *ʾ remained distinct in Ugaritic, and ʾlm and ʾglm both appear in its lexicon. Ugaritic ʾlm is well attested with the meaning “long duration,” “eternity.” And while it is true that Ugaritic ġlm and its feminine counterpart ġlmt normally mean “young man” and “young woman” respectively, it is also true that ġlm can mean “dark,” “to be dark” and that ġlmt can mean “darkness.”

In I K i 19–20, ġlm ʾym (admittedly a difficult phrase) probably means “a dark day” (literally “the darkness of the day”), paraphrased by H. L. Ginsberg as “calamity.” Hebrew semantic parallels include Job 3:4, “May that day turn to darkness” (ḥūšēq); 15:23, “the day of darkness” (yōm-ḥūšēq); Ezek 30:18, “Dark will be the day” (ḥāšak hayyōm); and, last but not least, Eccl 11:8, “the days of darkness” (yēmē ḥahōšeḵ).

In II K i–ii 50, [t]k mḥy uḡlm is translated by Ginsberg as “[E]ven as he arrives, it grows dark.”

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


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 ʾlm, viz., taʾalumā, meaning ‘hidden thing’.” But other words for “darkness” in Hebrew are multiple derivatives from the same root—e.g., cf. ḥšk, ḥśkh, mhšk; ʿpl, ʿphl; ʿph, mʾwp. 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 ġlm, ‘lad.’” But, although ġlm 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.


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

56H. L. Ginsberg in ANET 143.

ing “darkness.” G. R. Driver understands the words as common nouns and translates them “gloomy darkness” and “dark gloom” respectively.

In summary, if and when Hebrew ‘lm means “darkness” it probably should be referred to *glm (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 glm, 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 ECCLESIATES 1–11

Although Qoheleth was not overly preoccupied with the subject of darkness, 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 hōsek, 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.” 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.’” The pertinent lines of 12:1–8 read as follows:

Remember your Creator . . .
before the sun and the light
and the moon and stars grow dark (thšk),

58 Ginsberg in ANET 131 n. 11.
60 Ironically, however, the early rabbis almost consigned the entire book to a darkness of its own; cf. b. Šabb. 30:72.
63 E. Jenni, “Des Wort ‘olâm in Alten Testament,” ZAW 65 (1953) 27 n. 4, wants to read burk, “your pit,” here instead of bur’k, “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 (ḥškw); . . .
Then man goes to his byt ʿwlm . . .
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 demonstrat-ed.\textsuperscript{64}

It remains, then, only to show how byt ʿwlm fits into such a context.

X. THE TRANSLATION “DARK HOUSE” IN ECCL 12:5

Commentators who have been willing to entertain the possibility of translat-
ing byt ʿwlm as “dark house” or the like are few indeed. Gray sees the possible
relationship between the ḫlm, “ignorance/darkness,” in 3:11 and the (w)lm in
12:5 and is tempted to translate byt ʿwlmw as “his dark house.” But the sup-
posed parallel Egyptian expression for grave—“house of eternity”—makes him
uncertain.\textsuperscript{65} Although Hans Walter Wolff translates the Hebrew phrase as “his
secluded house,”\textsuperscript{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 ʿwlm.

Occasional attempts have been made to find Akkadian parallels to Qohe-
leth’s bytʿulm and its Northwest Semitic cognates. Tawil, for example, suggests
šubat dārat(i), “dwelling place of eternity”—but surely he exaggerates in
referring to it as an “exact semantic equivalent.”\textsuperscript{67} A phrase like *bīt dārat(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 ‘idīt = byt ‘d of the under-world,”\textsuperscript{68} connecting “‘idīt”
with Hebrew ‘d, often a synonym of ‘ulm 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:

\begin{quote}
iredannı ana bīt ekletı šubat Irkalla\textsuperscript{69}
ana bīti ša ĕribūsu lā āṣtu. . . .
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{64}Cf. e.g. E. H. Plumptre, Ecclesiastes (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1885) 221–222.

\textsuperscript{65}Gray, Legacy 200.


\textsuperscript{67}Tawil, “Note” 36.

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

\textsuperscript{69}Sumerian IR.KALLA = IR.KALA(K) = IRI.GAL, “big city”—i.e., the netherworld. IR.KALLA be-
came a Sumerian loanword in Akkadian.
nûra là immarâma ina eţûti ašbâ⁷⁰

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, 
anâ bit ekleti (“to the ‘house of darkness’”) is replaced by anâ bitî etê (“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 bit ekleti or bitu etû. Similarly, in
Hebrew one can say, “If my home (bêti) for which I hope is the grave (šê’ôl), if
I spread out my bed in darkness (hôšek) . . .” (Job 17:13), or one can speak of
going to “his ‘dark house’ (bêt ‘ôlâmô)” (Eccl 12:5). One can “go about in dark-
ness (baḥōšek hôlêk)” (Eccl 2:14; cf. also baḥōšek yêlêk in 6:4), “go (hôlêk)” to
“the grave (šê’ôl)” (9:10), or “go to his ‘dark house’ (hôlêk . . . el-bêt ‘ôlâmô)”
(12:5). The varied lexicon of Hebrew wisdom literature is seen to match that
of the Akkadian epics. If bêt ‘ôlâm means “dark house”—and I am here propo-
sing that it does—then the Akkadian equivalents are bit ekleti and bitu etû.
The Akkadian milieu of Qoheleth lends additional plausibility to such a ren-
dering.

R. B. Y. Scott, then, may well be missing the mark in his insistence that
the use of ‘ôlâm meaning “darkness” in Eccl 3:11 “is unique in the OT.”⁷¹ Later
interpretation of bêt ‘ôlâm 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 ‘îm, which can point to either; that in
Ecclesiastes the five occurrences of ‘îm preceded by lê- (1:4, 10; 2:16; 3:14; 9:6)
bear the meaning “long duration, eternity,” whereas the other three occur-
rences (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 ‘ôlâm, “darkness,” in 1
Kgs 8:12–13 (= 2 Chr 6:1–2), where “dwell (šḵn) in a dark cloud (‘ârâpêl)” is parallel to “dwell (yâb)
‘ôlâmmîm.”
ness”; that the former derive from an original ‘lm and the latter from an original ǧlm, 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 ʿolām, 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).