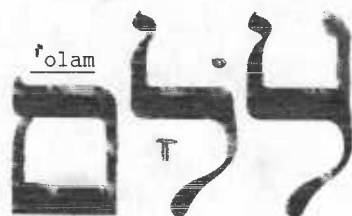


BIBLE STUDY:

Words are doors
into
minds/hearts/spirits.

Let's pass through this
word into OT thinking.



1 This morning, in reading in the Talmud's first section, I happened upon two stories in which the punch-line depends on what you make of this word as you are meditating on a scripture--i.e., what you decide to make of it in light of what the quoted "abot" (rabbi-fathers) made of it. In the first story, this "world [to the extent that it is] all good" or "the [next] world that is everlasting"? In the second story, over a rabbi's grave a rabbi thus midrashes Ruth 3.13 (the midrash being in italics): "Rest the night--*in this world that is like night*, and it will come to pass in the morning--*in the world to come, which is forever morning*."

NOTE (1) that "'olam" is elliptical or dialectical in sememe, the antonyms of this/that [diese Seite / jene Seite] "world," & (2) that this world's value is existential: facing life, "all good"; facing death, "like night."

2 Yesterday morning at 2.30 I awoke hearing the words "He [God] has put eternity in man's heart." The words occupied me for 2½ hours, as I shall detail here now. (If you're interested only in the meanings & not with my process, skip & proceed directly to §3.)

(1) I sensed the expression was Hebrew & "eternity" translated "'olam," but I couldn't remember the reference. Remembering where something is has become harder for me because of two distances, viz. from my few fundamentalist years in my mid-teens (when I masticated huge gobs of the King James Version) & from my youth (when retention is easier).

(2) I could have looked up the reference under "'olam" in a Hebrew concordance, but that wouldn't be easy: so common a word, so long an article. Quicker in a KJV concordance because "eternity" is only one way "'olam" is translated there; but the reference wasn't in Cruden!

(3) Next, I looked under "eternity" in a stack of quotations dictionaries. Not there! The quote was too famous to be nowhere in word-or-quotation finder-books, so I was thrown back on the Bible. Maybe I was remembering it from some other version than KJV (though most of the Scripture I can quote is KJV, from my childhood-&-youth exposure to that magisterial rendition).

(4) So I looked it up in the unabridged concordance to the RSV (Revised Standard Version), & there it was (though not exactly as the words had come to me as a very-early morning seizure).

(5) Finally, I looked up Ecclesiastes 3.11 in 17 versions & translations (in alphabetical order, with abbreviations-used-below in boldface): **American Standard Version**, **American Translation** (also called "The [U. of] Chicago Bible"), **Basic English**, **Contemporary English Version**, **Jay Green**, **Jerusalem Bible**, **King James Version**, **Moffatt**, **New English Bible**, **New International Version**, **New Living Translation**, **New Revised Standard Version**, **Revised English Bible**, **Revised Standard Version**, **Tanakh** (the current Jewish translation), **Today's English Version** (also called "The Good News Bible").

3 The semantic domain (i.e., area of meanings) of the Hebrew "'olam" is greater than that of the Greek κόσμος *kosmos* or the English "world." (Modern Hebrew, with its expanded vocabulary, has dropped the meaning "eternity": our word, its spelling slightly altered, now means only "world.")

Greek philosophy & Western math/science teach us precision & make us impatient of the "global" quality of biblical Hebrew, which has few words, with a wide range of meanings for each of its nodal words. On the analogy of a single-edge knife, the thin-sharp side is Greek & English, the thick-dull side is Hebrew, whose words are richer for worship/meditation/prayer (Bible & Talmud, not Aristotle & Einstein).

Now let's ask Eccl. the meaning of the whole verse (3.11), to view our phrase in its smallest context: God "has made everything beautiful in its season; but he has also implanted ignorance in their mind, so that mankind cannot discover the work which God has done from beginning to end" (AT). By divine design the world is orderly (3.1-8) and we are limited in knowledge of God & in span of life (3.9-15). Of the three roots having the same radicals (i.e., consonants), this translation derives from the one meaning to conceal: God is known because he has revealed himself ("deus revelatus"), but cannot be comprehended because he conceals himself ("deus absconditus"). The other roots signal spacetime consciousness (maturity; creation/world/age, antiquity, futurity [as unlimited, "eternity"]). In Eden, God planted a good/evil-knowledge apricot tree, but not tree that would give us access to the whole "from-beginning-to-end" Mystery. In biblical theology, access to God is (a) by his permission only & (2) limited. If we submit, we have (in a Prayerbook phrase) "humble access"; if we refuse & overclaim, he humiliates us. (See "hubris.") **M**: "for the mind of man he has appointed mystery." **BE**: "without knowledge."

The diametrical meaning is that God has given us a code-breaker to figure out all his works (**G**): God "has set the eternal in his heart, without which man cannot find out the work that God made from the beginning, even to the end." You may find it distressing that the Hebrew is elastic enough to embrace, on occasion, opposite meanings; or you may find it (as I do) refreshing, liberating to spiritual meditation & intellectual speculation (including vigorous group Bible-study, as in Talmud!).

TEV stands alone: God "has given us a desire to know the future." **JB** widens to permission to consider time in its wholeness." **NRSV**: God "has put a sense of past and future into their minds." **NEB, REB**: "a sense of time past and future." **CEV** I consider excellent: God "puts questions into our minds about the past and the future."

Oddly, though "world"* is the most common rendering of "ʿolam," only one of our seventeen versions/translations uses it, viz. **KJV**: God "hath set the world in their heart."

RSV & ASV have the same wording, except "eternity" replaces "world." Similar to **NIV**: God "has also set eternity in the hearts of men"; & **NLT**: God "has planted eternity in the human heart." And since the Hebrew meaning of "heart" is consciousness, we are not surprised that the Jewish translation, **T**, has this: God "also puts eternity in the mind." (**T** footnote: "He preoccupies man with the attempt to discover the times of future events; cf. 8.17," which has "guess" three times!).

Analogously, "ʿolam" is, like Bach, polyphonic. Hebrew is more into inspired suggestion than into intellectually satisfying solutions (which rector Ernesti was into in the Leipzig school--early 18th c.--in which Bach was the cantor). (In his latest, age 97, book, Paul Minear says that vis-a-vis the Bible, Bach was the last of the age of faith & Ernesti was the first of the age of reason.)

* The word's in "world without end, amen" & in "forever and ever."

ELLIOTT THINKSHEETS
309 Lake Elizabeth Drive
Craigville MA 02632

