Qoheleth and the Problem of Alienation

By N. Karl Haden

52   Paul Tillich begins "Part One: The Human Predicament" of *The Eternal Now* with these words:

[Aloneness] is more true of man than of any other creature. He is not only alone; he also knows that he is alone. Aware of what he is, he asks the question of his aloneness. He asks why he is alone, and how he can triumph over his being alone. For this aloneness he cannot endure. Neither can he escape it. It is his destiny to be alone and to be aware of it. Not even God can take this destiny away from him. ...This is the greatness and this is the burden of man.[1]

As man questions his existence[2] he appears only as a momentary and flickering flame in a remote corner of the universe--a flame that wishes to ignite the cosmos, but is all too quickly snuffed out. And no one seems to care--the universe is impersonal and indifferent; the gods or God, if they exist, have abandoned man as an unwanted child. Thus, the existence of humankind seems transitory and purposeless. Rational man's struggle with aloneness is manifest all the way from his microcosmic need for individual significance to his macrocosmic aspirations projecting man as the measure of all things.

Within the wisdom movement of ancient Israel Qoheleth, the most radical of the wisdom writers, wrestles with the problem of man's aloneness and man's search to attain meaningful existence. Qoheleth confronts this problem both with philosophical dexterity, and, of particular importance, with his own feelings of estrangement. This sage of yesterday has much to say to modem man regarding the experience which has become known as "alienation."[3]

Alienation

The word "alienation" conveys the dilemma of a modern experience, yet the term is muddled by its various connotations. In its multi-dimensional im-

Alienation as a characterization of human existence is generally thought of in connection with modern society, and modern thought from Feuerbach and Marx to existentialism. **N. Karl Haden** finds the essential characteristics of alienation in the ancient Hebrew sage Qoheleth, and discovers in his writings a perspective which is both sustaining and challenging to contemporary believers. Mr. Haden is pursuing a doctorate in philosophy at the University of Georgia.

plications, alienation concerns both the individual and humanity; the nuances of the term are thus philosophical, psychological, political, economic, sociological, religious and ethical. Because of these various connotations, the first task at hand is to arrive at a satisfactory understanding of "alienation" as the term will be used within the study.

   G. W. F. Hegel was the first to use *Entfremdung* (alienation) in a technical and philosophical sense. Hegel, Ludwig Feurbach, and Karl Marx are the three thinkers whose interpretations of alienation provide the basis for modem discussion.[4] Alienation has also become a major concern of another school of thinkers, the existentialists. F. H. Heinemann, the continental philosopher who coined the term *Existenzphilosophie* in 1929, explains that the existentialists wish to make man aware of the fact and problem of alienation; their aim is to liberate him from estrangement.[5] In recent scholarship various themes of existentialism have been assigned to Qoheleth: rebellion against a solely rational approach to problems of existence, an emphasis on the individual and the individual's experience, and a lack of meaning in human existence.6 The purpose of this study is to consider Qoheleth's struggle with alienation and to discern his conclusions about life within the framework of his world view.

Toward An Understanding of Alienation

   When man questions the significance of life he begins on the basis of his own existence; as he works his way into the macrocosm he can find only an indifferent and impersonal universe. But this estrangement from nature is only the beginning of the problem. Alienation is connected with human society, for

[1]Paul Tillich, *The Eternal Now* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963), pp. 15, 17.

[2]"existence," i.e., man's state of being.

[3]As far as I know, very little has been written on the theme of alienation in Qoheleth. One of the best essays I have encountered which treats this theme to some extent is James Williams, "The Wisdom of Koheleth (What Does It Profit a Man?)" in *Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom*, selected, with a Prolegomenon, by James L. Crenshaw (New York: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1976), pp. 375-389.

[4]This paper is not intended to be an analysis of the historical development of the term "alienation." For those interested in the ideology surrounding "alienation," particularly in relation to Hegel, Feurbach, and Marx, see the following: "Alienation" in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company 1972), pp. 76 77; George A. Kendall, "Alienation and the Struggle for Existence: Biblical and Ideological Views in Contrast," *Thomist* 47 (1983): 66-76; Lutz Musner, "Ein Versuch Die Hegelkritik in Marxel1s Fruhschriften Als Entstehung Eines Sozialwissenschaftlichen Forschungsprogrammes zu Deuten" *Conceptus* 15 (1981): 193-206; Mark C. Taylor, *Journeys to Selfhood: Hegel and Kierkegaard* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980): John Torrance, *Estrangement, Alienation, and Exploitation: A Sociological Approach to Historical Materialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977).

[5]Fredrick Heinemam, *Existentialism and the Modern Predicament* (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), p. 9.

[6]Some recent works dealing with existentialism, or existentialists, and Qoheleth are: Kenneth James, "Ecclesiastes: Precursor of Existentialists," *The Bible Today* 22 (1984): 85-90; Francis W. Nichols, "Samuel Beckett and Ecclesiastes on the Borders of Belief," Encounter 45.1 (1984): 11-22; C- B. Peter, "In Defense of Existence: A Comparison Between Ecclesiastes and Albert Camus," *Bangalore TheologicalForum* 12 (1980): 26-13. Robert Gordis gives a very perceptive comparison between modem existentialism and Qoheleth in "Koheleth and Modern Existentialism," *Koheleth-The Man and His World, A Study of Ecclesiastes* (New York: Schocken, 1968).

with the movement of the masses to the swelling urban centers of the world, man's estrangement from the natural realm becomes more acute. Since the Industrial Revolution man has spent an increasing amount of time working with machines. The estrangement brought on by technology has only intensified with the modern computer age as individuals spend less time in reflecting and relating to other individuals, choosing instead a kinship with automata.

The depersonalization of man in society leads toward the apogee of alienation: self-alienation. William Barrett describes this condition as resulting from a society that only requires man to perform his particular social function, identifying the individual with the function and neglecting the other vital components of humanness.[7] Self-alienation characterizes the cleavage which separates the individual as a dispensable component of the marketplace from the individual as a human being with deep personal needs.

Heinemann offers an excellent definition of alienation which coincides with our present concern:

> The facts to which the term 'alienation' refers are, objectively, different kinds of dissociation, break or rupture between human beings and their objects, whether the latter be other persons, or the natural world, or their own creations in art, science, and society; subjectively, the corresponding states of disequilibrium, disturbance, strangeness and anxiety.[8]

Morton A. Kaplan conveys the same understanding in a different manner: alienation occurs as the individual perceives that his status, his identifications, his relationships, his style of life, and his work are not meaningfully correlated.[9] Thus, alienation in our study is the individual's detachment from the universe at large, from society, and from one's own self.[10]

There have been various solutions proposed to remedy man's alienation. One school, believing that external changes have no effect, contends that individual effort can enable mankind to overcome alienation. Psychoanalytical treatment is seen as a viable means to the inward reform of the estranged person. A second school, basing its solutions on the economic determinism of Marxism, contends that the individual is the passive product of social organization and that social organization is the product of economic organization, which in many societies is determined by private property. Thus, the cure is thought to consist in social transformation through the abolition of private property.[11]
In contrast to those who maintain that alienation has a certain remedy, many existentialists have argued that the condition is permanent, that man cannot rid

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[7]William Barrett, *Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1962), p. 36.
[8]Heinemann, *Existentialism*, p. 9.
[9]Morton A. Kaplan, *Alienation and Identification* (New York: The Free Press, 1976), p. 119.
[10]The reader should note that here I am concerned primarily with the modem experience of alienation as opposed to a "biblical alienation" due, for example, to man's depravity. A link between the modern experience and the theological explanation will be discussed later in the paper.
[11]*The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. "Alienation," by G. Petrovic (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1972), p. 80. The reader may also want to note G.A. Kendall's article, "Alienation and the, Struggle for Existence." Kendall argues that the ideological understanding of alienation is destructive and negates existence, p. 76.

himself by any means of this inherent quality. Man is necessarily self-alienated; it is illusive to believe that he is capable of finding consistent personal meaning in an impersonal.world.[12] As a "precursor of existentialists" Qoheleth's conclusion on this matter is of particular interest.

Because man is alienated, life's occurrences often seem paradoxical. Paradox results from the projection of human insights, interpretations, values, and actions into the universe. Existence becomes absurd. C. B. Peter explains:

> Absurdity is the failure of the world to satisfy the human demand. There is a paradox and contradiction between man's longing for clarity and the failure of logic to provide it, his longing for eternal joy and his experience of agony, his longing for immortality and his ending in death.[13]

Perhaps the greatest paradox is the concept of God. Good health and fortune attest to the absolute goodness of God; evil and suffering call God's goodness into question. Traditional theism, embodied in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, seems unable to reconcile its concept of God with the experience of man: if God is immutable, how can he relate to individuals who constantly change? Why should he even want to relate to man? If he is omnipotent and loving, why is there pain and suffering? If he is omnipresent, why does he so often appear to be deaf to the voices of his children? Perhaps traditional theism has a fallacious view of God, shackled by the proclivities of man; or perhaps traditional theism, once divorced from dogmatic systematization, is right after all in its concept of God, but man simply refuses to accept the consequences of this view.

Alienation in Qoheleth

I will now turn to consider Qoheleth in view of my premise that he grapples for meaning which has been lost through alienation. Although the historical context is different, the problems causing alienation as faced by Qoheleth are universally human and timeless.

When Qoheleth considers the universe in which man finds himself, he concludes that in the natural cycles of this world man has no significance. The wind blows in the patterns it has always followed; the rivers flow to the sea, but the sea is never full; "a generation goes and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever" (1:4). Thus in the passing from generation to generation, man is an isolated and minute fragment, quite dispensable to nature. Qoheleth concludes that "all things are wearisome; man is not able to tell it" (1:8a). I suggest that the dillema Qoheleth recognizes here, man's alienation from nature, is because man can find no reference point in nature to give his life meaning.

Qoheleth experiences first hand the utter bankruptcy of the attempt to understand life rationally: ". . . in much wisdom is much grief, and increasing knowledge results in increasing pain" (1:18).[14] If man could only discern the

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[12]Ibid., p. 79.
[13]C.B. Peter, "In Defense of Existence," p. 37.
[14]The reference to man's reason has peculiar implications within the wisdom tradition. These implications, which concern practical wisdom for the ordering of life, will be noted later.

work of God, his divine plans and thoughts, then life could be patterned meaningfully in accordance with God's ordained purpose. But God's work escapes rational scrutiny:

> When I gave my heart to know wisdom and to see the task which has been done on the earth (even though one should never sleep day or night), and I saw every work of God, I concluded that man cannot discover the work which has been done under the sun. Even though man should seek laboriously he will not discover; and though the wise man should say, 'I know,' he cannot discover (8:16, 17; cf. also 3:11; 6:10-12; 11:5).

Not knowing the plans of God leaves all men subject to fate and the "chanciness" of existence (cf. 9:12).

The most severe confrontation with fate and chance comes in the form of death. Death becomes the ultimate boundary situation in which one's desires and choices conclusively elude him. Working within the mindset of Old Testament Judaism, Qoheleth asks if the end of human beings is any different than the end of the beast. His conclusion: we cannot know (cf. 3:18-21). Qoheleth maintains, ". ..this also is a grievous evil-exactly as a man is born, thus will he die" (5:16a). He concludes that there is "no advantage to him who toils after the wind" (5:16b). Poignantly, man is better off never to have been born (cf. 4:3; 6:3). The same fate awaits both the wise and the foolish: death is the great equalizer (cf. 12:14-19; 3:2).[15]

Just as modem experience is filled with paradox, so Qoheleth observes paradox in his context. Prosperity was not guaranteed by right living; many wicked were found to be prosperous while the righteous were in poverty (cf. 7:15). Even the most likely to succeed are rendered unsuccessful by time and chance:

> ...the race is not to the swift, and the battle is not to the warriors, and neither is bread to the wise, nor wealth to the discerning, nor favor to men of ability; for time and chance overtake them all (9:11).

Qoheleth observes that folly is set in many high places while rich men are in humble places. He has seen slaves riding horses as if they were princes, and princes walking as if they were slaves (cf. 10:5-7). In summation, life is not always governed by the dictates of logic; rather, life is paradoxical.

Vanity
Perhaps the greatest and most significant affinity between the modern dilemma of alienation and Qoheleth's experience is to be found in the word "vanity" (*hebel*). The term is used no less than 37 times, and it conveys to the

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[15]Walther Zimmerli notes that one of the major concerns of the wisdom tradition was the avoidance of premature death via proper conduct. At one point Qoheleth seems to favor this project (cf. 7:15, 17). But as Zimmerli argues, the admonition of 7:15, 17 "does not comprise Qoheleth's completely radical consideration of death." In 2:15, 16 Qoheleth maintains that the same fate awaits both the foolish and, the wise. Zimmerli suggests that the older sages are concerned only with the "when" of death and" willfully ignore the "what." Contrary to the tradition, Qoheleth focuses on the inevitability (the "what") of death. See Walther Zimmerli, "Concerning the Structure of Old Testament Wisdom, in *Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom*, pp. 191-193.

reader the feeling of meaninglessness, or—to use the modem term-absurdity. The introduction, " 'vanity of vanities,' says Qoheleth, 'vanity of vanities! All is vanity'" (1:2), which is repeated in the conclusion (12:8), provides the overall inclusion of the work.[16] James Williams notes that Qoheleth's constant use of *hebel* is a rhetorical feature: Qoheleth questions the profit (*yitron*) of this life, which evokes the response that there is no profit, and he concludes with "all is *hebel*."[17] George Castellino makes a similar suggestion about the literary procedure in Qoheleth:

> ...generally a theoretical statement in the form of a thesis about some point.is offered the reader, then the statement is validated or illustrated through expence (at times in terms of a proverb or a saying), and finally, a judgment is passed on the 'non-value,' 'vanity,' of the experience in question.[18]

In the recent literary approach to Qoheleth, *hebel*, as a *Leitmotiv*, has played a fundamental part in the analysis of the book.[19]

The basic definition of *hebel* is "wind" or "breath." Figuratively, *hebel* conveys the connotation of being unsubstantial and worthless, making the thing in question unprofitable. Vanity parallels the conclusions evoked by alienation: first, there is an inability to find fulfillment in toil, and thus man experiences the failure to exercise freedom in relation to his own possessions (cf. 2:11, 19, 21, 23; 4:4, 8; 6:2); secondly, the relationship between sin and judgment, and righteousness and blessing is absent, and such anomalies of life are vanity; thirdly, the brevity of life is vanity.[20] C. B. Peter states that vanity includes four aspects of existence: first, the changeless monotony which characterizes the affairs of men and the course of nature; secondly, there is no profit or advantage (*yitron*) in wisdom (cf. 116-18), pleasure (cf. 2:1-10), nor in toil (cf. 2:18-23); thirdly, death ends all (cf 3:19-21; 9:2); and fourthly, God remains mysterious, and thus man cannot understand the universe rationally (cf. 3:11; 8:17-9:1).[21]

The contrast between *hebel* and *yitron* is significant for the two concepts represent an antithesis. K. Seybold suggests that *hebel* serves an evaluative purpose with a "critico-polemic" intention. Qoheleth's observation that all human

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[16]That 1:2 and 12:8 provide the overall inclusion is a generally accepted view. Addison Wright, "The Riddle of the Sphinx: The Structure of the Book of Qoheleth," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 30 (1968): 314-320, considers the larger context of 1:2-11 and 11:7-12:8 to be poems which stand outside of the main structure of the book. Wright gives a helpful survey of other views on the structure of Qoheleth, including the new literary methods, and then makes his own analysis (see n. 19 below), p. 333.

[17]James Williams, "The Wisdom of Koheleth" p. 375. Williams notes that Walther Zimmerli suggested this rhetorical feature in *Die Weisheit des Predigers Salomo* (Berlin, 1936), p. 24.

[18]George R. Castellino, "Qohelet and His Wisdom," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 30 (1968): 18f.

[19]For recent discussions on the structure of Qoheleth, especially to his use of *hebel,* see Castellino, J.A. Loader, *Polar Structures in the Book of Quohelet*, BZAW 152 (Berlin: Walter de Gryuter, 1979), and Addison G. Wright's three related articles: "The Riddle of the Sphinx: The Structure of the Book of Qoheleth," *The Cathollic Biblical Quarterly* 30 (1968): 314-320; 'The Riddle of the Sphinx Revisited: Numerical Patterns in the Book of Qoheleth," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 42 (1980): 38-51; "Additional Numerical Patterns in Qoheleth," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 45 (1983): 32-43.

[20]*Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, edited by Laird R. Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Walkte, s. v. "*hebel*," by Victor P. Hamilton (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), p. 205.

[21]Peter, "In Defense of Existence," pp. 29-31.

activity is vanity stands in opposition to the wisdom tradition's quest for yitron in life.[22] Seybold concludes:

> ...thus *hebhel* serves as 'destructive judgement,' a devaluation of the system of norms established by traditional wisdom, a polemic against its sensible value regulations, a defamation of the wisdom ideal of life.[23]

I maintain that Qoheleth's observations and experiences are testimonies to what has become known as alienation. He is unable to find significance in nature, in his achievements, with reason, or even in seeking out the plans of God. But the study is yet incomplete, for Qoheleth's response must be examined. In order to comprehend his response properly, we must establish his context as a sage and ascertain the roots of alienation for Qoheleth. Perhaps the crux of alienation for Qoheleth is estrangement from God.[24]

The Goal of the Wisdom Tradition

James Crenshaw argues that, in his view, the "fundamental link" between the quest of Israel's sages and modem man is the search for divine presence.[25] I suggest that failure in this enterprise is the major contributor to the dilemma of alienation. The primary difference between Qoheleth and the other sages is Qoheleth's recognition of how romantic and fanciful the venture to insure God's, favor, and thereby guarantee the good life, had become. To arrive at Qoheleth's concept of God -his conclusion on the divine presence--we will establish first the goal or purpose of the tradition; then we will probe Qoheleth's conclusions in contrast to the tradition.

Walther Zimmerli proposes that the basic question of the wise may be expressed as: "'How do I as man secure my existence?'"[26] The school of wisdom represented in Proverbs held the belief that a divine moral order existed, an order which rewarded the wise and the good and punished the foolish and the wicked (cf. Prov 3:3: 10:3; 14:11; 22:4).[27] The same presupposition is apparent in the book of Job. Although it was championed by Job's friends, Job himself severely questioned the doctrine of retribution. Job was a righteous man, yet he suffered excruciating physical pain and untold emotional distress.

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[22] *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*," edited by G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, vol. 3: *gillulim-haras*, trans. by John T. Willis and Geoffery W. Bromiley, s. v. "*hebhel*," by K. Seybold (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), p. 319. Williams draws a similar conclusion: for Qoheleth there is no profit (yitron) in this life, but there is a portion (*heleq*). Experiencing this portion brings joy to life. See pp. 384-389.
[23] Ibid., p. 320.
[24] In "The Riddle of the Sphinx," Wright concludes that the idea of the impossibility of discovering God's work is the theme of the book, and it is built on the vanity motif, p. 266.
[25] James L. Crenshaw, "In Search of Divine Presence," *Review and Expositor* 74 (1977): 366.
[26] Zimmerli, "Concerning the Structure of Old Testament Wisdom," p. 190.
[27] R. B. Y. Scott, *The Way of Wisdom in the Old Testament* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1971), p. 10.

Crenshaw maintains that the three friends had a rational and predictable deity; one who was enslaved by a greater principle-justice.[28]
What then is the basis for this trust in an order that insures retribution? Von Rad explains that the basis of trust may be seen not in terms of trusting in God,

> ...but to something apparently quite different, namely the reality and the evidence of the order which controls the whole of life, much as this appears in the act-consequence relationship....In it however, Yahweh himself was at work in so far as he defended goodness and resisted evil.[29]

How does this affect the concept of God? Von Rad continues:

> If this experiential reality could only be approached, from the point of view of acquiring knowledge of it, from the direction of knowledge of God, then knowledge of the world could, in turn, also consolidate knowledge of God. The statement that the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom could even be turned around, to the effect that knowledge and experience lead to the fear of God.[30]

For the sages the discovery of this fundamental order meant the ability to coordinate life in the most advantageous manner. What then is the goal of the wisdom tradition? Crenshaw states this goal in one word-life.[31] The sages sought to master life in order to attain the best that life could offer: health, honour, longevity, prosperity--all leading to a sense of security. This sense of security is antithetical to alienation; this desire to master life, which can be achieved only at the expense of enslaving the deity to a greater principle, causes Qoheleth to become a revolutionary within the wisdom movement. Experience does not affirm any such law of the universe; in fact, life often seems subject to the arbitrariness of circumstances.

Are there parallels to the experience of modern man as he desires to master life? The passion for affluence and personal security characterizes contemporary Western society. It is apparent all the way from the beer commercial panning the "yuppies" in a bar and espousing the philosophy that "you are in charge"--conveying to the viewer or listener the message of autonomous bliss--to the trend of many religious organizations, pray "this way. .." and God will grant your requests. Presumably, God does not want his people to suffer--or be poor (thus, enslaving God to formulas designed to meet the whims of man). Man longs to be more than man, but existentially he is unable to shed his bonds of mortality. In his failure to escape his own finitude, modem man, like the sage of old, experiences alienation.

'Olam in Man's Heart

For Qoheleth the venture for the mastery of life failed because of a false premise about God. That God exists and rules the world is a major assumption

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[28]Crenshaw, "In Search of Divine Presence," p. 360.
[29]Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1972), pp. 191, 192.
[30]Ibid., p. 194.
[31]James L. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom, An Introduction* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), p. 62.

of Qoheleth, as with the older teachers; but Qoheleth introduces a new dilemma: the activity of the divine is beyond man's comprehension, and therefore man cannot adapt himself to any fundamental order ordained by God. Should man despair? Is there absolute alienation from God? In response to these questions our first concern will be Qoheleth's theology, which is unorthodox in comparison with the tradition, and secondly his theological conclusions and their practical applications.

Recent scholarship has been quick to point out agnosticism, skepticism, nihilism and various other negative themes within the book of Qoheleth. Crenshaw has described Qoheleth's God as "stingy," and as one who concealed all important knowledge that would enable the sages to act in accordance with his plan and timing.[32] Von Rad states that for Qoheleth man cannot discern what has been decreed by God in any given set of circumstances. The dilemma is not the adversities of life but rather the insurmountable barrier blocking man's attainment of knowledge.[33] Scott considers the philosophy of Qoheleth agnostic and fatalistic.[34] Thus, some conclude that Qoheleth conceives of God as a remote and indifferent being; God is omnipotent to be sure, but He is also arbitrary. Man is left without recourse with such a God; man can only submit (cf. 6:10, 7:14).

Much of the scholarship deducing Qoheleth as a philosopher chasing after meaning in life, and not finding significant meaning, can be traced to the exegesis of 3:11:

He has made everything appropriate in its time. He has also set 'olam in their heart, yet so that man will not find out the work which God has done from the beginning even to the end.

Chapter 3, verse 11 proves to be the most pivotal and perhaps the most debated verse in the book of Qoheleth. 'Olam has various renderings: forever, ever, everlasting, evermore, perpetual, old, ancient, world. The Septuagint translates the word as aion. Allan Macrae suggests that 'olam is derived from 'alam, meaning "to hide" and pointing to the distant future or to the distant past.35 Scott translates 'olam in 3:11 as "an enigma," thereby signifying the root meaning as "that which is hidden."[36] Gordis proposes that "love of the world" is Qoheleth's intention in using the term.[37] Within the context of Chapter 3, there is nearly unanimous agreement that the contrast is between fixed time ('et) and 'olam. In 3:1 Qoheleth states: "There is an appointed time ('et) for everything. And there is a time ('et) for every event under heaven." He then delineates such appointed

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[32]Crenshaw, "In Search of Divine Presence," p. 36.
[33]von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel,* p. 230.
[34]Scott, *The Way of Wisdom*, p. 170.
[35]*Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, s. v. "'olam," by Allan A. Macrae, pp. 672-673.
[36]R.B.Y. Scott, *The Anchor Bible: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes*, edited by William Foxwell Albright and David Noel Freeman (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1965), p. 221.
[37]Gordis, *Koheleth*, pp. 231, 232.

times (again, '*et*) in verses 2-8. God has ordained a proper time ('et) for every-thing, but as Roland Murphy comments,

God runs things off at his own time, and man is not geared to this scheme because of the timeless <*'olam*> in his heart. Hence, he cannot discover 'the work God has done'--a limitation that earlier sages failed to appreciate.[38]

I agree with James Williams, that however the word is translated, the im-plication is that '*olam* lies at the center of existence. '*Olam* is the component which makes the human species distinctive; '*olam* provides a link with God, yet God's work remains mysterious.[39] Williams suggests that '*olam* is the reason for the "unhealable alienation of man from his world."[40] It is at least the source of man's deepest yearning for meaning.

Williams contrasts two recent responses to the function of '*olam* as the primary cause of alienation.[41] The position credited to H. Gese is that alienation is overcome in the world-context through the fear of God; thus, alienation is replaced by openness to the world as man thankfully receives the good times in life as a gift from God. The individual will accept the bad times in accord with God's purposes, and he will recognize "that it is only his inability to understand the '*olam* that brings him to his existential impasse."[42] Williams disagrees with this position, and he deduces a contrary view from H.H. Schmid: the gifts of God are arbitrary; fear of God and accepting his gifts in life do not provide a sufficient explanation to man's estrangement.[43]

Williams identifies '*olam* as the antithesis of *hebel* (vanity), and he also con-tends that '*olam* is the basic cause of human striving. He argues:

God puts the '*olam* in men's hearts, he wills that they fear him-and they could not fear him if they were unaware of the '*olam*, which is the 'divine' dimension. Yet justice and righteousness cannot be observed in the world, and oppression cannot be rectified by final judgement or a release of the spirit to a heavenly reaIm.[44]

In accord with the position he attributes to Schmid, Williams maintains that Qoheleth's fear of God is due to his discontent over the *hebel* of life, and his yearning for knowledge of the '*olam* which would make the course of life appar-

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[38]Roland E. Murphy, "Ecclesiastes (Qoheleth)," in *Jerome Biblical Commentary*, edited by Raymond E. .Brown, S.S., Joesph A. Fitzmyer, S.J., and Roland E. Murphy, O. Carm., (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968), p. 536.
[39]Williams, "The Wisdom of Koheleth," p. 378.
[40]Ibid., pp. 378-379.
[41]H. Gese, "Die Krise der Weisheit bei Koheleth," in *Les Sagesses des Proche-Orient Ancien* (Paris, 1963); and H.H. Schmid, *Wesen und Geschichte der Weisheit*, BZAW 101, G. Fohrer, ed. (Berlin, 1966).
[42]Williams, "The Wisdom of Koheleth," p. 377.
[43]Ibid., pp. 378, 380. H. L. Ginsberg suggests the same: "For Koheleth regards God as the absolute and *arbitrary* [his emphasis] master of destiny." Human merit does not matter, for God's actions toward man are unpredictable. See H. L. Ginsberg, "The Structure and Contents of the Book of Koheleth," *Vetus Testamentum Supplement* 3 (1955): 147. As will soon be apparent, I do not think that the emphasis falls on the arbitrariness of God, but rather on man's interpretation of God and His actions.
[44]Ibid., p. 380.

ent to him and allow true wisdom. Williams concedes that the wise and the foolish are "in the same boat."[45] In what follows, I tend to side with the opposing conclusion, that is, Qoheleth's response to God in fear and submission is a life-affirming alternative to estrangement.

I believe that Francis Nichols' explanation provides insight into man's dilemma over *'olam*, God, and alienation: in 3:11 Qoheleth is struggling with life's significance in the historical or world context. Empirically, man cannot verify God's control over history, yet faith says that God is directing man's drama. In spite of the conclusion of experience -vanity of vanities- man continues to strive.[46] Although man seemingly has no reference point for meaning in his experience of nature, society, or within himself, he yearns for significance. Why? As Kenneth James explains, there is a level of meaning known only to God, but God has placed an element of this meaning, '*olam*, in man's heart. This component within man's being draws him to profound contact with life.[47]

Qoheleth's Concept of God

Israel's God was Yahweh, the God who spoke at Sinai, and the God to which Israel was bound in the covenant relationship. The older sages based their wisdom on the experience of Yahweh, but Qoheleth chooses the more common name "Elohim" to relate his theistic perspective. Within the Old Testament, Elohim signifies God as: creator (cf. Isa 45:18; Jonah 1:9); savior (cf. Gen 17:8; Exod 3:6; Isa 45:21); the sovereign (cf. Ps 57:2; Isa 54:5; Jer 32:27); the God of heaven (cf. Gen 24:7); and the supreme God above all gods (cf. Deut 10:17; Ps 136:2). Often the name "Yahweh" occurs in the same context with "Elohim," but such is not the case in Qoheleth.[48]

There can be no doubt that Qoheleth was familiar with the various concepts surrounding the name "Elohim"; I suggest that Qoheleth adopts the less personal name to convey his thinking more precisely. Helmer Ringgren points out that "Elohim" is often used instead of "Yahweh" with the intent of exalting Yahweh as God absolutely-the transcendent God.[49] Along with transcendence comes a measure of abstractness; God as Elohim transcends the rationality of humankind. As a Hebrew, and thus a monotheist, Qoheleth knows Yahweh to be the one true God, but perhaps Qoheleth's experience fails to affirm the

[45]Ibid. Despite this conclusion, Williams deduces a positive message from Qoheleth, see n. 22.
[46]Nichols, "Samuel Beckett and Ecclesiastes," p. 16. .
[47]Kenneth W. James, "Ecclesiastes: Precursor of Existentialists," p. 89. By now the question has possibly arisen: is '*olam* the *imago dei*? Perhaps, for there seem to be parallels. But to assert '*olam* as the *imago dei* seems unwise in the face of the ambiguity surrounding 'olam and its use in 3:11.
[48]My purposes within the confines of this paper do not entail an examination of source criticism regarding Old Testament names of God. If the reader is interested in source criticism, Ringgren offers a good starting point in vol. 1 of the *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, s. v. "'*elohim*." Also see James L. Crenshaw, "Qoheleth in Current Research," *Hebrew Annual Review* 7 (1983): 44, for a recent bibliography on the question: "Was Qoheleth the guardian of authentic Yahwism or did he circle around biblical faith, remaining on the outermost fringes?"
[49]*Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, s. v. "'*elohim*" by Helmer Riggren, p. 284.

intimate personal involvement claimed by Israel in the prior centuries. For Qoheleth, Elohim is God, but Elohim is girded with mystery.

Compared to other Old Testament writings, the motif of God's hiddenness is intensified by Qoheleth; some have even referred to it as skepticism.[50] Qoheleth recognizes that discerning God's activity in life cannot be accomplished through the normal process of the wisdom tradition, that is, by means of observation; thus, the failure to obtain satisfying answers is not because God is increasingly inaccessable, but because man's methods are suspect. Qoheleth concludes that the sage, by reason and wisdom, cannot discover the work of God, no matter how diligent he may be (cf. 8:16, 17). Furthermore, man cannot discover the activity of God "who makes all things" (11:5). And experientially man does not know his future or what awaits him (cf. 9:1). Perhaps Qoheleth is focusing attention on what John Hick has called "epistemic distance," that is, man exists in a world in which God is not "immediately and overwhelmingly" apparent.[51] The question yet to be answered is whether Qoheleth perceives man as ultimately and totally alienated from God.

Crenshaw points out a major consideration at this point:

The careful reader will have noted that Qoheleth seems to know far more about God than his theology of divine mystery allows. In truth, he frequently makes assertations about God's will and activity despite the protestations about God's hiddenness.[52]

I suggest that apparent inconsistencies in Qoheleth' s concept of God are instead components of a viable theocentric world view. God is concealed and conceals, but this enigma is not absolute-God is not an unknown variable. Qoheleth knows that his God is the Creator of the cosmos and sovereign over his creation: Who can change God's work? (cf. 7:13); God is responsible for both prosperity and adversity (cf. 7:14); wise men and their deeds are subject to God (cf. 9:1); "everything that God does will remain forever" and is perfect (3:14). Man must accept the element of mystery that separates him from God, but man cannot discount what can be known about Elohim.

For Qoheleth God grows more personal as the sovereign Lord becomes the judge of every man: "God will judge both the righteous man and the wicked man, for a time for every matter and for every deed is there" (3:17; cf. 5:8; 9:1; 11:9; 12:14). As a Jew, Qoheleth had been taught from the rich tradition of the Torah and the Prophets; judgment implies a standard. Final execution of justice

[50] Cf. Samuel E. Balentine, *The Hidden God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 167; Gordis, *Koheleth*, pp. 128-132; R. H. Pfeiffer, "The Peculiar Scepticism of Ecclesiastes*," Journal of Biblical Literature* 53 (1954): 100-,109; Klopfenstein, M. A., "Die Skepsis des Qohelet," *Theologische Zeitschrift* 28 (1972): 97-109; James L. Crenshaw, "The Birth of Skepticism in Ancient Israel," in *The Divine Helmsman*, edited by James L. Crenshaw and S. Sandmel (New York, 1980), pp. 1-19. Balentine notes the following differences between the "psalms of lament" and Qoheleth: first, in Qoheleth the issue is not so much God's hiddenness, as in the psalms, but rather the hiddenness "of the interpretation of events"; and secondly, while in the psalms God bears the burden of responsibility, Qoheleth believes the problem to be man's failure and thus man's responsibility, p. 169.
[51] John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (Cleveland: Collins World, 1968), p. 373.
[52] Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom*, p. 139.

is in the hand of God (cf. 9:1; 11:9); and perhaps, even for Qoheleth, the acts of men will be measured against God's commandments (cf. 12:13).[53] Man must understand, however, that this standard cannot be used to manipulate God. God can be known as sovereign creator and as judge, but the dominant theme regarding the person of God is found in Qoheleth's continuous reference to God as the source of joy. Qoheleth has identified alienation from nature, from society, from human achievements, and to a degree, from God. But in the face of this estrangement, he asserts that man should be happy! As the individual approaches the common occurrences of daily life, he is to enjoy them. For Qoheleth, God is the source of this enjoyment; he is the rewarder of man. In the mundane toil of life, the very toil that can lead to alienation, man is to enjoy his labor as a gift from God (cf. 2:24,25; 3:12). The good and fitting in life is to eat and drink and enjoy the few years of life, "for he will not often consider the years of his life, because God keeps him occupied with the gladness of his heart" (5:20, cf. also 8:15; 9:7). Von Rad notes that although God's dealings are often shrouded with ambiguity, Qoheleth recognizes one sure "lot" in life directed toward good. Von Rad adds, "Here for the first time, Qoheleth is aware that he is in accord with a divine purpose; here he sees himself face to face with a beneficient God. . ." (cf. 2:24; 9:7-9).[54]

In 2:26 Qoheleth notes that to the good person God has given wisdom, knowledge and joy; thus, Qoheleth does not totally discount the value of wisdom and knowledge, only the direction the pursuit for understanding had taken (cf. 7:15-18; 10:10; 12:9-12). Qoheleth certainly recognizes the limits of wisdom, but in seeing its merits, he is mindful that the source is God.[55] Therefore, God is the origin of experiential significance and of all theoretical understanding leading to meaningful existence.

[53]Today most scholars agree that the epilogue is the product of a redactor, perhaps one of Qoheleth's students. In all three of Wright's articles (see n. 19), he argues that the main structure of the book is independent of the epilogue. Cf. also Williams, "The Wisdom of Koheleth," pp. 382, 389; Gerald T. Sheppard, "The Epilogue to Qoheleth As Theological Commentary," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 39 (1977): 182-189; Gerald H. Wilson, "'The Words of the Wise': The Intent and Significance of Qohelet 12:9-14," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 103.2 (1984): 175-192. Michael V. Fox in "Frame-Narrative and Composition in the Book of Qohelet," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 48 (1977): 83-106 proposes that the entire book is product of an epilogist. As a frame-narrative, the book takes on a whole new concept of unity; the "frame-narrator" relates the story and teachings of Qoheleth the sage, p. 91. The epilogue is a type of epic situation, i.e., it is didactic as in the father-son instruction, p. 99. Fox contends that the epilogue reinforces Qoheleth's teachings: Qoheleth advises fear of God (5:6; 7:18), and he warns of divine judgment (2:26; 3:17; 8:12b-13), "even though he sometimes denies its working." And although Qoheleth does not mention explicitly obedience to God's commandments, "that requirement could be inferred from 5:3-5:" p. 103. I admit, in accord with Fox, that the epilogue does admonish in a more dogmatic fashion than the rest of the book; nevertheless, there is no reason to suppose the epilogue contradicts Qoheleth's main teaching.

[54] von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, p. 231.

[55] In *Koheleth* Gordis states:"Koheleth, a son of Israel, reared on the words of the Torah, the Prophets, and the Sages, could not doubt the reality of God for an instant. For him, the existence of the world was tantamount to the existence of God....It was on the question of God's relation to men that Koheleth parted company with the conventional teachers of his time. ...There was not a shred of proof that God wished toreveal the true Hokmah, the secret of life, to men," p. 122.

The Divine Mandate

Time and time again Qoheleth identifies man's proper response to Elohim as fear: the sovereign God has worked in his perfect ways so that men should fear him (ct. 3:14); God is holy and exalted. When entering his house and making vows, be respectful and serious-minded, not lighthearted (cf. 5:1-7). Wisdom and righteousness are the results of fearing God (cf. 7:18). Even though the wicked may seem to prosper and lengthen their days, still, Qoheleth maintains, it will be better for those who fear God-and fear God openly (cf. 8:12, 13). The epilogue, which concurs with the main body of the book, admonishes the reader to "fear God and keep his commandments, because this applies to every person" (12:13).[56]

What exactly is this divine imperative of fear? Is it an attitude of terror? Commenting on the occurrence in 3:14, Murphy states,

Fear of God means walking under a heaven that is mysteriously closed, walking without the assurance that lightning might not suddenly shoot out and strike you as you go- every step relying upon the free gift of God, but with every step also summoned to suffer the riddle and oppression that God can inflict.[57]

But for Qoheleth fear of God is much more than dread evoked by uncertainty. Fear of God is willful submission to the Divine and to his plans. Such fear implies a trust in God in spite of multiplied perplexities; it includes not only an emotional state, but conduct that is pleasing to God. Thus, amid the vanity of life there is a proper ethical code, there can be wisdom and knowledge, and there can be significant existence. Fear of God is the disposition that combines the components of mystery, vanity, and limited knowledge to result in meaningful existence.

Conclusion

Common experience seems to invite skepticism, agnosticism, and even Atheism. Qoheleth recognizes the proneness toward doubt and abdication; man's limitations are the innate qualities that pilot him toward alienation. The self-appointed station as the measure of all things continually eludes man; thus, he is destined to this insatiable desire for something more. Why? As Gordis explains,

Man is a creature whose reach is always greater than his grasp, with a boundless imagination weaving hopes and desires far beyond the capacity of his brief earth-bound existence to fulfill.[58]

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[56]Sheppard, "The Epilogue to Qoheleth,"argues that the admonition "fear God and keep his commandments" has no parallel in the body of Qoheleth, p.187. In view of 3:14; 5:7; 7:18; 8:12, in addition to n. 53 above, I find Sheppard's position implausible. In contrast, Wilson, "The Words of the Wise," suggests that the epilogist selected the phrase because it does reflect the content of Qoheleth, p. 178. He states furthermore that there is "sufficient evidence" to support the thesis that the epilogue is meant to link Qoheleth together with Proverbs. The epilogue could therefore serve as a "canonical key to the interpretation or both," pp. 179, 191, 192.
[57]Murphy, *Jerome Biblical Commentary*, p. 536.
[58]Gordis, *Koheleth*, pp. 130-131.

Qoheleth offers hope in teaching that although limitations are inescapable, they do not necessitate a renunciation of meaningful existence. The rupture between most modern existentialists and Qoheleth occurs precisely at the recognition of a higher level of meaning: for the existentialist, meaning escapes man because there is no reference point outside of humanity to give life meaning; for Qoheleth, meaning may be elusive and cause the feeling of *hebel*, but nevertheless, meaning exists because God exists.[59]

Qoheleth's conclusions are relevant for the modern religious experience, but the meaning of Qoheleth's unconventional words is often muddled by the attempt to interpret him solely from a New Testament perspective. Harvey Cox argues that "the biblical doctrine of God's hiddenness stands at the center of the; doctrine of God."[60] God's hiddenness does not mean absolute alienation from the "wholly other"; instead the inscrutability of God entails that God is revealed only in the way, and to the degree, that he desires. Qoheleth is fully aware of the divine dimension which remains beyond the mind of man; his awareness of this higher level is far more acute than the understanding of the older sages. The failure to accept this exalted view of the Divine results in deeper alienation, for when God is not responsive to the theist's dogmatism and doctrinaire formulas, the theist feels cut off from the source of meaningful existence.

The proper rejoinder to alienation for modern theism is found within the problem itself: theology must elucidate the difference between the Creator and the creature. George Kendall, commenting on the biblical account of the Fall, makes the perspicacious observation that the effort of man to abolish his crea-tureliness is the source of the schism between creature and Creator.[61] I agree with Kendall: man must reaffirm creaturehood, for it is the negation of his limitations as a creature which leads him toward deeper alienation and struggle in life.[62] Qoheleth's affirmation of creaturehood is apparent in his exhortation to enjoy life as the gift of God. Underlying the affirmative approach to life must be a trust in God's divine plan, despite the daily uncertainties of life. Hence, modern theology must reckon man as man, and be reconciled to God as the majestic, self-existent, self-revealing, and often mysterious Absolute of the universe. Dogma must not be defended to the exclusion of the truth-the truth that the unequivocal meaning of this existence rests beyond mortal man.

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[59]There is a higher level of meaning, that is, there is a level of meaning known only to God. When God serves as the reference point-or the hub of existence for the individual-one finds equanimity in the belief that although he does not have all the answers, God does. It is this abandonment, faith, that allows joy to radiate from the higher level into the mundane life of mortal man.
[60]Harvey Cox, *The Secular City* (New York, 1965), quoted in Gordis, *Koheleth*, pp. 120-121.
[61] Kendall, "Alienation and the Struggle for Existence," p. 67.
[62] Ibid., p. 69.