

Ecclesiastes 3:21

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Who knoweth the spirit of man that goeth upward, and the spirit of the beast that goeth downward to the earth?

Analysis

Who knoweth the spirit of man that goeth upward (רוח בְּנֵי הָאָדָם הָעֹלָה, ruach benei ha'adam ha'olah)—a rhetorical question expressing uncertainty about different eternal destinies for humans versus animals. The verb 'olah ('ascending') contrasts with yoredeth ('descending'), suggesting directional separation at death. Yet the interrogative mi yodea ('who knows?') introduces epistemological doubt from an 'under the sun' perspective.

This verse has sparked interpretive debate: Is Qoheleth genuinely uncertain about human afterlife, or is he speaking from the limited viewpoint of natural observation? Reformed interpreters generally view this as the Preacher demonstrating what human wisdom alone cannot discern—the eternal state requires divine revelation. Genesis 2:7 established that God breathed into man the neshamah chayyim (breath of life), making humanity qualitatively different from animals, yet observation alone cannot prove immortality. Only Christ's resurrection (1 Corinthians 15) finally answers this ancient question.

Historical Context

Pre-exilic Israelite theology contained limited clarity about afterlife distinctions. Daniel 12:2 and later intertestamental literature developed these concepts, but Ecclesiastes reflects earlier, more opaque understanding—intentionally highlighting limits of earthly wisdom.

Related Passages

Hebrews 11:1 — Definition of faith

James 2:17 — Faith and works

Study Questions

1. How does the New Testament's clear teaching on resurrection and judgment resolve Qoheleth's uncertainty?
2. What does this verse teach about the limits of natural theology versus special revelation?
3. How should confidence in human immortality (based on Scripture) affect your daily choices?

Interlinear Text

מִי	יֹדֵעַ	וְרוּחַ	בְּנִי	הָאָדָם	הַהוֹלֵךְ	הַיָּא
H4310	Who knoweth	and the spirit	of man	H120	that goeth	H1931
	H3045	H7307	H1121		H5927	
לָמַעְלָה	וְרוּחַ	הַבְּהֵמָה	הַיֹּכֵדֶת	הַיָּא	לָמַטָּה	לְאָרֶץ:
upward	and the spirit	of the beast	that goeth	H1931	downward	to the earth
H4605	H7307	H929	H3381		H4295	H776

Additional Cross-References

Ecclesiastes 12:7 (Spirit): Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.

John 14:3 (Parallel theme): And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also.

2 Corinthians 5:1 (Parallel theme): For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.

Philippians 1:23 (Parallel theme): For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better:

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