

CLARIFYING
BAFFLING
BIBLICAL PASSAGES

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

RECOVERY OF RARE WORDS
IN ECCLESIASTES 7:26 –28

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RECOVERY OF RARE WORDS IN ECCLESIASTES 7:26–28

QOHELETH'S CHAUVINISM

The significant difference between the KJV translation of Ecclesiastes 7:26 and more recent translations is the use of a comma. The MT reads **וּמוֹצָא אֲנִי מֵרַמְמוֹת אֶת־הָאִשָּׁה אֲשֶׁר־הִיא מֵצוּדִים וְחַרְמִים לְבָהּ**, which became in the KJV “and I find more bitter than death the woman, whose heart *is* snares and nets.” This translation has the speaker, Qoheleth, making the blanket statement that any woman is worse than death. If the comma after the word “woman” is removed, Qoheleth’s statement becomes a qualified statement that *only* the woman whose heart is a snare and net is more bitter than death. This is the interpretation of the RSV, “And I found more bitter than death the woman whose heart is snares and nets,” and the NIV, “I find more bitter than death the woman who is a snare, whose heart is a trap.”

Scott (1965: 238) maintained the traditional interpretation, translating “More bitter to me than death was my experience with woman, whose thoughts are traps and snares.”¹ This interpretation, reading **אֶת** as the preposition “with” rather than the sign of the direct object, restricts the bitterness to the experience of the Qoheleth, but women in general are berated as those whose thoughts are traps and snares. However, the crux of the verse is not the **אֶת**, be it a preposition or a particle, but with the ambiguity of the relative pronoun **אֲשֶׁר**, which can be read as a restrictive modifier meaning “only those who (are snares),” or it has a causal force, “forasmuch as, in that (she is a woman)” (BDB 83b).

CLARIFICATION FROM COGNATES

The seemingly elementary phrase, אִתְּהָאִשָּׁה אֲשֶׁר־הִיא “the woman who she,” may be a bit more complex than appears at first glance. The relative pronoun may be nothing other than the misvocalization of the אֲשֶׁר which is cognate to Arabic أُشِرَ (^ʔ*ašir*) “exulting, or exulting greatly, or excessively; or exulting by reason of wealth, and behaving with pride, and self-conceitedness, and boastfulness, and want of thankfulness, or . . . rejoicing, and resting the mind upon things agreeable with natural desires” (Lane 1863: 62).

If this is the correct derivation of אֲשֶׁר, the text behind the MT was probably אִתְּ אִשָּׁה אֲשֶׁר־הִיא, with the definite article הַ of אִשָּׁה־הַ having been originally the feminine ending of אֲשֶׁר־הַ “self-conceited.” Once the meaning of this rare word was lost, a pseudo-correction transferred the הַ of אֲשֶׁר־הַ to אִשָּׁה since it was preceded by the particle אִתְּ, which is normally followed by a definite noun.² With the recognition of אֲשֶׁר as a rare word and with the reversal a pseudo-correction, Eccl. 7:26 can now be translated as “more bitter than death is a self-conceited/thankless woman; she is *snares* and her heart is *nets*.” The plural predicates *snares* and *nets*, following the singular subjects אִיא “she” and לִבָּהּ “her heart,” are plurals of intensity (GKC 124^c), which can be paraphrased in English with a corresponding emphatic singular such as “a sure snare” and “a really tight net.”

The appeal to the Arabic cognate أُشِرَ (^ʔ*ašir*) “exulting” to explain the אֲשֶׁר in this verse gains support from Qoheleth’s use of אֲשֶׁר in 7:29, “Behold, this alone I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many devices.” Scott (1965: 239) questioned the integrity of the MT and commented: “Heb. *yāšār*, a unique and curious word to be

used of man’s creation. The context suggests that it is a corruption of *w^eiššāh*, ‘and woman,’ but there is no support for this in the ancient versions.” However, Scott overlooked the fact that the word for “the man” in Ecc 7:29 is אָדָם, which is as gender inclusive there as it is in Gen 1: 27, where אָדָם “the human being” is equal to זָכָר וְנִקְבָּה “male and female,” and as in Gen 5:2b, which states אָדָם אֶת אִשְׁתּוֹ וַיִּקְרָא “and he named *them* Adam.”

The semantic range of *yusr* (يسر), the cognate of שָׁר, explains why שָׁר is so appropriate for this context. The Arabic *yusr* (يسر) means “ease, easiness [of circumstance], and what is made easy” (Lane 1893: 2977).³ With this definition in mind, שָׁר—used in reference to God’s “making of man”—is a clear allusion to Eden where אָדָם (Adam and Eve) surely had “easiness [of circumstance].” But the ease of Eden ended when אָדָם (Adam and Eve) “willfully turned to many reckonings of their own” (7:29b).

As with שָׁר, so also with שָׂר, the clue to the curious is in the cognates. Qoheleth certainly had a disliking of excessively boastful or self-conceited women, but there is no basis to pin on him the label of misogynist for allegedly having said that “women were more bitter than death.”

The ambiguity of the comparison in 7:28 (“one man in a thousand I found, but not one woman in all these did I find”) has also been problematic. Barton (1908: 147) concluded:

This [7:28c] implies that Qoheleth was something of a misogynist. He apparently had some bitter experience with a member of the opposite sex. He is more than reflecting the Oriental view that women are more prone to sin than men. . . . Qoheleth is saying “perfect men are rare, perfect women are non-existent.”

Scott (1965: 238) added some bracketed words: “but not one woman in all these did I find [to be wise]”; and the NIV added italicized words: “I found one *upright* man among a thousand, but not one *upright* woman among them all.”

A better option is to restore a word which may have dropped out due to haplography. A *Vorlage* with a cognate of either (1) Arabic مالوف (*mā' lūf*) “familiar,” مالف (*mā' lāf*) “object of familiarity” or (2) الف (*ilf*) “close friend, intimate, confidant, lover” (Lane 80–81; Wehr 1979: 29)⁴ would have read:

אָדָם אֶחָד מֵאַלְף מֵאַלְף מֵאַלְף מֵאַלְף

“one familiar/friendly man out of a thousand I found

וְאִשָּׁה בְּכָל-אַלְפָה לֹא מֵאַלְפָתִי

but a (friendly) woman

among all these (= the thousand) I did not find.

The אֶלֶף מֵאַלְפָה or אֶלֶף מֵאַלְפָה in an unpointed *Vorlage* appeared to be a dittography; and, as a result, a scribal decision to “correct” the dittography became the prelude for traditions alleging that Qoheleth berated women—even though he allegedly confessed, “I got singers, both men and women, and many concubines, man’s delight (תֵּעֲנוּגוֹת)” (RSV 2:8).⁵

In Ecc 2:8 the enigmatic וְשָׂדָה וְשָׂדוּת translated in the Septuagint as οἰνοχόου καὶ οἰνοχόας “a butler and female cupbearers”) is actually the cognate of the Arabic شدو/شدو (*šadw / šadā*) “he sang, chanted, recited poetry” (Lane 1872: 1521; Wehr 1979: 538). The phrase should be repointed as participles וְשָׂדוּת וְשָׂדָה “a chanter and chantresses,” like the preceding וְשָׂדוּת וְשָׂדָה. There is no apparent reason to trans-

late the MT **וּשְׂדוֹת וְשָׂדֵה** as “many concubines” (RSV, NRS, NAU) or “and a harem as well” (NIB, NIV) or “a wife and wives” (YLT), as though Qohelet had been a playboy.

CONCLUSIONS

By inserting a comma in a translation it is possible to make Qoheleth say, “I find more bitter than death the woman, whose heart *is* snares and nets.” But the insertion of a comma is a translator’s choice, not a necessity. Qoheleth may have said only that some women are worse than death, and in so saying demonstrated a personality bias, not a gender bias. He disliked those women who were snares or nets. As reconstructed by this writer, he found women who were **אֲשֵׁרָה** “exulting by reason of wealth, and behaving with pride, and self-conceitedness,” to be more bitter than death.

The addition of words which make Qoheleth say “not one woman is *upright*” or “not one woman *wise*,” is purely subjective. Some objectivity has been introduced to make clear the comparison between the man and the woman in 7:28 by limiting the options to what may have been due to a haplography in the *Vorlage*. Reconstructing the dittography **מֵאֵלֶּף מֵאֵלֶּף** and interpreting it in the light of Arabic cognates for a “familiar person” and “intimate friend” suggest that Qoheleth had a hard time with close relationships. For all of his reckoning he could find only one male friend out of a thousand people, but not a single female friend. Qoheleth suggested (7:29) that Edenic relationships between male and female were lost by (mis)calculations. Some of the miscalculations perpetuate themselves in mistranslations and traditions which have denigrated all women, not just the self-conceited and thankless women.

NOTES

1. Scott commented (1965: 239), “[bitter] agrees with the subject of the sentence rather than with woman (or, “a woman”); hence, *my experience with* instead of the usual translation, ‘I found more bitter than death is the woman’”
2. As noted in BDB (86a) and GKC (§117^d) the direct object sign תָּשׂ is well attested with indefinite nouns. Especially noteworthy is Lev 20:14, $\text{וַיִּקַּח אִשָּׁת־אִשָּׁה}$ “he took a woman,” like the אִשָּׁת־אִשָּׁה proposed here.
3. Note also $\text{מִיִּשְׂרָיִם בְּיָדֶיךָ מְאֹד בָּרַךְ}$ in Song of Solomon 1:4 which means, in light of this Arabic cognate, “they loved you more than *great luxuries*” (the *great* added to indicate the plural of intensity). In light of this cognate, MT יִשְׂרָ can be revocalized as a *quṭl* segolate noun, i.e., as יִשְׂרָ .
4. Note the wordplay in Arabic, like the one suggested for Ecc 7:28, ألف مؤلفة (*alf muwallafat*) “[These are] a thousand made complete” (Lane 1863: 81). The *Pi^el* participle مؤلف “teacher” (BDB 48) also remains a possibility.
5. Note that the Arabic cognate of הַיִּלְנִינִת is غنج (*gunj*) “[in the present day generally used to signify lascivious motion, or a wriggling of the body or hips, under the excitement of sexual passion, or to excite such passion]” (Lane 1877: 2300) and “to coquet, flirt, play the coquette (woman)” (Wehr 1979: 802).