

# Vetus Testamentum

## Enjoying the Tension: Reading Qoh 2:25 in the Context of Qoh 2:24-26 --Manuscript Draft--

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### Enjoying the Tension: Reading Qoh 2:25 in the Context of 2:24-26

In response to the comments of the reviewer:

1. We are glad that our alternative translation “makes sense” and that the discussions are sufficiently in depth.
2. We have looked again at the structure and brought forward a key sentence from the conclusion (p 15) so as to clarify what our direction of argument will be (on page 2).
3. We have omitted the sentence “scholarly activity that tends to paper over the difficulties...” as we did not want to make a hard distinction between other work and our own. It is true that we are in the realm of uncertainty and so that is the sentence that we have brought forward to p 2 (as in point 2).
4. In order to provide more of a preview on p 3 we have expanded the content of the structure paragraph and we have provided an introduction to the two main text critical issues that will be addressed. The discussion of the section of text proper then starts on p 4.
5. P 10 We have changed the reference to the idea of God eating and drinking to refer just to Qoheleth – the Hebrew Bible as a whole was a sweeping generality that we are glad that the reviewer spotted.
6. P 14 We have replaced *lectio difficilior* with *hapax legomena*.

Title Page

# **Enjoying the Tension: Reading Qoh 2:25 in the Context of Qoh 2:24-26**

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## Enjoying the Tension: Reading Qoh 2:25 in the Context of Qoh 2:24-26

### Abstract

Qoheleth's experiential method and inner-dialogue creates tensions on the levels of language, style, content and theological ideas. In this paper we seek to explore this tension in relation to a short section (Qoh 2:24-26) that is placed at the end of chapter 2. In the process we question the section division itself and the usual emendation of the translation of v. 25 to fit into the thought of these three verses and that of their neighbouring verses. We engage in a detailed analysis of the versions and of scholarly opinion on the translation, key terms and structure of these verses. We argue that this is just one example of where literary structure has dictated translational options and we prefer instead to 'enjoy the tension' of the more convincing and less accepted translation of verse 25 as "For who can eat or even sense, apart **from me**."

### Keywords

Tension, ideational contradictions, literary structure, royal autobiography, experience,

The dominant literary type employed by Qohelet is observation and reflection.

As Crenshaw accurately states: "Qohelet seeks out experience of every kind as the most accurate path to insight... The repeated use of the personal pronoun *אני* (I) thrusts the ego of the speaker into prominence, leaving no doubt about his investment in what is

being reported” (p. 28).<sup>1</sup> Qoheleth’s experiential method leads him into conflict with traditional ideas and leads to what Loader calls “patterns of tension created by the counterposition of two elements to one another. This tendency is so prominent throughout the book that it may be called its outstanding characteristic” (p. 1). For Loader this tension, or set of polarities as he prefers to call it, is witnessed in genre terms by the tension both between forms used and the book’s content and within the content itself. The dominant polarity concerning the worth of wisdom itself is explained in the use of “weapons of the *hokma* against the *hokma*” (p.131).<sup>2</sup> Loader introduces us to an important aspect of Qoheleth’s technique. This is however only a description of a small element, in genre terms, of many levels of tension at work in this small book in relation to language, style, content and theological ideas. Qoheleth is not simply in dialogue with tradition, he is also in dialogue with himself – as Forti writes, “the conflicting points of view in the discourses of the book express a dialogue between Qoheleth and his inner-self” (p. 236).<sup>3</sup> However, this inner dialogue is not easy to diagnose and identify clearly. The uncertainties make it difficult to prefer one reading over another without entering a

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<sup>1</sup> J. L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes: A Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia, 1987), p. 28.

<sup>2</sup> J. A. Loader, *Polar Structures in the Book of Qohelet* (BZAW 152; Berlin: 1979), pp. 1-3; 29-116.

<sup>3</sup> T. Forti, “The Fly and the Dog: Observations on the Ideational Polarity In the Book of Qoheleth”, in R. L. Troxel, K. G. Friebel, and D. R. Magary (eds.), *Seeking Out the Wisdom of the Ancients: Essays Offered to Honor Michael V. Fox* (Winona Lake, IN, 2005), pp. 235-255.

subjective area of exegesis that focuses not simply on the meaning of particular words, but also on the meaning to be gleaned from the context surrounding the phrase and even in relation to the message of the entire book.

In this paper we wish to draw out the related point that often a particular tension is lost in the scholarly attempt to segment and divide the book into meaningful pericopes.<sup>4</sup> This is one of the problems raised by the process of commentary writing. As in the case below, it is assumed, in the interests of defining a ‘section’, that verses fit together in a logical sequence or that the flow of thought is in one direction. By contrast, we believe that it is a key aspect of Qoheleth’s style that he teases us with abrupt changes of subject or with linguistic word-plays or complex meanings that heighten the sense of tension that already exists. This undermines our attempts to find neat sections and thwarts the commentator’s best intentions.

Qoh 2:24-26 is often regarded as the conclusion to the section 2:18-26 (on the theme of deploring the advantages of toil), also to 2:12-26 (experiences and reflections at the end of the second half of the royal autobiography) or to the wider section 1:12-2:26 (the entire royal autobiography), depending on how one chooses to divide the opening chapters of this work. There is a tendency therefore to harmonize not only the three verses of this section, but also to keep this section closely in alignment with what has gone before. Commentators’ attention to the structure of the chapter and its literary

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<sup>4</sup> On various attempts to find structure in this book, see C. L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes: A New Translation With Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven and London, 2008), pp. 42-47.

nature has gone on to influence the many emendations of textual criticism, as we shall show. Two text-critical issues stand out in this section that we will address in detail below, notably issues around the textual emendation of מַמְנִי and the meaning of the word יְחִוֵּשׁ, both of which occur in verse 25, the middle verse of the three. The preference for seeing this as a distinct section has tended to influence translation as we shall demonstrate. The tendency to harmonize sections of verses and then whole chapters together, then, has led to distortions in interpretation and ever more fantastic suggestions on the part of scholars. Literary context has dictated translational options rather than the other way around. Instead we opt for keeping the tension of the translation and seeing where that option leads in relation to understanding this enigmatic author.

The choice of Qoh 2:25 as a particularly difficult verse is not new – J. de Waard (1979) used it as his prime example of problems in translation and textual criticism. De Waard maintains, however that “in a proper approach to translation the analysis of larger units like sections, subsections and paragraphs normally precedes that of sentences, phrases and words” (p. 511).<sup>5</sup> However it is our contention that each sentence needs, first and foremost, to be analysed independently of the surrounding context.

With reference to Qoh 2:24-26, verse 24 is the first verse of the entire chapter to introduce a divine dimension with mention of the ‘hand of God’, an aspect also taken up in verse 26. If verse 25 also implicitly refers to God then this heightens the argument for a divinely orientated conclusion to the section, however delineated (2:12-26; 2:18-26 or

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<sup>5</sup> J. de Waard, “The Translator and Textual Criticism”, *Biblica* 60 (1979), pp. 509-529.

even 1:12-2:26). So the NRSV translates these verses:

V. 24 *There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God;*

V. 25 *for apart **from him** who can eat or who can have enjoyment?*

V. 26 *For to the one who pleases him God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy; but to the sinner he gives the work of gathering and heaping only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a chasing after wind.”*

However in the NRSV there is a note against the ‘from him’ of verse 25 that indicates that the English translation is following the Greek (ἀπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ) and Syriac (לבר מנה) and that the Hebrew text has ממני ‘apart from me’. This note alerts us to a problem. It is soon apparent that, if the MT is followed, the meaning changes entirely for v. 25 — not referring to God ממנו ‘from him’ but to ‘me’, namely the narrator/the fictional king.<sup>6</sup> Thus no longer is this section as a whole about relationship with God, rather a tension is introduced whereby verses 24 and 26 seem to refer to God, but v. 25 refers to ‘me’, presumably the author Qoheleth in his Solomonic ‘king’ guise. There are, though,

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<sup>6</sup> Waard however, opts for the MT’s version of ממני being, only here, a *lectio difficilior* which implicitly quotes a sentence pronounced by God. He argues against the emended reading and writes: “it seems highly probable that the evidence of the Hebrew and the versions for the reading *mimmennû* testifies only to a facilitating reading and a translational adaptation of the *lectio difficilior*”. (Waard, “The Translator and Textual Criticism”, p. 520).



ancient versions that noticed the problem and suggest textual emendations to dissolve the tension as we shall show below.

We prefer to translate these verses as follows:

V. 24 *There is nothing better for humans than to eat and drink and express enjoyment in their toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God.*<sup>7</sup>

V. 25 *For who can eat or even sense, apart **from me**.*

V. 26 *For to the one who pleases him God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy; but to the errant he gives the busyness of gathering and heaping, only for handing on to anyone who pleases God. This also is futility and a chasing after wind.*

Verse 24 rounds off the theme of the previous six verses on toil (2:18-23), but, in true Qoheleth fashion, also introduces a new theme – the fact that enjoyment is from the hand of God [מיד האלוהים היא]. This is the most positive verse of the section and often aligned with other ‘joy’ passages in the book.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, the two catchwords of ‘eat’ and ‘enjoyment’ are taken up in verse 25 in another of Qoheleth’s techniques — of picking up a word or sometimes two in one verse

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<sup>7</sup> Our translation “express enjoyment” for והראה את נפשו follows the double meaning of נפש “soul, spirit” (cf. LXX ψυχῆ) and “throat=appetite.” Cf. Isa 29:8; Prov 6:30; 13:4, 25, hence denoting both satiation and satisfaction.

<sup>8</sup> See R. N. Whybray, “Qoheleth, Preacher of Joy”, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 23 (1982), pp. 87–98; also E. P. Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment in Qoheleth’s Theological Rhetoric* (BZAW 353, Berlin, 2005).

but taking them in new directions in another or in a section.<sup>9</sup> This links the verses together and suggests that any attempt at redactional rearrangement would not be appropriate. Verse 26 is linked to verse 24 by ‘God’ but also to verse 25 with the linking concepts of ‘enjoyment’ and ‘pleasure’ and ‘joy’ and with the link to being pleasing to God, in the reference (twice) to the one who pleases God. Verse 26 also links back to the discussion of wisdom in verses 12 and 21 (with knowledge) and also further back into the chapter (vv. 3, 9, [wisdom]; vv. 1, 10 [pleasure]). In this sense it has a concluding quality.

The interpretive crux in this section is clearly in verse 25 – it is here that our translation departs most radically from the NRSV (cf. NAS). Within the verse itself the most complex enquiry is into the meaning(s) of the verb לחוש.

This complexity illustrates well the more general evaluation often made by scholars of the language of Qoheleth “which is as intriguing as its elusive message”.<sup>10</sup> The root ח"ש functions as a homonym for both meanings: 1. “to hasten” and 2. “to

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<sup>9</sup> Examples are Qoh 2:13-19 where Qoheleth explores different angles regarding the sage (חכם) and Qoh 9:14-18 where he does the same with the theme of wisdom (חכמה).

<sup>10</sup> D. C. Fredericks, *Qoheleth's Language: Re-evaluating its Nature and Date* (Ancient Near Eastern Texts and Studies 3; Lewiston/Queenstown, 1988), p. 1.

feel/sense/enjoy”.<sup>11</sup> It is clear that the first meaning does not fit this context and so it can be discounted.<sup>12</sup> Both the NRSV and our translation opt for the second sense, a sense only found in Qoheleth. However, there is also a third sense if the verb is seen as the root חשׁשׁ: “to be aware, anxious” as used by the Targum. The Aramaic brings the noun חשׁשׁא “apprehension/suspicion” into the mix (instead of יחוּשׁ ‘to feel/sense’) and so translates (with embellishments): “For who is occupied/busy with the words of the law, and who is the man that **has anxiety** about the great day of Judgement, which is to come **except**

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<sup>11</sup> The Vulgate has: *deliciis affluet ut ego* “abound in delights more than I”; cf. NAS, NRV, NJPS. Whybray reads יחוּשׁ “can have enjoyment”. See R. N. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes* (New Century Bible Commentary; London, 1989), p. 64.

<sup>12</sup> See for example., 1 Sam 30:28; Ps 139:30. Jewish medieval commentators interpret לחוּשׁ “to hasten” in various ways. Rashi (1040-1105) reads: “who deserves eating my effort, and who hastens to swallow it other than me”. Qara’ (1050/55-1120/30) adduces a double meaning to לחוּשׁ “hasten” and “enjoy”: “who deserves to hasten for the purpose of eating my labor before my property falls in the hand of others”, and similarly Ibn Ezra (1089-1164): “to hasten to fulfil his desire” (cf. 1 Sam 20:38). Ralbag (1288-1344) opts for the meaning “to enjoy the pleasure” [ירגיש בתענוג]. Ginsburg, who reads “hasten”, points to a similar instance of חוּשׁ being construed with אכל in Hab 1:8: “Like an eagle hastening to eat.” (NRSV: “Like an eagle swift to devour”). See C. D. Ginsburg, *The Book of Ecclesiastes* (London, 1861), pp. 301-302.

me/besides me”.<sup>13</sup> This highlights the importance of ממני in the verse (see discussion below). In our translation we keep the sense ‘apart from me/except me’/‘the same as me’ and do not emend to ממנו ‘him’ to refer to God as the NRSV (following many ancient traditions) does. We note, at this point, Barthelemy who interprets the verse “There is no gourmet nor sensualist but me” (picking up verse 24’s reference to eating and drinking’).<sup>14</sup>

From the earliest translations there were problems with יחוש. The old Greek (G\*), including the direct witnesses of the Greek tradition such as Theodotian (cf. Syr), read πίεται ‘will drink’, so ישתה for יחוש. This is because of the mention of eating which is normally accompanied by drinking (as in verse 24) and so was probably a contextual interpretation. This emendation to ‘can/will drink,’ based on the LXX (Syr, Theod) is unlikely to be correct.

The other Greek manuscripts including Symmachus and Aquila read φείσεται ‘to spare/abstain/refrain from’. It seems as if the translator was playing with the opposite words – φάγεται “to eat” and φείσεται “to spare/abstain/refrain from”. Since the Greek verb φείδομαι often translates the verb יחוס ‘to have pity/to spare’,<sup>15</sup> and never יחוש ‘to

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<sup>13</sup> It is a byform of Rabbinic Hebrew חשש “be uncomfortable, worry”, i.e. the linguistic usage of the Mishnah חוש “to be worried, consider.”

<sup>14</sup> Dominique Barthélemy, *Critique Textuelle de l'Ancien Testament* (OBO 50/5 (Job, Proverbes, Qohélet et Cantique des Cantiques); Fribourg & Göttingen, 2016).

<sup>15</sup> See LXX Deut 7:16; 13:9; 19:13, 21; 25:12; Ps 72:13; Ezek 5:15 ; Hab 1:17. The Tg of Job 20:13, 27:22, and Jer 15:5 employs יחוס to render the verb יחמול “to have

hasten' or 'to feel/sense', the translator might have read the grapheme  $\text{ש}$  instead of  $\text{ש}$ .<sup>16</sup>

In any case, this error led to a tradition of translating verse 25 'to eat and to abstain/refrain from eating', so LXX has: "For who will eat and who will refrain from eating apart from him?". The interpretation of "apart from him" to refer to God in juxtaposition with eating and refraining from eating gives an entirely different meaning to this verse and again links this verse with vv. 24-26 in reference to divine interference. However, the idea of God eating and refraining from eating is out of place in the thought of Qoheleth.

The alternative of reading  $\text{ש}$  instead of  $\text{ש}$  has led modern scholars to emend to  $\text{יחוס/יחוש}$  'abstain, refrain' from  $\text{יחוש}$ , thus maintaining this 'eat/refrain from eating' parallelism which neatly parallels the sequence of opposites in verse 26 – enjoyment and failure to enjoy. So Gordis who also opts for the emended third personal suffix  $\text{ממנו}$  'apart from

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pity/to spare" (cf. LXX'  $\phi\epsilon\acute{\iota}\sigma\epsilon\tau\alpha\iota$ . For parallels of  $\text{חוי"ס/חמ"ל}$ , see Ezek 7:9; 9:10; 8:18.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. e.g. the MT's reading of Gen 26:20:  $\text{וַיִּקְרָא שֵׁם הַבְּאֵר עֶשֶׂק כִּי הִתְעַשְׂקוּ עִמּוֹ}$  "So he called the well Esek, because they contended with him" with the LXX' reading "Injury, for they injured him"—most probably a retroversion of  $\text{עֶשֶׂק}$  "to oppress".

The verb  $\text{עֶשֶׂק}$  "to contend" does not occur elsewhere in the OT. Post-biblical Hebrew knows the word  $\text{עֶשֶׂק}$  only with *samek*. The LXX thus, reflects the root  $\text{עֶשֶׂק}$  "to oppress". For more examples of words that can be read with either  $\text{ש}$  or  $\text{ש}$  see E. Tov, *The Text-Critical Use of the Septuagint in Biblical Research* (Jerusalem Biblical Studies 3; Jerusalem, 1981), pp. 167–169.

God' hence 'who can eat and even refrain from eating apart from Him'.<sup>17</sup> This sentiment links up with ideas of God in 3:13 and 5:18 as the source of eating and drinking in his gifts to humankind.

The uncertain meaning of לחוש has prompted attempts to discover its meaning elsewhere,<sup>18</sup> on the basis of philological analogy with cognate Semitic languages. Thus Ellermeir compares חוש with the Akkadian *hâšû(m)*, bearing both meanings, "to hasten" and "to be worried/anxious" but nonetheless opting for the meaning "worry".<sup>19</sup> This meaning has convinced several commentators, including recently Fox and Krüger.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> R. Gordis, *Koheleth/Ecclesiastes: The Man and His World* (New York, 1968), pp. 226-227.

<sup>18</sup> The crux interpretum of this verb is demonstrated by the different categorization of Qoh 2:25 under the homonym חוש II.2 "to feel joyful", III. "be anxious", and IV. "be sated". See D.J.A. Clines (ed.), *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew 3* (Sheffield: 1996), pp. 178-180.

<sup>19</sup> F. Ellermeier, "Das Verbum חוש in Koh 2, 25. Eine exegetische, auslegungsgeschichtliche und semasiologische Untersuchung," *ZAW* 75 (1963), pp. 197-217. D. Fredericks (*Qohelet's Language*, p. 225) suggests a semantic development from "to hasten" to "to worry," or "to be agitated".

<sup>20</sup> See M. V. Fox, *A Time To Tear Down and A Time To Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge, U.K., 1999), p. 189; T. Krüger, *Qoheleth: A Commentary* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis, 2004), p. 59.

Whybray points out that if this is the tenor of the verse it more naturally connects to verse 26 rather than verse 24 in that both anxiety (v. 25) and enjoyment (v. 26) come equally from the hand of God.<sup>21</sup> Though, Krüger opts for the same meaning; ‘For who can eat and who must worry except me?’, he points out that ‘worry’ links up best thematically with vv. 22-23.<sup>22</sup> Modern philology has found a related Akkadian root *ḥašāšu* meaning “to rejoice”. Thus, Goldman suggests either the reading “for who can eat and have pleasure, if not (coming) from Him” or “Who can eat and have any feeling if not from Him?” He refers the suffix to God in verse 24 on the grounds that a first singular suffix referring to Qoheleth does not fit the context and that חוץ cannot mean ‘more’. In fact the meaning of חוץ is another discussion inextricably related to ממני.<sup>23</sup>

Modern scholars are divided with regard to the suffixed pronoun ממני. Textual criticism seems to evidence an accidental confusion in the script between waw and *yôd* (cf. Ps. 16:8; 24:4; 36:2 etc).<sup>24</sup> The biblical Hebrew phrase חוץ מן is a hapax which means

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<sup>21</sup> Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 64.

<sup>22</sup> Krüger, *Qoheleth*, p. 59.

<sup>23</sup> See Y. A. P. Goldman, *Qoheleth* (BHQ 18, Stuttgart, 2004), p. 75\*.

<sup>24</sup> Dahood finds the first person singular suffix ממני possibly representing the Phoenician spelling for “from him” since in that dialect the suffix of the third masculine singular was represented by *yôd* after a long vowel of a genitive singular. M. Dahood, *Psalms I* (AB 16; Garden City, NY, 1966, 10- 11. This suggestion has been debated. See A. Schoors, *The Preacher Sought to Find Pleasing*

literally “outside of, apart from, except, without.”<sup>25</sup> As already seen, a few MSS of LXX, Syr (and also Jerome) and many modern scholars opt to read מִמֶּנּוּ ‘apart from him’. The reference to ‘him’, namely, God, follows the preceding verse (24) more naturally – i.e. human beings even in the most common matters are absolutely dependent on the will of God (so Wright).<sup>26</sup> Murphy claims that if מִמֶּנּוּ is read it “underlines the view of God’s primacy in human affairs that stands in harmony with Qoheleth’s thoughts of divine causality” but he opts for an alternative (see below).<sup>27</sup> Fox though opts for the emended מִמֶּנּוּ, explaining the verb לַחֹשׁ from the root חֹשׂ worry/fret (cf Job 20:2 and the Tg). Hence he reads “for who will eat or who will fret except as he [God] determines”.<sup>28</sup> Following the meaning חֹשׂ II “sich sorgen” (to be worried about) and the MT’s reading of חוץ מִמֶּנּוּ, ‘apart from me’ Lauha regards the verse as a quotation of unknown origin

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*Words: A Study of the Language of Qoheleth* Part 1: Grammar (Leuven, 1992), pp. 50-51. See also C. F. Whitley, *Koheleth: His Language and Thought* (BZAW 148; Berlin and New York, 1979), p. 29.

<sup>25</sup> The phrase מִן חוץ is common in Rabbinic Hebrew, see e.g., “everything is from God, except the fear of God” (*b. Ber.* 33b). For more examples, see Ginsburg, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 302. Biblical Hebrew uses מִבְּלִעָדִי instead of מִן חוץ (see e.g., Num 5:20; Jos 22:19; 2 Sam 22:32; Isa 43:14).

<sup>26</sup> C. H. Hamilton Wright, *The Book of Koheleth* (London, 1883), p. 337.

<sup>27</sup> R. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes* (WBC 23A; Nashville, 1992), p. 26.

<sup>28</sup> Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and A Time to Build Up*, p. 189.



added by a late redactor (R<sup>2</sup>) in which God is speaking about himself, the redaction thus proclaiming a later dogmatic belief.<sup>29</sup> However this is a minority opinion. Most of those who translate this way see the verse as the words of Qoheleth referring back to the quest for pleasure of the royal autobiography. So Lohfink takes it as a reference by Solomon to his own exceptional opportunities for enjoyment, which are not to be taken as typical of the human situation. Lohfink describes this verse as “The last grammatical trace of the royal fiction”.<sup>30</sup> Murphy opts for a translation of the verse as “For who can eat or rejoice, if not I”, the I referring to the fiction of royal authorship maintained by Qoheleth in this section.<sup>31</sup> This would reinforce the recommendation of accepting the fact of pleasure in life from an authoritative perspective of a king that surpassed all before him in Jerusalem.

In our translation we have opted for a literal reading of v. 25 accepting the *hapax legomenon* חוּשׁ ‘to sense/feel/enjoy’ (without any object to be employed in its absolute sense) in conjunction with the 1sg. suffix ‘me’.<sup>32</sup> We see this as a reference by Qoheleth

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<sup>29</sup> A. Lauha, *Kohelet* (BKAT 19; Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1978), pp. 40, 58.

<sup>30</sup> N. Lohfink, *Qoheleth: A Continental Commentary* (Minneapolis, 2003), p. 56.

<sup>31</sup> Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 24.

<sup>32</sup> The Late Hebrew borrows from the Aramaic language a sense of חוּשׁ “to perceive/to feel.” See e.g., *b. Šabb.* 134a. Ben Yehuda, in his dictionary, classifies Qoh 2:25 as the oldest attested occurrence with this meaning (see Ps 141:1). See E.

Ben Yehuda, *A Complete Dictionary of Ancient and Modern Hebrew* 3

back to the quest for pleasure undertaken earlier in the chapter: “For who can eat, or even sense, in the same way as me?” We do not find a problem in the changing of referent from ‘the hand of God’ to ‘me’ and back to ‘God’ as we are familiar with an author who likes to stylistically and thematically twist and turn, to repeat and to double back. Verse 25 therefore undercuts the theme of verses 24-26 and yet picks up some of its keywords, tantalizingly also taking us back to the early verses of chapter 2 where the royal ‘test of pleasure’ is at the centre of concern.

In any translation one has ultimately to opt for a ‘reading’ and a meaning for the verse. The controversy about the etymology and meaning of יָחִוּשׁ in the first clause and the accompanying reading of the suffix in the second clause, as discussed above, demonstrates the complexity and uncertainty of translation and the options opened up by different emphases. In reading Qoheleth one has to be prepared to ‘enjoy the tension’, the tension caused by his subject changes, by his abrupt interruptions and repetitive windings of theme. Even in verse 26 Qoheleth’s contrast between God’s meting out of wisdom to those who please him and toil to the errant (toil which might well ultimately benefit another) is suddenly, and typically, relativized with one of his key phrases “This also is futility and a chasing after wind” (so also 2:11, 21). One also has to enjoy, as we have sought to convey in this paper, the tension of the ancient versions and modern interpreters as they struggle to understand the meaning of the language of this ancient philosopher who seems still to tease us with his enigmatic language.

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(Jerusalem, 1980), c. 1475b.

# Enjoying the Tension: Reading Qoh 2:25 in the Context of Qoh 2:24-26

## Abstract

Qoheleth's experiential method and inner-dialogue creates tensions on the levels of language, style, content and theological ideas. In this paper we seek to explore this tension in relation to a short section (Qoh 2:24-26) that is placed at the end of chapter 2. In the process we question the section division itself and the usual emendation of the translation of v. 25 to fit into the thought of these three verses and that of their neighbouring verses. We engage in a detailed analysis of the versions and of scholarly opinion on the translation, key terms and structure of these verses. We argue that this is just one example of where literary structure has dictated translational options and we prefer instead to 'enjoy the tension' of the more convincing and less accepted translation of verse 25 as "For who can eat or even sense, apart **from me**."

## Keywords

Tension, ideational contradictions, literary structure, royal autobiography, experience,

The dominant literary type employed by Qohelet is observation and reflection.

As Crenshaw accurately states: "Qohelet seeks out experience of every kind as the most accurate path to insight... The repeated use of the personal pronoun *אני* (I) thrusts the ego of the speaker into prominence, leaving no doubt about his investment in what is

being reported” (p. 28).<sup>1</sup> Qoheleth’s experiential method leads him into conflict with traditional ideas and leads to what Loader calls “patterns of tension created by the counterposition of two elements to one another. This tendency is so prominent throughout the book that it may be called its outstanding characteristic” (p. 1). For Loader this tension, or set of polarities as he prefers to call it, is witnessed in genre terms by the tension both between forms used and the book’s content and within the content itself. The dominant polarity concerning the worth of wisdom itself is explained in the use of “weapons of the *hokma* against the *hokma*” (p.131).<sup>2</sup> Loader introduces us to an important aspect of Qoheleth’s technique. This is however only a description of a small element, in genre terms, of many levels of tension at work in this small book in relation to language, style, content and theological ideas. Qoheleth is not simply in dialogue with tradition, he is also in dialogue with himself – as Forti writes, “the conflicting points of view in the discourses of the book express a dialogue between Qoheleth and his inner-self” (p. 236).<sup>3</sup> However, this inner dialogue is not easy to diagnose and identify clearly. The uncertainties make it difficult to prefer one reading over another without entering a

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<sup>1</sup> J. L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes: A Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia, 1987), p. 28.

<sup>2</sup> J. A. Loader, *Polar Structures in the Book of Qohelet* (BZAW 152; Berlin: 1979), pp. 1-3; 29-116.

<sup>3</sup> T. Forti, “The Fly and the Dog: Observations on the Ideational Polarity In the Book of Qoheleth”, in R. L. Troxel, K. G. Friebel, and D. R. Magary (eds.), *Seeking Out the Wisdom of the Ancients: Essays Offered to Honor Michael V. Fox* (Winona Lake, IN, 2005), pp. 235-255.

subjective area of exegesis that focuses not simply on the meaning of particular words, but also on the meaning to be gleaned from the context surrounding the phrase and even in relation to the message of the entire book.

In this paper we wish to draw out the related point that often a particular tension is lost in the scholarly attempt to segment and divide the book into meaningful pericopes.<sup>4</sup> This is one of the problems raised by the process of commentary writing. As in the case below, it is assumed, in the interests of defining a ‘section’, that verses fit together in a logical sequence or that the flow of thought is in one direction. By contrast, we believe that it is a key aspect of Qoheleth’s style that he teases us with abrupt changes of subject or with linguistic word-plays or complex meanings that heighten the sense of tension that already exists. This undermines our attempts to find neat sections and thwarts the commentator’s best intentions.

Qoh 2:24-26 is often regarded as the conclusion to the section 2:18-26 (on the theme of deploring the advantages of toil), also to 2:12-26 (experiences and reflections at the end of the second half of the royal autobiography) or to the wider section 1:12-2:26 (the entire royal autobiography), depending on how one chooses to divide the opening chapters of this work. There is a tendency therefore to harmonize not only the three verses of this section, but also to keep this section closely in alignment with what has gone before. Commentators’ attention to the structure of the chapter and its literary

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<sup>4</sup> On various attempts to find structure in this book, see C. L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes: A New Translation With Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven and London, 2008), pp. 42-47.

nature has gone on to influence the many emendations of textual criticism, as we shall show. Two text-critical issues stand out in this section that we will address in detail below, notably issues around the textual emendation of מִמֶּנִּי and the meaning of the word יְהוֹשֻׁעַ, both of which occur in verse 25, the middle verse of the three. The preference for seeing this as a distinct section has tended to influence translation as we shall demonstrate. The tendency to harmonize sections of verses and then whole chapters together, then, has led to distortions in interpretation and ever more fantastic suggestions on the part of scholars. Literary context has dictated translational options rather than the other way around. Instead we opt for keeping the tension of the translation and seeing where that option leads in relation to understanding this enigmatic author.

The choice of Qoh 2:25 as a particularly difficult verse is not new – J. de Waard (1979) used it as his prime example of problems in translation and textual criticism. De Waard maintains, however that “in a proper approach to translation the analysis of larger units like sections, subsections and paragraphs normally precedes that of sentences, phrases and words” (p. 511).<sup>5</sup> However it is our contention that each sentence needs, first and foremost, to be analysed independently of the surrounding context.

With reference to Qoh 2:24-26, verse 24 is the first verse of the entire chapter to introduce a divine dimension with mention of the ‘hand of God’, an aspect also taken up in verse 26. If verse 25 also implicitly refers to God then this heightens the argument for a divinely orientated conclusion to the section, however delineated (2:12-26; 2:18-26 or

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<sup>5</sup> J. de Waard, “The Translator and Textual Criticism”, *Biblica* 60 (1979), pp. 509-529.

even 1:12-2:26). So the NRSV translates these verses:

V. 24 *There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God;*

V. 25 *for apart **from him** who can eat or who can have enjoyment?*

V. 26 *For to the one who pleases him God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy; but to the sinner he gives the work of gathering and heaping only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a chasing after wind.”*

However in the NRSV there is a note against the ‘from him’ of verse 25 that indicates that the English translation is following the Greek (παρεξ αὐτοῦ) and Syriac (לבר מנה) and that the Hebrew text has ממני ‘apart from me’. This note alerts us to a problem. It is soon apparent that, if the MT is followed, the meaning changes entirely for v. 25 — not referring to God ממנו ‘from him’ but to ‘me’, namely the narrator/the fictional king.<sup>6</sup> Thus no longer is this section as a whole about relationship with God, rather a tension is introduced whereby verses 24 and 26 seem to refer to God, but v. 25 refers to ‘me’, presumably the author Qoheleth in his Solomonic ‘king’ guise. There are, though,

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<sup>6</sup> Waard however, opts for the MT’s version of ממני being, only here, a *lectio difficilior* which implicitly quotes a sentence pronounced by God. He argues against the emended reading and writes: “it seems highly probable that the evidence of the Hebrew and the versions for the reading *mimmennû* testifies only to a facilitating reading and a translational adaptation of the *lectio difficilior*”. (Waard, “The Translator and Textual Criticism”, p. 520).

ancient versions that noticed the problem and suggest textual emendations to dissolve the tension as we shall show below.

We prefer to translate these verses as follows:

V. 24 *There is nothing better for humans than to eat and drink and express enjoyment in their toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God.*<sup>7</sup>

V. 25 *For who can eat or even sense, apart **from me**.*

V. 26 *For to the one who pleases him God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy; but to the errant he gives the busyness of gathering and heaping, only for handing on to anyone who pleases God. This also is futility and a chasing after wind.*

Verse 24 rounds off the theme of the previous six verses on toil (2:18-23), but, in true Qoheleth fashion, also introduces a new theme – the fact that enjoyment is from the hand of God [מיד האלוהים היא]. This is the most positive verse of the section and often aligned with other ‘joy’ passages in the book.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, the two catchwords of ‘eat’ and ‘enjoyment’ are taken up in verse 25 in another of Qoheleth’s techniques — of picking up a word or sometimes two in one verse

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<sup>7</sup> Our translation “express enjoyment” for והראה את נפשו follows the double meaning of נפש “soul, spirit” (cf. LXX ψυχή) and “throat=appetite.” Cf. Isa 29:8; Prov 6:30; 13:4, 25, hence denoting both satiation and satisfaction.

<sup>8</sup> See R. N. Whybray, “Qoheleth, Preacher of Joy”, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 23 (1982), pp. 87–98; also E. P. Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment in Qoheleth’s Theological Rhetoric* (BZAW 353, Berlin, 2005).



but taking them in new directions in another or in a section.<sup>9</sup> This links the verses together and suggests that any attempt at redactional rearrangement would not be appropriate. Verse 26 is linked to verse 24 by ‘God’ but also to verse 25 with the linking concepts of ‘enjoyment’ and ‘pleasure’ and ‘joy’ and with the link to being pleasing to God, in the reference (twice) to the one who pleases God. Verse 26 also links back to the discussion of wisdom in verses 12 and 21 (with knowledge) and also further back into the chapter (vv. 3, 9, [wisdom]; vv. 1, 10 [pleasure]). In this sense it has a concluding quality.

The interpretive crux in this section is clearly in verse 25 – it is here that our translation departs most radically from the NRSV (cf. NAS). Within the verse itself the most complex enquiry is into the meaning(s) of the verb לחוש.

This complexity illustrates well the more general evaluation often made by scholars of the language of Qoheleth “which is as intriguing as its elusive message”.<sup>10</sup> The root חו"ש functions as a homonym for both meanings: 1. “to hasten” and 2. “to

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<sup>9</sup> Examples are Qoh 2:13-19 where Qoheleth explores different angles regarding the sage (חכם) and Qoh 9:14-18 where he does the same with the theme of wisdom (חכמה).

<sup>10</sup> D. C. Fredericks, *Qoheleth's Language: Re-evaluating its Nature and Date* (Ancient Near Eastern Texts and Studies 3; Lewiston/Queenstown, 1988), p. 1.

feel/sense/enjoy”.<sup>11</sup> It is clear that the first meaning does not fit this context and so it can be discounted.<sup>12</sup> Both the NRSV and our translation opt for the second sense, a sense only found in Qoheleth. However, there is also a third sense if the verb is seen as the root חשׁ״שׁ: “to be aware, anxious” as used by the Targum. The Aramaic brings the noun חשׁ״שׁ “apprehension/suspicion” into the mix (instead of יחוּשׁ ‘to feel/sense’) and so translates (with embellishments): “For who is occupied/busy with the words of the law, and who is the man that **has anxiety** about the great day of Judgement, which is to come **except**

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<sup>11</sup> The Vulgate has: *deliciis affluet ut ego* “abound in delights more than I”; cf. NAS, NRV, NJPS. Whybray reads יחוּשׁ “can have enjoyment”. See R. N. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes* (New Century Bible Commentary; London, 1989), p. 64.

<sup>12</sup> See for example., 1 Sam 30:28; Ps 139:30. Jewish medieval commentators interpret לחוּשׁ “to hasten” in various ways. Rashi (1040-1105) reads: “who deserves eating my effort, and who hastens to swallow it other than me”. Qara’ (1050/55-1120/30) adduces a double meaning to לחוּשׁ “hasten” and “enjoy”: “who deserves to hasten for the purpose of eating my labor before my property falls in the hand of others”, and similarly Ibn Ezra (1089-1164): “to hasten to fulfil his desire” (cf. 1 Sam 20:38). Ralbag (1288-1344) opts for the meaning “to enjoy the pleasure” [ירגיש בתענוג]. Ginsburg, who reads “hasten”, points to a similar instance of חוּשׁ being construed with אכל in Hab 1:8: “Like an eagle hastening to eat.” (NRSV: “Like an eagle swift to devour”). See C. D. Ginsburg, *The Book of Ecclesiastes* (London, 1861), pp. 301-302.

me/besides me”.<sup>13</sup> This highlights the importance of ממני in the verse (see discussion below). In our translation we keep the sense ‘apart from me/except me’/‘the same as me’ and do not emend to ממנו ‘him’ to refer to God as the NRSV (following many ancient traditions) does. We note, at this point, Barthelemy who interprets the verse “There is no gourmet nor sensualist but me” (picking up verse 24’s reference to eating and drinking’).<sup>14</sup>

From the earliest translations there were problems with יחוש. The old Greek (G\*), including the direct witnesses of the Greek tradition such as Theodotian (cf. Syr), read πίεται ‘will drink’, so ישתה for יחוש. This is because of the mention of eating which is normally accompanied by drinking (as in verse 24) and so was probably a contextual interpretation. This emendation to ‘can/will drink,’ based on the LXX (Syr, Theod) is unlikely to be correct.

The other Greek manuscripts including Symmachus and Aquila read φείσεται ‘to spare/abstain/refrain from’. It seems as if the translator was playing with the opposite words – φάγεται “to eat” and φείσεται “to spare/abstain/refrain from”. Since the Greek verb φείδομαι often translates the verb יחוס ‘to have pity/to spare’,<sup>15</sup> and never יחוש ‘to

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<sup>13</sup> It is a byform of Rabbinic Hebrew חשש “be uncomfortable, worry”, i.e. the linguistic usage of the Mishnah חוש “to be worried, consider.”

<sup>14</sup> Dominique Barthélemy, *Critique Textuelle de l'Ancien Testament* (OBO 50/5 (Job, Proverbes, Qohélet et Cantique des Cantiques); Fribourg & Göttingen, 2016).

<sup>15</sup> See LXX Deut 7:16; 13:9; 19:13, 21; 25:12; Ps 72:13; Ezek 5:15 ; Hab 1:17. The Tg of Job 20:13, 27:22, and Jer 15:5 employs יחוס to render the verb יחמול “to have

hasten' or 'to feel/sense', the translator might have read the grapheme  $\text{ש}$  instead of  $\text{ש}$ .<sup>16</sup>

In any case, this error led to a tradition of translating verse 25 'to eat and to abstain/refrain from eating', so LXX has: "For who will eat and who will refrain from eating apart from him?". The interpretation of "apart from him" to refer to God in juxtaposition with eating and refraining from eating gives an entirely different meaning to this verse and again links this verse with vv. 24-26 in reference to divine interference. However, the idea of God eating and refraining from eating is out of place in the thought of Qoheleth.

The alternative of reading  $\text{ש}$  instead of  $\text{ש}$  has led modern scholars to emend to  $\text{יחוס/יחוש}$  'abstain, refrain' from  $\text{יחוש}$ , thus maintaining this 'eat/refrain from eating' parallelism which neatly parallels the sequence of opposites in verse 26 – enjoyment and failure to enjoy. So Gordis who also opts for the emended third personal suffix  $\text{ממנו}$  'apart from

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pity/to spare" (cf. LXX'  $\phi\epsilon\iota\sigma\epsilon\tau\alpha\iota$ . For parallels of  $\text{חוס/חמ"ל}$ , see Ezek 7:9; 9:10; 8:18.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. e.g. the MT's reading of Gen 26:20:  $\text{וַיִּקְרָא שֵׁם הַבְּאֵר עֵשֶׂק כִּי הִתְעַשְׂקוּ עִמּוֹ}$  "So he called the well Esek, because they contended with him" with the LXX' reading "Injury, for they injured him"—most probably a retroversion of  $\text{עֵשֶׂק}$  "to oppress".

The verb  $\text{עֵשֶׂק}$  "to contend" does not occur elsewhere in the OT. Post-biblical Hebrew knows the word  $\text{עֵשֶׂק}$  only with *samek*. The LXX thus, reflects the root  $\text{עֵשֶׂק}$  "to oppress". For more examples of words that can be read with either  $\text{ש}$  or  $\text{ש}$  see E. Tov, *The Text-Critical Use of the Septuagint in Biblical Research* (Jerusalem Biblical Studies 3; Jerusalem, 1981), pp. 167–169.

God' hence 'who can eat and even refrain from eating apart from Him'.<sup>17</sup> This sentiment links up with ideas of God in 3:13 and 5:18 as the source of eating and drinking in his gifts to humankind.

The uncertain meaning of לחוש has prompted attempts to discover its meaning elsewhere,<sup>18</sup> on the basis of philological analogy with cognate Semitic languages. Thus Ellermeir compares חוש with the Akkadian *ḫāḫū(m)*, bearing both meanings, "to hasten" and "to be worried/anxious" but nonetheless opting for the meaning "worry".<sup>19</sup> This meaning has convinced several commentators, including recently Fox and Krüger.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> R. Gordis, *Koheleth/Ecclesiastes: The Man and His World* (New York, 1968), pp. 226-227.

<sup>18</sup> The crux interpretum of this verb is demonstrated by the different categorization of Qoh 2:25 under the homonym חוש II.2 "to feel joyful", III. "be anxious", and IV. "be sated". See D.J.A. Clines (ed.), *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew 3* (Sheffield: 1996), pp. 178-180.

<sup>19</sup> F. Ellermeier, "Das Verbum חוש in Koh 2, 25. Eine exegetische, auslegungsgeschichtliche und semasiologische Untersuchung," *ZAW* 75 (1963), pp. 197-217. D. Fredericks (*Qohelet's Language*, p. 225) suggests a semantic development from "to hasten" to "to worry," or "to be agitated".

<sup>20</sup> See M. V. Fox, *A Time To Tear Down and A Time To Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge, U.K., 1999), p. 189; T. Krüger, *Qoheleth: A Commentary* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis, 2004), p. 59.

Whybray points out that if this is the tenor of the verse it more naturally connects to verse 26 rather than verse 24 in that both anxiety (v. 25) and enjoyment (v. 26) come equally from the hand of God.<sup>21</sup> Though, Krüger opts for the same meaning; ‘For who can eat and who must worry except me?’, he points out that ‘worry’ links up best thematically with vv. 22-23.<sup>22</sup> Modern philology has found a related Akkadian root 𒂗𒂗𒂗𒂗 meaning “to rejoice”. Thus, Goldman suggests either the reading “for who can eat and have pleasure, if not (coming) from Him” or “Who can eat and have any feeling if not from Him?” He refers the suffix to God in verse 24 on the grounds that a first singular suffix referring to Qoheleth does not fit the context and that חוץ cannot mean ‘more’. In fact the meaning of חוץ is another discussion inextricably related to ממני.<sup>23</sup>

Modern scholars are divided with regard to the suffixed pronoun ממני. Textual criticism seems to evidence an accidental confusion in the script between waw and yôd (cf. Ps. 16:8; 24:4; 36:2 etc).<sup>24</sup> The biblical Hebrew phrase חוץ מן is a hapax which means

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<sup>21</sup> Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 64.

<sup>22</sup> Krüger, *Qoheleth*, p. 59.

<sup>23</sup> See Y. A. P. Goldman, *Qoheleth* (BHQ 18, Stuttgart, 2004), p. 75\*.

<sup>24</sup> Dahood finds the first person singular suffix ממני possibly representing the Phoenician spelling for “from him” since in that dialect the suffix of the third masculine singular was represented by yôd after a long vowel of a genitive singular. M. Dahood, *Psalms I* (AB 16; Garden City, NY, 1966, 10- 11. This suggestion has been debated. See A. Schoors, *The Preacher Sought to Find Pleasing*

literally “outside of, apart from, except, without.”<sup>25</sup> As already seen, a few MSS of LXX, Syr (and also Jerome) and many modern scholars opt to read מִמֶּנּוּ ‘apart from him’. The reference to ‘him’, namely, God, follows the preceding verse (24) more naturally – i.e. human beings even in the most common matters are absolutely dependent on the will of God (so Wright).<sup>26</sup> Murphy claims that if מִמֶּנּוּ is read it “underlines the view of God’s primacy in human affairs that stands in harmony with Qoheleth’s thoughts of divine causality” but he opts for an alternative (see below).<sup>27</sup> Fox though opts for the emended מִמֶּנּוּ, explaining the verb לַחֹשׁ from the root חֹשׂ worry/fret (cf Job 20:2 and the Tg). Hence he reads “for who will eat or who will fret except as he [God] determines”.<sup>28</sup> Following the meaning חֹשׂ II “sich sorgen” (to be worried about) and the MT’s reading of חוץ מִמֶּנּוּ, ‘apart from me’ Lauha regards the verse as a quotation of unknown origin

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*Words: A Study of the Language of Qoheleth* Part 1: Grammar (Leuven, 1992), pp. 50-

51. See also C. F. Whitley, *Koheleth: His Language and Thought* (BZAW 148; Berlin and New York, 1979), p. 29.

<sup>25</sup> The phrase חוץ מִן is common in Rabbinic Hebrew, see e.g., “everything is from God, except the fear of God” (*b. Ber.* 33b). For more examples, see Ginsburg, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 302. Biblical Hebrew uses מִבְּלַעַד instead of חוץ מִן (see e.g., Num 5:20; Jos 22:19; 2 Sam 22:32; Isa 43:14).

<sup>26</sup> C. H. Hamilton Wright, *The Book of Koheleth* (London, 1883), p. 337.

<sup>27</sup> R. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes* (WBC 23A; Nashville, 1992), p. 26.

<sup>28</sup> Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and A Time to Build Up*, p. 189.

added by a late redactor (R<sup>2</sup>) in which God is speaking about himself, the redaction thus proclaiming a later dogmatic belief.<sup>29</sup> However this is a minority opinion. Most of those who translate this way see the verse as the words of Qoheleth referring back to the quest for pleasure of the royal autobiography. So Lohfink takes it as a reference by Solomon to his own exceptional opportunities for enjoyment, which are not to be taken as typical of the human situation. Lohfink describes this verse as “The last grammatical trace of the royal fiction”.<sup>30</sup> Murphy opts for a translation of the verse as “For who can eat or rejoice, if not I”, the I referring to the fiction of royal authorship maintained by Qoheleth in this section.<sup>31</sup> This would reinforce the recommendation of accepting the fact of pleasure in life from an authoritative perspective of a king that surpassed all before him in Jerusalem.

In our translation we have opted for a literal reading of v. 25 accepting the *hapax legomenon* חִוֵּשׁ ‘to sense/feel/enjoy’ (without any object to be employed in its absolute sense) in conjunction with the 1sg. suffix ‘me’.<sup>32</sup> We see this as a reference by Qoheleth

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<sup>29</sup> A. Lauha, *Kohelet* (BKAT 19; Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1978), pp. 40, 58.

<sup>30</sup> N. Lohfink, *Qoheleth: A Continental Commentary* (Minneapolis, 2003), p. 56.

<sup>31</sup> Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 24.

<sup>32</sup> The Late Hebrew borrows from the Aramaic language a sense of חִוֵּשׁ “to perceive/to feel.” See e.g., *b. Ṭabb.* 134a. Ben Yehuda, in his dictionary, classifies Qoh 2:25 as the oldest attested occurrence with this meaning (see Ps 141:1). See E.

Ben Yehuda, *A Complete Dictionary of Ancient and Modern Hebrew* 3



back to the quest for pleasure undertaken earlier in the chapter: “For who can eat, or even sense, in the same way as me?” We do not find a problem in the changing of referent from ‘the hand of God’ to ‘me’ and back to ‘God’ as we are familiar with an author who likes to stylistically and thematically twist and turn, to repeat and to double back. Verse 25 therefore undercuts the theme of verses 24-26 and yet picks up some of its keywords, tantalizingly also taking us back to the early verses of chapter 2 where the royal ‘test of pleasure’ is at the centre of concern.

In any translation one has ultimately to opt for a ‘reading’ and a meaning for the verse. The controversy about the etymology and meaning of יָחִוּשׁ in the first clause and the accompanying reading of the suffix in the second clause, as discussed above, demonstrates the complexity and uncertainty of translation and the options opened up by different emphases. In reading Qoheleth one has to be prepared to ‘enjoy the tension’, the tension caused by his subject changes, by his abrupt interruptions and repetitive windings of theme. Even in verse 26 Qoheleth’s contrast between God’s meting out of wisdom to those who please him and toil to the errant (toil which might well ultimately benefit another) is suddenly, and typically, relativized with one of his key phrases “This also is futility and a chasing after wind” (so also 2:11, 21). One also has to enjoy, as we have sought to convey in this paper, the tension of the ancient versions and modern interpreters as they struggle to understand the meaning of the language of this ancient philosopher who seems still to tease us with his enigmatic language.

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