Notes on Some Hebrew Words in Ecclesiastes

Biblical scholars in general are well provided with lexicographical resources – not least among them now the Dictionary of Classical Hebrew, edited by David Clines. The inclusion by this work of new words and meanings found only in Ben Sira and the Qumran texts has been especially helpful for those of us working on late biblical materials, and students of Ecclesiastes, in particular, have had the benefit also in recent years of Antoon Schoors’ magisterial work on the language of Qohelet, the second volume of which is devoted to a consideration of the book’s vocabulary.¹ There are many words in Ecclesiastes, however, which remain problematic for one reason or another, and, by way of tribute to David, I want to explore a few such lexical problems here.

1. אנסכה

This word appears in Eccl 2:1, where Qohelet tells us:

אמרתי אני בלבי לכה אנסכה במחה וראה בטוב

Here he is speaking “in his heart” (as at 2:15; 3:17-18), and the challenge which he proposes is essentially to himself: he is going to do something involving pleasure. The sense of the closing imperative וראה בטוב is not entirely certain itself, as we shall see, but it does not raise significant problems. The meaning of אנסכה, on the other hand, is much more difficult to determine, and has been the focus of considerable discussion. This word is most easily parsed as a cohortative form from נסך, “pour”, and that understanding underpins both a certain amount of subsequent Jewish interpretation and Jerome’s Vulgate rendering, affluam. It is difficult to find a good sense for נסך here, however, especially since there is no direct object for the verb. Whilst it is possible that Qohelet is declaring his intention to pour libations, or

perhaps to mix wine (so Ibn Ezra), it is hard to see how doing so would merit the subsequent dismissal as הָבָא, or form a basis for his conclusion in the next verse, that fun and pleasure are useless. Some scholars have correspondingly sought to re-organize the text here, linking this expression to Qohelet’s subsequent use of wine in 2:3.²

It is probably a perception of that difficulty, rather than a variant text, that led the translator of G to parse אנסכה instead as a piel yiqtol/cohortative fromנסה, “test”, with a second person object suffix: πειράσω σε, “I shall test you”. This reading is adopted also in the Peshitta (temptabo te), while the Targum and Midrash both seem to understand here the related אֲנַסֶּנָּה, “I will try it”, which BHS actually suggests as an emendation. An interpretation in these terms, however, adds the complication of an unusual form – the plene writing of the suffix נא, which is quite plausible in itself– without the compensation of a notably better sense: Qohelet is clearly supposed to be investigating pleasure here, not investigating himself or his heart, and the uncontested reading of שמחה withב permits us only to take pleasure as the instrument or context of any test, not its object. This is a problem even if we takeנסה in the


extended sense of “giving experience”: it could not mean “give you experience of pleasure” here, but only “make you experienced by means of pleasure”.

The context suggests that whatever Qohelet is going to do, either intransitively or to himself, pleasure must play a role in the action of a type which will enable him to pronounce on its value in the next verse. It may be helpful, therefore, to consider a further possibility: that we are dealing with a form neither from נָסַח nor from נָסִיך, but from נָסֵך, “compel”. In Esth 1:8 this is used specifically of forcing people to drink, and in Sir 31:21 (sub 31:22 in ms B) of being filled with too much food (so DCH). That verb would give an excellent sense here: Qohelet is to stuff himself, absolutely to fill himself with pleasure, so that there can be no question that he has given it an opportunity to display its value. In terms of form, it seems most probable that we should understand נָסֵכ(ה): the omission of one א in our text may be an orthographic variant or the result of a copying error in the sequence נָסֵכ(ה).

As for the subsequent רָהָה בָּטֶהֶב, it is interesting to observe that Ginsberg, writing quite separately about רָהָה בָּטֶהֶב in 6:6, suggested taking רָהָה there as a variant form from רָהָה רָהָה, a verb which is used of saturating with liquid, and of drinking beyond the point of satiation or

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4 The idea that נָסַח + ב could mean “give experience” was first put forward in Moshe Greenberg, “Nas in Exodus 20:20 and the Purpose of the Sinaitic Theophany,” JBL 79 (1960): 273–76. His examples include Judg 3:1-3, where the point is that Canaanites were left in the land to give new generations of Israelites experience in fighting, not to give them experience of Canaanites. Such a meaning, in fact, seems appropriate to all the passages cited, and is congruent with other occurrences of the verb meaning “used to (something)”, e.g. 1 Sam 17:39.

intoxication. Some confusion between the two verbs does indeed seem to be visible elsewhere (cf. Job 10:15; Prov 11:25), and it may be that this is a matter of variant spellings or pronunciations rather than of actual errors in the consonantal text, so Ginsberg’s suggestion is not far-fetched, and requires no emendation; it may, however, suit 2:1 better than 6:1. Of course, it is perfectly possible for us to understand ראה בשמה and אנסכה בשמה as essentially parallel clauses, based on an image of food and drink: “I shall stuff you with pleasure, and you must drench yourself with what is good”. If that was indeed the original reading, then although the writer may have intended that the combination would affirm the proper reading of each clause, it is possible that his reference to liquid in fact influenced the subsequent misreading of the first, less familiar verb as from נסך.

2. כשרון

There are a number of words in Ecclesiastes which do not occur elsewhere in Biblical Hebrew, but the meaning of which can be established beyond reasonable doubt by reference to other words from the same root or to cognate terms in Aramaic: יתרון and its counterpart חסרון are obvious examples. כשרון looks as though it ought to be a further such word, but other words from the stem connote ideas of fitness or suitability, as do their equivalents in Aramaic. That meaning does not seem to accord well with the contexts of כשרון in 2:21; 4:4; and 5:10, and is often considered not really to suit the uses of the cognate verb in 11:6. In fact, the context of 11:6 is usually taken to require the very different sense “succeed” or “prosper”: you are to sow your seed morning and evening “for you do not know which will prosper, this or that, or if both alike will be fine”. However, despite the fact that the

6 H. Louis Ginsberg, קהלת (A New Commentary on the Torah, the Prophets and the Holy Writings; Tel-Aviv & Jerusalem: M. Newman, 1961), 192.

7 So, e.g., Schoors, The Preacher Sought: Part II, 448.
Akkadian kašāru can refer to success, and so provide an analogy to such a shift in meaning, that shift is not required. It is quite possible that the issue really is the suitability of the seed, and that כשר means not “prosper” but “prove fit”: whether the crops do well depends not on some random fate, but on qualities of the seed that cannot be discerned before sowing, and so we must keep sowing in the hope that some of our seed will prove capable of flourishing in the unknown conditions to come. Since 10:10 is obscure, we cannot say much about the other occurrence of the verb in Ecclesiastes (if כשר there is even to be construed from the verb), but its sole biblical appearance elsewhere, in Esth 8:5, demands a connotation of fitness or propriety. There is nothing that requires us, therefore, to suppose that כשר must ever have a sense in Ecclesiastes different from its normal sense in later Hebrew and in Aramaic.

Correspondingly, we cannot import the meaning “success” into the noun on the basis of the verb, and, since “suitability” or “fitness” seem inappropriate, we are left to understand כשרון almost entirely on the basis of its use in three passages:

2:21

כ יי אדמ שטמל חכמה בדעת וכשרון

“For there may be a person whose work has been with wisdom and with knowledge and with כשרון …”

4:4

וראית אני את כל עמל ואת כל כשרון המעש ה כי קנאת איש מרעהו

“Then I observed all work and all כשרון of labour, that it is an ill feeling (separating) a man from his neighbour.”

5:10

ברבות הטובה רבו אוכליה ומה כשרון לבעליה כי אם ראיתו, ראית ענייה

“As what is good increases, those who consume it increase, and what כשרון is there for its owner, apart from looking on?”

Obviously, the first two of these connect כשרון with work and with the process of accomplishment: it stands alongside the mental qualities of wisdom and knowledge in 2:21, and in 4:4 is the “of labour” or “of action”. In 5:10, however, it is something of which
one may be deprived, and is apparently associated with the rewards of work. This discrepancy has led scholars commonly to assert two meanings: according to Schoors, for instance, it can connote both “skill” (comparable to וֹאֶתְפָּה in 2:21) and the “result of using one’s skill” – that is, “success” or “achievement”.

In 5:10, indeed, כְּשֶׁרָן is usually given a particular nuance not merely of “success” but of “gain” or “profit”, similar to נְהָרִים.

What leads to accomplishment and what flows from accomplishment are surely, however, very different things, and neither sense fits very well in 4:4, where כְּשֶׁרָן and כַּל עֶמֶל are identified as, or with, a feeling that separates people from each other (כְּשֶׁרָן המַעְשָׁה).

If this verse is about motivation, as is usually assumed, then כְּשֶׁרָן has presumably to be imbued with a further connotation of “exercizing skill” or of “achieving success” – it has to relate, in other words, neither to an ability nor to the result of that ability, but to the application of that ability. Particularly in view of the fact that none of them is attested elsewhere, it seems unsatisfactory to grant three, effectively distinct meanings to כְּשֶׁרָן in the three verses where it appears, and it seems that little constraint is being placed on the interpretation of the verses individually by any attempt to establish a single, common sense for this term.

In fact, כְּשֶׁרָן could be understood in all three verses as a reference to effort, even if something like that sense is only required by 4:4. So, in 2:2 it would indicate the effort or determination which, alongside wisdom and knowledge, Qohelet believes to underpin proper work: this is what someone may put into their business, only to see it pass to someone else, who has made no such investment. In 4:4, it is not skill or success which stems from jealousy, but the motivation and effort of workers. In 5:10, finally, when consumers multiply in proportion to goods, we should understand not that the owner has no “profit” beyond looking on, but either that this is all his effort amounts to (“What is [his] effort to their owner …”) or that this is the only thing he has any reason still to do (“What can their owner find any determination to do, except …”).

It is interesting in this respect to note that on each occasion G renders the noun using ἄνδρεία (which is also used to render כֹּהֶרֶת in Ps 68:7), while the

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8 Ibid., 449.
corresponding adjective ἀνδρεῖον is used for ἰσχύς in 10:10: this is used in Hellenistic Greek of fortitude or determination, rather than simple “manliness”. We may also observe that in Syriac the participle of ἀνδρεῖος is widely attested with the sense “diligent”, “industrious”, often in connection with work. With so little material, it may be impossible for us to catch the precise nuance of כשר in Qohelet’s usage, but it is economical to suppose that he employs it with only a single meaning, and there are good reasons to believe that he associates it with the effort and motivation of workers.

3. סנヵיה

In Biblical Hebrew, סנヵיה is most commonly found in descriptions of Israel’s special relationship with God (Exod 19:5; Deut 7:6; 14:2; 26:18; Ps 135:4; Mal 3:17). Unlike others, Israel has been chosen by him to be his own, and the word is conventionally translated in such terms, as “own possession” or suchlike. In 1 Chr 29:3, however, and in Eccl 2:8, it is more often translated as “treasure”, a sense which BDB describes as “very late”. HALOT and DCH, to be sure, opt respectively for “personal property” and “possessions”, but its juxtaposition with silver and gold in both Chronicles and Ecclesiastes has persuaded commentators that סנヵיה implies a quantity of wealth, not a type.

The point in 1 Chr 29:3, though, is that David is distinguishing his personal fortune from the valuables that he has provided (and previously listed) for the Temple, and that were presumably, in some sense, possessions of the state or the royal household. He is now offering his “own possessions” as well, and inviting contributions from others. This nuance of specific private ownership is found in the post-biblical usage also. Most notably, in b. B. Bat. 52a there is a discussion of property that is in the possession of an individual, but that does not belong to his estate: in the context of this discussion, the advice is offered that money received for safekeeping on behalf of a minor should be made into a סנヵיה, that is, used to purchase some distinct item of property against which a claim can later be lodged without the need to dismantle other parts of the estate. Similarly, Jastrow lists numerous uses of the verb סנヵל to indicate money set aside for oneself out of an allowance, or put aside as savings, with no implication that this money need be a significant amount. In both Biblical
and Mishnaic Hebrew, then, the term connotes not high value but distinct or private ownership.

Since Qohelet is undoubtedly asserting in Eccl 2:8 that he had become wealthy, it may seem mere pedantry to assert the importance of that nuance. There are other problems, however, that surround the expression סגלת מלכים והמונרכות, and a proper understanding of the noun affirms both that it stands in a construct relationship only with מלכים, since provinces cannot have private property, and that Qohelet is not asserting here his own kingship: if he were a king anyway, it would not be extraordinary for him to have the personal property of a king (even if that were no more than a few coins to rub together). Since the account in chapter 2 is commonly taken to embrace just such an assertion, then a little precision in the handling of the noun may have a lot of implications for interpretation.

4. עמל 

This is a very significant term in Ecclesiastes: Schoors notes 22 occurrences of the noun in the book, and 13 of the cognate verb. Its common connotation is of labour, although the noun is apparently used elsewhere to suggest “trouble”, in the senses both of suffering (e.g. Ps 10:14) and of mischief (e.g. Prov 24:2). The latter usage, in particular, indicates that its scope extends beyond the mere act of working, and Ps 7:14-17 speaks of עמל returning upon the head of a man who has conceived it. It is commonly acknowledged that we find an extended sense of the term in Ecclesiastes also, at least in 2:18, where Qohelet speaks of his עמל as something that can be left behind for his successor, but there is no consensus about its actual meaning there, or about the significance of this usage for understanding עמל elsewhere in the book.


10 Schoors, The Preacher Sought: Part II, 139.
The עמל that Qohelet will leave to his successor in 2:18 is described in the next verse as something over which this successor will have legal rights: ויהלך בכל עמלו שלטתי. In 2:20, furthermore, Qohelet describes how he accordingly let go of his concern with that עמל, and this sequence of verses appears to make it clear that he is talking about something that will not only persist after his death, but that can exist independently of him while he is alive. Something similar seems to be true in 2:11 also, when Qohelet speaks of looking around לעמל שעמלתי לעשות: one does not work to achieve work, so עמל is seemingly a product of labour. This leads many commentators to accept that, at least in 2:18-19, עמל can mean “wealth”, “income” or “gain”. The use of the technical term שלט in 2:19 would be strange, however, if the reference were simply to a bag of gold, and Qohelet seems to have in mind something that is a specific, durable entity, not something that may be dispersed.

The rabbinic use of עמל for “income” is noted by Jastrow, and picked up by some of the commentators who argue for the sense “wealth”, but it is important to note that this usage actually seems to link the term not to wealth per se, but to continuing income, or sources of income. Most strikingly, in the discussions about the collection of a daughter’s share from an estate in b. Ketub. 69a (cf. b. B. Bat. 67a), mention is made of the עמל of houses, which is their immovable, and so collectable, capacity to generate rental income. We do not need to look so far afield for other evidence that עמל may refer to a source of income, and although

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Ps 105:44 is often adduced as evidence for עַמֵּל meaning simply the product of work,\(^\text{13}\) that text also seems to demonstrate that more than just wealth is meant: when God gives Israel the lands of the nations and they thereby “come into possession of the עַמֵּל of the peoples”, it surely does not mean simply that they get to take whatever piles of money or crops are lying around. Rather, Israel takes over the fields, vineyards, and all the other mechanisms which have been produced by the work of the peoples, and which will now be worked to create their own produce (cf. Deut 6:10-11; Josh 24:13). The verb used there of acquiring the עַמֵּל is יִרְשָׁ, regularly used of “dispossessing” others, as in, e.g., Deut 2:12 and Jer 8:10 (where the disposessors take over the fields of wise men, just as “others” take over their wives). Rainey’s suggestion of “trade” may be closer to the mark,\(^\text{14}\) but, in the light of such references, is surely too limited: what Qohelet means by עַמֵּל in chapter 2 is apparently the infrastructure or capacity that he has been describing in the previous verses 4-7: the vineyards, orchards, forests, slaves and flocks associated with his wealth, which will continue to exist (and to generate an income) even after his death.\(^\text{15}\)

Arguably, this does not represent the development of a wholly separate sense for עַמֵּל, but exemplifies the sort of semantic shift or extension that permits English words like “business” and “industry” to refer both to personal activities and to entities created by such activities. Even if it is only in chapter 2 that we are compelled to understand it as something other than “labour” in Ecclesiastes, there are other places, such as 5:18, where the idea of עַמֵּל as “business” would be quite appropriate. Indeed, in the various expressions like עִמֵּל שִׂיעַמֵּל in 1:3 that Qohelet likes to use (cf. 2:11, 18, 19, 20, 22; 5:17; 9:9), it seems quite plausible to suppose that he is always talking about “the business at which one works” rather than just

13 “Produce” is also, nevertheless, a possible connotation, at least in Aramaic: in 4QEnoch\(^\text{a}\) 1 III, 18, the giants consume human עַמֵּל until humans can supply them with nothing more, which presumably means that they are eating everything produced.


“the labour that one does”. Sometimes the context constrains the sense to “labour”, just as sometimes it excludes that sense, but we should not suppose that Qohelet always has one specific meaning in mind, any more than we would always require “I am at work” in English to mean either “I am working” or “I am at the office”, but never both.

5. עֲלֵיהֶם

We have already noted the difficulty of 10:10 when discussing הבשנות. The verse follows an assertion in 10:9 that workers quarrying stones or chopping logs may, or will, be injured by them, and it either explains that claim, or uses it as the basis for a further saying. The text itself is difficult: something will happen, we are told, Está קָהָה הָבוֹרִי (“if the iron/tool is blunt[?]”) and והוא לא פנים קלקל, according to MT (broadly supported by the Targum), but G renders the second clause as καὶ αὐτὸς πρόσωπον ἐτάραξεν, which does not reflect the לא. G is followed by the Peshitta here, and Jerome appears to be aware of both readings in his commentary on Ecclesiastes: his translation reads et hoc non ut prius sed conturbatum erit, but in his comments on verse 9 he renders as et faciem eius turbauerit. Matters are further complicated both by the fact that a reading ל for לא is found in oriental manuscripts of MT, and by the position of לא, which is strange if it is supposed simply to negate the verb. In the light of all these considerations, some commentators have proposed that לא פנים should be emended, perhaps to לא לפנים.16

This is not the place to solve the problem as a whole, but it may be apparent that much depends on the meaning of קלקל here. Those scholars who would follow MT and retain לא in והוא לא פנים קלקל generally propose that קלקל means “sharpened”, so the verse would say, “If the tool is blunt and he has not sharpened the edge.” They can point to Ezek 1:7 and Dan 10:6 where a word קלל is used of “burnished” or “polished” bronze, but the relationship of that

word to קַלָּל here is uncertain, and “polished” is not the same as “sharpened”. It is also difficult to make נָפֶש mean “edge” – Driver, with some justice, calls that an “impossible suggestion”17 – and so although quite a good case could be made for supposing that the reference here is to polishing the flat surfaces of a tool, if that fitted the context, “sharpened the edge” involves two speculative leaps. Even if we accept those, the position of לא would also suggest “he has sharpened what is not the edge”, rather than “he has not sharpened the edge” (cf. Jer 2:27; 19:17; 32:33).

Another suggestion, to take קַלָּל with the next clause and in the sense “shake” (the tool), understood to mean “swing” it, requires לא פְּנֵי to carry a sense like “without an edge”, which seems improbably.18 That proposal does have the merit, however, of taking seriously the fact that we have קַלָּל here, and not קַלְל: whether we treat קַלָּל as the pilpel of קַלְל or as effectively a separate verb, we have to give some priority to קַלָּל in Ezek 21:26 and in Jer 4:24 when assessing the sense.19 Both of those passages, in fact, point to agitation as the basic meaning: in Ezekiel, the reference is to a form of belomancy, perhaps involving the shaking of arrows in a quiver to mix them (cf. Vulgate commiscens), while Jer 4:24 is talking about the quaking of mountains (רְעָשִים). It is difficult to associate that meaning with the long, single movements involved in sharpening or wielding an axe. In connection with נָפֶש, indeed, it is reasonable to suppose that the shaking implied by קַלָּל is rather the jarring of a blade on a surface, and this is probably what G has understood: ταράσσω is used in Jer 4:24 as well, and it commonly refers to physical agitation. Although πρόσωπον is not the most

17 Ibid., 232, pointing out that Ezek 21:21 involves a personification.


19 The context of the very difficult מָחַם קַלָּל in Num 21:5 suggests a sense there closer to the normal connotations of disorder or disgrace in Aramaic and in later Hebrew.
obvious choice for “surface” in Greek, it is regularly used for the surface of the ground (e.g. Gen 2:6), so the translator can stay close to the Hebrew here without sacrificing the sense, and G is probably to be understood “he has jarred the surface”, reflecting והוא פנים קלקל. If we are to retain MT, then the reference is perhaps to the blow missing the surface at which it is aimed, while emendation to לא לפנים would allow the possibility that it has not been delivered straight (cf. Jer 7:24).

All this might be simpler if we were certain that הקה in the preceding clause really meant “blunt”, and if we knew what הכשיר meant subsequently: the gaps in our knowledge of

20 The verb is used elsewhere in Biblical Hebrew only of the effect on teeth of sour grapes (Jer 31:29-30; Ezek 18:2), and הקה (also קיה, קהא) is often used with reference to teeth in later texts. It can also imply both weakness and obstinacy, the latter leading some early Jewish interpreters of this passage, including the Targum, to understand the sense “unyielding as iron” here. The most striking later parallel, however, comes in y. Ber. 9:1 63a, when R. Yannai describes how, when Pharaoh had arrested Moses and they tried to cut off his head, הקה התחרב מעל צוארו של משה ונשבר (the sword bounced off Moses’ neck and was broken”), showing that Moses’ “neck is like an ivory tower” (Song 7:4); R. Abyatar adds that, the sword flew off” the neck of Moses and on to the neck of the executioner instead, killing him. It is clear that הקה is to be understood in this passage, at least, in the sense of a blade taking a deflection or bouncing off a hard surface, which would make good sense in Eccl 10:10, and might fit well with the reading of MT; that meaning may also suit G ἐκπέσῃ, “fails”, “falls away”, “goes off course”. In fact, many of the other passages cited by Jastrow from rabbinic literature suggest an association of הקה not with bluntness per se, but with the resistance of a surface to being cut or the difficulty of cutting hard surfaces.

21 Even the reading is uncertain: the Kethib הבישר is pointed as an infinitive construct: the versions have read the consonants of the Qere הבישר, but have mostly taken it as an adjective, rather than an infinitive absolute. Symmachus, interestingly, renders as ὁ γοργευσάμενος (εἰς
Qohelet’s vocabulary are made more obvious in this verse, perhaps, than in any other, and we cannot really even state with certainty the relationships of the various clauses to each other or of this verse to the verses that precede and follow it. Despite such ample provision of lexicographical resources, Qohelet seems determined to defy our best efforts to understand him, and to prove that אֶמ יִשְׁמַר הַחַמֶּם לָדוּעַ לֹא יִכְלֶל לַמִּשְׁא. 

σοφίαν, “he who has hastened (towards wisdom)”, which might tie in with the understanding of כֶּשֶׁרו advanced above.