

A NEW INTERPRETATION OF THE WORD *QOHELETH*

YOSHITAKA KOBAYASHI, Ph.D.

The Hebrew word *qōhelet* is translated as *Ekklesiastēs* in the Septuagint and means “a member of an assembly” rather than “preacher” or “convener.” Jerome transliterated the Greek *Ekklesiastēs* into “Ecclesiastes” in the Vulgate,¹ identical to the English title of this book. The Syriac Peshitta version transliterated the Hebrew *qōhelet* into *qwhlt* (*qūhlat*).² However, Jerome interpreted this word as *concionator* or “assembler of people.”³ Since it is difficult to consider the Qal participle⁴ as causative, the meaning of *concionator* is dubious. Further, there is little difference between Jerome’s *concionator* and modern translations of this word, including “Preacher” (RSV, NKJV, NASB), “Teacher” (NRSV, NIV), and “Speaker” (NEB). These meanings given for *qōhelet* point to important and rather exalted designations. However, the meaning of the word may point in the direction of something much less sophisticated, such as “a member of assembly,” as in the Septuagint. The situation is such that O. S. Rankin has remarked, “The exact content of meaning attached to the word Koheleth may never be determined.”⁵ In this paper I would like to challenge Rankin’s negative prospect with regard to the determination of the meaning of *qoheleth*.

This paper limits itself to the questions of the meaning of *qoheleth* (Eccl 1:1) and the reason why it has a feminine ending (-*et*).⁶ In order to find possible

¹*Biblia Sacra iuxta Vulgatam Versionem* (Stuttgart: Württembergische Bibelanstalt, 1969), 2:986.

²*Syriac Peshitta Version* (London: Trinitarian Bible Society, 1954), 383.

³Cf. Francis Brown, with S. R. Driver and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament with an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic* (BDB), based on the lexicon of William Gesenius (1952), s.v. “*qoheleth*.”

⁴The Qal masculine participle *qōhēl* means “attendee of an assembly” or “a member of an assembly.”

⁵O. S. Rankin, “The Book of Ecclesiastes,” *Interpreter’s Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick (New York: Abingdon, 1956), 5:3.

⁶The verb *qhl* is not used in Qal but the word (*qōhelet*) has the form of a Qal participle feminine singular. In the Hebrew Bible many examples of the same pattern—a noun or Qal feminine participle with -*eth* ending—are attested. Examples include: *’ōhebet* (Gen 25:28),

answers to these issues I will follow a two-step process: the first is largely a lexical-grammatical approach, supported by the second, which is a brief contextual study.

Lexical and Grammatical Study

Since the term usually takes the form of a Qal feminine participle, I will first point out examples of this form and then compare them with masculine participles to see if there is any difference in nuance between them. The purpose for doing this is to ascertain if there is possibly a rule whereby masculine objects are represented by feminine participles.

Qal Participles (Masculine and Feminine)

The word *zōhāl*, “crawler” (e.g., Deut 32:24; Micah 7:17), is used in parallel with “snake” as a synonym in the masculine form. However, in 1Kgs 1:9 the participle is used in the feminine form *zōhelet*, implying that a “snake” is a particular “crawler,” one among those that crawl. In other words, there are many things which do crawl, but a “snake” is a particular “crawler.” From this observation, a rule may be tentatively suggested for the use of the feminine participle in that it may be used to show its particularity, in this case, specific to “crawler.”⁷

Hōbēr generally means “uniting” (e.g., Deut 18:11; Ps 58:6). The feminine *hōberet*, “something that joins” (Exod 26:4,10; 36:17) is used in reference to the curtain-pieces of the Tabernacle. The feminine form is used there for a particular joint or juncture used only for the tabernacle. Therefore, it appears that this feminine form may also be understood as the feminine of particularity, not merely the feminine form to simply express feminine gender.

The word *yōnēq* means “young plant,” or “sapling” (e.g., Isa 53:2). The feminine *yōneqet* means “young shoot” (e.g., Job 8:16), that is, a particular part of the young plant. This too may suggest the feminine of particularity.

In Amos 9:13 and Ps 109:12 *māšāk* means “drawing.” The feminine *māšeket* (e.g., Job 38:31) means “a cord” that is used for drawing; it is a particular item useful for drawing. It may also be the case that this is a feminine of particularity.

While *sōper* means “secretary,” the feminine *sōperet*, was used as a name of a man, Sophereth (Ezra 2:55; Neh 7:57). This may be one of the numerous

⁷*ōkelet* (Exod 24:17), *ōmeret* (1 Kgs 3:22), *bō'eret* (Jer 20:9), *yōledet* (Gen 17:19), *yōredet* (Eccl 3:21), *yōrešet* (Num 36:8), *yōshebet* (Lev 15:23), *yōteret* (Exod 29:13), *kōteret* (1 Kgs 7:16), *nōhelet* (Isa 1:30), *sōheret* (Ezek 27:12), *sōperet* (Neh 7:57), *sōreret* (Zech 7:21), *ōmedet* (Hag 2:5), *ōperet* (Job 19:24), *rōheset* (2 Sam 11:2), *rōkelet* (Ezek 27:20,23), *šō'eleṭ* (1 Kgs 2:20,22), *šōkebet* (Ruth 3:8), *šōpeket* (Ezek 22:3).

⁷Note that the feminine form was not used for the female snake.

theophorous names. It may imply that here, this “secretary” is a particular divine “secretary.” Therefore, this feminine form is also considered as the feminine of particularity. This is an important example because this name is similar to the case of Qoheleth.

’Oleh means “going up” (e.g., Gen 38:18; Isa 24:18). The feminine *’olā* is a variation of another feminine ending *-eth*, and it means either a “burnt-offering” that goes up to heaven or a “stairway” on which one may “go up” (Ezek 40:26). The feminine forms, both with *-ā* and *-et* endings, were used for particular items that go up, and on which one may go up.

The masculine form *šōmēr* means “guard, watch.” The feminine *šōm’rā* (e.g., Ps 141:3) is used for a mouth, a particular organ of body that needs to be watched or guarded. An organ that needs to be watched was referred to metaphorically as a “watch” organ. In this case, the mouth is a particular organ that needs watching. Therefore, this may also be an example of the feminine of particularity. (Cf. Prov 13:3; 21:23; Eccl 5:2,6).

From the above observations of these Qal participles, we may assume that the feminine participles, both with *-ā* and *-et* endings, were used for specific, particular, or peculiar unnatural things. The forms are feminine, but their natural genders could have been masculine, apparently not feminine. These examples of Qal participles point us in the direction that at times the feminine forms may have been used to indicate non-feminine objects. However, I want to extend the search to nouns and substantives, in addition to Qal participles, to see if a similar phenomenon occurs with nouns having feminine endings. The attempt is to try to find the difference in meanings between masculine and feminine substantives that have the same patterns.

Masculine and Feminine Substantives with the Same Patterns

The following examples provide evidence that feminine forms may be used to indicate peculiarity. The masculine form is first given, followed by the feminine.

’Addār means “majestic” while the feminine *’adderet* means “glory,” a particular majestic thing. *’Okel* means “eating,” “food,” while the feminine *’oklā* means “eating,” “devouring,” or “consuming” by wild beasts or by fire, not by a human being. The feminine form may suggest unnatural, or non-human eating and consuming. Further, *bārāq* means “lightning.” The feminine forms, *bāreqet* (Exod 28:17; 39:10) and *borqat* (Ezek 28:13) point to “shining stone,” something like lightning. The word may actually be translated as “lightning-stone,” that is, a particular stone that shines like lightning. *Gan* means “enclosure,” or “garden” while the feminine *gannā* refers to a garden that is a particular enclosure. *Hāsīd* means “kind” but the feminine *hāsīdā* is a name of a bird, namely, the “stork,” so called because it is kind and affectionate to its young.⁸ *Tebah* means “slaughtering”

⁸Brown, BDB, s.v. “*hāsīdā*.”

while the feminine *ṭibhā* is a particular “thing slaughtered.” *Kinnôr* is “lyre” while the feminine *Kinneret* is the name of a lake that is shaped particularly similar to the lyre. *Keter* is translated as “crown” while the feminine *kôteret* is a particular “crown” for a pillar. *Lābān* means “white” but the feminine *l̄bānā*, “moon,” is a particular object that looks “white.”

More examples may be evidenced. *Nābāl* points to a “fool” while the feminine form *n̄bālā* means “senselessness.” It is a particularly common characteristic of the fool. *ʿAṣṣāb* means “sufferer” but the feminine *ʿaṣsebet* means “pain.” Indeed, the feeling of “pain” is particularly common among the sufferers. *Ma ʿrāk* means “arrangement.” The feminine *ma ʿreket* indicates “the row of shewbread,” a particular arrangement of bread in the Tabernacle.

One final set of words will illustrate this matter of feminine form particularity. *Paḥat* means “hole” while the feminine *pihetet* describes a “leprous decay in a garment,” that is, a particular hole in a garment. *Qāʾā*, a feminine participle, means “vomiting.” *Qāʾat* is a pelican, a bird that vomits up “food from its crop for its young.”⁹ *Šālôm* means “peace.” The feminine is attested in a man’s name *Šlômôt*, meaning of course, “peace.” This may be a theophorous name that refers to the “God of peace.” The sue of this feminine form probably implies the particularity of a non-human God. *Mišqāl* means “weight” while the feminine *mišqōlet* is a particular “weight for leveling.”

We also find feminine nouns derived from masculine nouns having the same root consonants, but with different patterns. For instance, *ʾaryēh* means “lion;” however, the feminine *ʾrāyôt* are the “decorative lions” on the base of the molten sea (1 Kgs 7:29,36; 10:13; 2 Chron 9:18,19). This is an example of the feminine of particularity. Further, the rebellious kings of Judah were likened to the roaring lions (Zeph 3:3; Jer 51:38). The lions in the simile were certainly masculine figures or persons but they were described with feminine forms. These lions are not living natural lions. So this is a case of the feminine of particularity of non-naturality.

The masculine *tāmār* is a “palm tree” but the feminine *timōrā* denotes a “palm-tree figure” and *tīmārā* is a “palm-like column” spreading at the top. These feminine nouns essentially indicate a “palm-tree,” but not the natural palm-tree. This is also an example of the feminine of particularity in the sense of non-naturality.

The masculine noun *ʾāpār* means “dry-earth.” The feminine *ʾōperet* means “lead,” a kind of a refuse metal obtained in the process of refining silver (Jer 6:29). It is a masculine noun,¹⁰ but it has the form of a Qal feminine participle. The name was probably given because it was the softest metal known in the biblical period and its color is somewhat similar to the masculine noun *ʾāpār* (“dry-earth” or “soil”). Probably the lead was at first considered as a particular dust or soil,

⁹Ibid., s.v. “*qāʾat*.”

¹⁰Ibid., s.v. “*ʾaphereth*.”

different from the ordinary soil. So the feminine form here may be understood as an example of the feminine of particularity.

Contextual Study

The use of the words in the book of Qoheleth and 1 Kgs 3:7-9, 11b-14 are similar. The latter passage records Solomon's humble prayer and God's response to his prayer. In the book of Qoheleth, common words are to be found, including "king" and "David" (Eccl 1:1); "people," "hear," and "search" (Eccl 12:9); "seek" (12:10); "wisdom" (12:11); "commandment" (12:13); and "good and evil" (12:14). In 1 Kgs Solomon considers himself only "a little child" (3:7). In other words, Solomon considered himself as being only one of the Israelite *qōhēl* or "congregation," or even less than that, according to his words. However, according to the same passage in 1 Kgs 3, God gave him "wisdom" in order that he may judge His people properly. Thus, Solomon became a particular member of the *qōhēl*, different from other members of God's congregation. In this way he may properly be called *qōhelet*, a particular member of the *qōhēl*, or God's assembly, gifted with the wisdom of God.

Conclusion

When Qal feminine participles are used for male persons those feminine participles denote particularity, rather than gender. This phenomenon is also observed among many of the feminine nouns that were derived from the masculine nouns. From this lexical and grammatical study we may draw a conclusion that the feminine form of the word Qoheleth, applied to Solomon, denotes his "particularity." The brief contextual study of the book of Qoheleth and 1 Kgs 3:7-9, 11b-14 shows similarity in the use of certain words.