

The Woman Who Is a Snare: A Fresh Look at the Identity and Nature of the Female Figure in Eccl 7:25–29

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In what is likely the most highly contested passage of Ecclesiastes, Qohelet has been judged a misogynist,¹ who finds women irrational,² condemns them indiscriminately as seductresses,³ and lashes out against them in an “especially vitriolic and bitter” way.⁴ Despite these protestations, the discourse of the passage suggests a different understanding: through intertextual links to the warnings against the strange woman in Proverbs and to Solomon’s narrated demise through intermarriage with foreign women in 1 Kings 11, Qohelet advises self-discipline lest the reader fall prey to the allurements of illicit sexual relations—a danger that the text hints Qohelet himself has experienced.

The Literary Boundaries of Eccl 7:25–29

The passage of Eccl 7:25–29 carries several literary markers suggesting the boundaries of the literary unit. Discourse features signal a new section in 7:25, and a number of these features tie back to the royal quest for wisdom outlined in 1:12–2:26 to mark here an analogous and new phase of exploration. Whereas in the royal quest for wisdom Qohelet sought clues from achievement, knowledge, and pleasure as to how best to navigate life in a fallen world, here he turns his gaze upon wisdom itself to explore the potential pitfalls thwarting its application. Literary features marking a new phase of exploration include the following:

(1) The phrase סָבֹבְתִי אֲנִי (“I turned”) opening 7:25 is the first asyndetic first-person *qatal* verb with the pleonastic pronoun אֲנִי (“I”) appearing since 3:17–18, and the verb סָבַב (“to turn”) occurs for the first time since the royal autobiography in 2:20, where it also appears with reference to the heart. This rare sequence opening 7:25 (Ø + *qatal* 1cs verb + X, followed by an infinitive construct clause) hints at Qohelet’s earlier assays into wisdom and folly, as the syntax

¹ L. Swidler, *Biblical Affirmations of Women* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979), 128; T. Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of Goddesses: Women, Culture, and the Biblical Transformative Pagan Myth* (New York: Free Press, 1992), 205; A. Brenner, “Figurations of Woman in Wisdom Literature,” in *A Feminist Companion to Wisdom Literature*, ed. A. Brenner, 50–66 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 60; C. R. Fontaine, “‘Many Devices’ (Qoheleth 7.23–8.1): Qoheleth, Misogyny and the *Malleus Maleficarum*,” in *Wisdom and Psalms: A Feminist Companion to the Bible*, ed. A. Brenner and C. R. Fontaine, 137–68 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 142; M. Sneed, “(Dis)closure in Qohelet: Qohelet Deconstructed,” *JSOT* 27 (2002): 122–23; J. L. Koosed, *(Per)mutations of Qohelet: Reading the Body in the Book*, LHBOTS 429 (New York: T & T Clark, 2006), 77–78; idem, “Qoheleth in Love and Trouble,” in *Approaching Yehud: New Approaches to the Study of the Persian Period*, ed. J. L. Berquist, 183–93 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 184–85.

² Sneed, “(Dis)closure in Qohelet,” 122.

³ H.-F. Richter, “Kohelets Urteil über die Frauen: Zu Koh 7,26.28 und 9,9 in ihrem Kontext,” *ZAW* 108 (1996): 589, 593; Koosed, *(Per)mutations of Qohelet*, 77.

⁴ Swidler, *Biblical Affirmations of Women*, 128.

occurs elsewhere only in the royal quest for wisdom as a unit-marker (2:3).⁵ Qohelet has undertaken a fresh turn in his investigation along the lines of his earlier observations and reflections.⁶

(2) The lexeme לְבִי (“my heart”) likewise occurs with אָנִי for the first time since 3:17–18, marking Qohelet’s holistic participation in this new phase (“I and my heart set/turned”) while also carrying resonances with his earlier experiments.

(3) The high unit frequency of “search” terms, including בִּקֵּשׁ (“seek”; 3 of 7 times in the book), תּוֹר (“explore”; 1 of 3 occurrences), and מָצָא (“find”; 7 of 17 times), along with introduction of the new lexical participant הִשְׁבּוֹן (“scheme/explanation”), heralds Qohelet’s intention to explore afresh the saliency of wisdom and folly. The phrase “and to seek wisdom” (וּבִקֵּשׁ חֵכְמָה) in v. 25 corresponds to “they sought many schemes” (בִּקְשׁוּ הִשְׁבְּנוֹת רַבִּים) in v. 29 to frame the unit.

(4) The “editorial intrusion” presenting Qohelet in the third person (“says Qohelet,” אָמַרְהָ קֹהֵלֶת) in v. 27 functions to mark a major transition and signals a midpoint or hinge in the book.⁷ Outside the opening and closing frames (1:1–11; 12:1–14), the book encompasses four large sections: (1) experimental observations on wisdom and folly in human behavior (1:12–2:26); (2) reflective observations and instructions about human transience, finitude, and evil vis-à-vis divine timelessness, transcendence, and righteousness (3:1–7:24); (3) reflective observations and instructions concerning the applicability of wisdom to the enigmas of life (7:25–10:15); and (4) instructions about successful toil and leadership (10:16–11:10). The two largest sections are the second and third, comprising reflective observations and instructions. The third-person reference to Qohelet in 7:27 may be seen thus not as a gloss or redactional vestige but as an intentional link to the larger literary structure marking the book’s latter portion.

(5) Several linguistic features in 7:23–24 suggest the closure of that earlier section. The phrase “all this” (כָּל־זֶה) appears to be anaphoric, summarizing his preceding discourse rather than introducing a new unit (Schoors, 567). The use of נִסָּה (“to test”) appears elsewhere only in 2:1, providing a verbal link with the earlier testing of wisdom in the royal quest and likely framing the first two parts of the book (1:11–2:26; 3:1–7:24). The twofold repetition of “far” (רְחוֹק/רְחוֹקָה) (end of v. 23 and beginning of v. 24) creates a resonance with the twofold repetition of “deep” (עָמֵק) (v. 24) to signal a frustrated conclusion to his earlier efforts to gain mastery of wisdom, which has proved unfathomable and inaccessible. This sets the stage for a new phase of investigation. These factors collectively signal, then, a closure in v. 24 followed by a reactivation of his quest in 7:25 but this time in tandem with a new theme, viz., the limitations of discerning and applying wisdom due to mankind’s inherent sinful inclinations.⁸

⁵ Similar syntactical patterns begin clauses elsewhere in the royal autobiography (1:13, 17; 2:12, 20), but these clauses are headed by the *waw* conjunction to signal some level of continuity with earlier wisdom pursuits.

⁶ O. Loretz likewise notes that 7:25 reactivates key search and epistemology terms utilized in 1:17 and 2:12 (“Poetry and Prose in the Book of Qoheleth (1:1–3:22; 7:23–8:1; 9:6–10; 12:8–14),” in *Verse in Ancient Near Eastern Prose*, ed. J. C. de Moor and W. G. E. Watson, 155–89 [Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1993], 183).

⁷ Cf. also Holmstedt, Cook, and Marshall, *Qoheleth*, 2, 222.

⁸ See Walton, *Experimenting with Qohelet*, 44, 85.

With these literary clues in mind, keywords signal the contours and boundaries within the unit, as in the following outline:⁹

- v. 25a “To seek” (בַּקֵּשׁ)
- v. 25a “Insight/Schemes” (חֵשְׁבוֹן)
- v. 26a “I am finding” (מוֹצֵא)
- v. 26b Bitter, ensnaring woman (הָאִשָּׁה)
- v. 27 “Says Qohelet” (אָמַרְהָ קֹהֵלֵת)
- v. 28 Undiscovered woman (אִשָּׁה)
- v. 29a “I have found” (מֵצְאָתִי)
- v. 29b “Insight/Schemes” (חֵשְׁבוֹן)
- v. 29b “They have sought” (בִּקְשׁוּ)

In this new phase of exploration Qohelet is turning his attention to the foolish missteps even the wise may take. Due to the rupture in human relationships originating from the fall and to the inborn foolish tendencies that result, aspiring wisdom-seekers must remain vigilant with respect to the deceitfulness of their own hearts, a warning reinforced through intertextual connections to the “strange woman” warnings of Proverbs and the narrative of Solomon’s disastrous allegiance to foreign wives in 1 Kings 11.

Translation of Eccl 7:25–29

Building on the foregoing assessment of the unit’s literary features, I propose the following translation for the Hebrew text of Eccl 7:25–29:

25 So I turned with my mind¹⁰ to understand, to explore, and to search out wisdom related to intellectual discovery, and to understand the wickedness of folly and the foolishness of madness.¹¹ **26** Now I am discovering that more bitter than death is the woman who is a snare, whose heart is a net, and whose hands are fetters. The man who pleases God escapes her, but the sinner is captured by her. **27** See, I discovered this,¹² says Qohelet, assessing one by one¹³ to reach this intellectual discovery. **28** What I sought continually and ardently but did not find is this: I found one man among a thousand, but I have not found one woman among all of these. **29** See, this alone I discovered: God made mankind upright, but they have sought many schemes.

⁹ Cf. Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet*, 401.

¹⁰ Heb. לִבִּי, “my heart.”

¹¹ The four Hebrew words are absolute nouns with one *waw* and one definite article occurring before the third term, rendering the decipherment of their relations challenging (יִשַׁע בְּסָל וְהַסְכָּלוֹת הוֹלָלוֹת) (“wickedness, folly and [the] foolishness, madness”). The preferred reading takes the four words as two phrases, each with two nouns carrying a genitive function.

¹² The demonstrative הֵן is cataphoric. See below.

¹³ Heb. “one to one.”

Due to space constraints, this paper will focus on v. 26 to discern the identity and nature of Qohelet's ensnaring woman.

Qohelet's Discovery

Qohelet's initial discovery from his foray into wisdom and folly concerns the dangers posed by a certain female figure. This verse has been deemed as among the most misogynistic texts in the Bible¹⁴ and the ensuing passage as among the most difficult of the book.¹⁵ Qohelet switches from the *qatal* 1cs mainline ("I turned") to a participial form of מֵצֵא (מֵצֵא = "and I am finding") following the III-ן vocalization. Some interpreters view the change as marking the verse as a parenthetical example and thus not an indictment of all women (Galling, 109; Hertzberg, 157). But this places too much weight on the participial conjugation, which appears often in proverbial sayings to express rhetorically present principles (Lauha, 141). More likely, the participle carries durative force, heightening dramatic effect by relaying Qohelet's experience as a present discovery.¹⁶ The word מֵצֵא appears 17 times in the book, mostly in the latter portions.¹⁷ The term appears to have a rather elastic semantic range of "to find what is sought," "to attain/reach," "to discover/learn," or "to obtain/achieve" (BDB, 592–93; HALOT, 619–20; DCH, 5:434–39).¹⁸ The term functions as a keyword in this pericope (7x). DCH defines these uses as the following sense: to find something to be true through examination and experience (5:435). Cognates of מֵצֵא in Akkadian and Ugaritic shed some light on the term. The Akkadian term *mašû*, related in form but distinct semantically, means "to be sufficient for," "to reach," or "to be able to," while the semantically related term *kašādum* means "to reach," "arrive at," or "attain" a position, state, or entity.¹⁹ The associated Ugaritic term *mš'* denotes similarly "to

¹⁴ J. Koosed, *(Per)mutations of Qohelet*, 77; idem, "Qoheleth in Love and Trouble," in *Approaching Yehud: New Approaches to the Study of the Persian Period*, ed. J. L. Berquist, 183–93 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 184–85; T. Fryer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddesses*, 205; K. Butting, "Weibsbilder bei Kafka und Kohelet: Eine Auslegung von Prediger 7,23–29," *Texte und Kontexte* 14 (1991): 2–15; A. Brenner, "Figurations of Woman in Wisdom Literature," in *A Feminist Companion to Wisdom Literature*, ed. A. Brenner, 50–66 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 60; C. R. Fontaine, "'Many Devices' (Qoheleth 7.23–8.1): Qoheleth, Misogyny and the *Malleus Maleficarum*," in *Wisdom and Psalms: A Feminist Companion to the Bible*, ed. A. Brenner and C. R. Fontaine, 137–68 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 142.

¹⁵ N. Lohfink, "War Kohelet ein Frauenfeind? Ein Versuch, die Logik und den Gegenstand von Koh 7,23–8,1a herauszufinden," in *La sagesse de l'ancien testament: Festschrift Maurice Gilbert*, 2nd ed., ed. S. Amsler, P. Beauchamp, P.-É. Bonnaud, et. al., 259–87 (Leuven: University Press, 1990), 260–61; L. Schwienhorst-Schönberger, "'Bitterer als der Tod ist die Frau' (Koh 7,26): Zum Argumentationsgang von Koh 7,25–29," in *Textarbeit: Studien zu Texten und ihrer Rezeption aus dem Alten Testament und der Umwelt Israels: Festschrift für Peter Weimar*, ed. K. Kiesow and T. Meurer, 443–55 (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2003), 443.

¹⁶ Isaksson understands the nuance to be continuation or repetition: "Again and again I have found" (*Studies in the Language of Qoheleth*, 65–66).

¹⁷ Eccl 3:11; 7:14, 24, 26, 27 (2x); 28 (3x); 29; 8:17 (3x); 9:10, 15; 11:1; 12:10.

¹⁸ DCH lists eleven categories of glosses for the term with slightly distinct shades of meaning. Cf. also TDOT, s.v. "מֵצֵא," by S. Wagner and H.-J. Fabry, 8:465–83.

¹⁹ CAD, s.v. "mašû," 10A:344; CAD, s.v. "kašādu," 8:271. The term מֵצֵא appears to carry the connotation of "be sufficient for" in at least Josh 17:16: "The descendants of Joseph said, 'The hill country is not enough (מֵצֵא) for us'" (CSB).

reach,” “attain to,” or “arrive at,”²⁰ with a related cognate *mgy* meaning “to reach something,” “come to,” or “arrive at.”²¹

Discussion has surrounded how these cognate backgrounds might inform the meaning of מַצֵּא and whether the term is actually a Hebrew amalgamation of distinct Semitic cognates.²² Moshe Held argues, on this score, that the two Ugaritic terms are allographs meaning “to reach” rather than “to find” and that the two terms overlap in shaping the single Hebrew term מַצֵּא.²³ Similarly, Samuel Iwry contends that the Ugaritic terms color the nuance of the Hebrew word, with ample evidence that the term often means “to come upon,” “meet,” or “reach” in the OT (Lev 25:28; Num 20:14; Judg 5:30; 6:13; 1 Sam 23:17; Pss 21:8 [9]; 116:3; Isa 10:10).²⁴ Moreover, he suggests that in several passages “to catch” or “apprehend” is an optimal gloss (Exod 22:1–2; Deut 22:22; Prov 6:30–31; Jer 2:26; 48:27; 50:24).²⁵ The term serves as well as a *terminus technicus* for a “captive” or “prisoner of war” in battle contexts (Josh 10:17; Judg 20:48; 2 Kgs 25:19; Isa 13:15; 22:3).²⁶ This connection lends credence to Ceresko’s suggestion of wordplay in this passage, which he identifies as *antanaclasis*, whereby a writer uses a term repeatedly but with distinct shades of meaning.²⁷ Ceresko contends that מַצֵּא, appearing eight times in 7:24–29, carries no fewer than four connotations: “to grasp” (v. 24), “find” (vv. 26, 28 [3x]), “learn” (v. 27a, 29), and “reach” (v. 27b).²⁸ Beyond Ceresko’s suggested nuances for מַצֵּא in this pericope, Qohelet in a larger way also plays on “catching” terminology. He contrasts thus between the “catching” of the bitter woman, who captures (לָכַד [“catch”]) and ensnares (מְצוּדִים, תְּרָמִים, אֶסְרוּרִים [“snares, nets, fetters”]) her prey with his own intellectual “catching” (מַצֵּא [“overtake, reach, apprehend”]) of practical and conceptual insights. So מַצֵּא connotes here that Qohelet has reached, grasped, or attained a seminal discovery.

More Bitter than Death

Qohelet has apprehended a grim reality that he judges “more bitter than death.” The term מַר is understood traditionally as denoting something that tastes “bitter” (*HALOT*, 629; *DCH*, 5:472). The literal meaning of “bitter” as a sharp, pungent taste gives way often to metaphorical depictions of the human experience of deep distress or despair. In this way, the contrasting taste metaphors of sweet and bitter represent qualities or deeds that are altogether desirable or

²⁰ Aistleitner, *Wörterbuch*, 192; Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook*, 436, §1524.

²¹ Aistleitner, *Wörterbuch*, 190; Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook*, 436, §1520.

²² See the discussion in A. R. Ceresko, “The Function of *Antanaclasis* (*mš*’ ‘to find’ // *mš*’ ‘to reach, overtake, grasp’) in Hebrew Poetry, Especially in the Book of Qoheleth,” *CBQ* 44 (1982): 551–69.

²³ M. Held, “The *YQTL-QTL* (*QTL-YQTL*) Sequence of Identical Verbs in Biblical Hebrew and in Ugaritic,” in *Studies and Essays in Honor of Abraham A Neuman*, ed. M Ben-Horin, 281–90 (Leiden: Brill, 1962), 289n1.

²⁴ S. Iwry, “והנמצא – A Striking Variant Reading in 1QIs^a,” *Textus* 5 (1966): 35–37.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 37–38.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 38–42.

²⁷ Ceresko, “Function of *Antanaclasis*,” 551–52.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 567–68.

disagreeable, as in Isaiah’s indictment of moral deviance:²⁹ “Ah, you who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!” (Isa 5:20).³⁰ Only two OT texts use מַר to characterize humans who possess a bitter nature harmful to others: Prov 5:4 and Eccl 7:26, both depicting a woman who poses a mortal risk to the wisdom-seeker (SDBH). Bitterness as tied to extreme suffering is also the unwelcome fate of Job, who expresses repeatedly his “bitterness of soul” (Job 3:20; 7:11; 10:1).

Despite the customary meaning, numerous interpreters read the term מַר here, however, as connoting “strength” rather than “bitterness,” thus depicting the woman as stronger than death.³¹ Dahood connects this to the captive power exerted by the woman: “The author depicts the tenacity with which a woman will cling to the man she has ensnared. . . . The grip of a woman is stronger than the grasp of death.”³² Yet Qohelet is making comparison to the woman herself, not her grip, which suggests that “stronger than death” would be a statement about the woman’s immortality. Such a notion contradicts the tenor of the book where death’s inescapability is a chief concern.³³ The versions support the primary meaning of “bitter” for the term (LXX, Vg., and Syr.). Moreover, OT parallels where bitterness appears in the context of death hint at a common conceptual field. The Amalekite king’s experience of death will prove bitter: “Samuel said, ‘Bring Agag king of the Amalekites here to me.’ And Agag came to him haltingly. Agag said, ‘Surely this is *the bitterness of death*’” (1 Sam 15:32). Job laments the frequency with which people die in bitterness: “Another *dies in bitterness* of soul” (Job 21:25). The outside woman of Proverbs is likewise “bitter” as wormwood (Prov 5:4), and her feet descend to “death” and Sheol (5:5).

Beyond the meaning of the terms, the syntax of the clause is difficult to assess for several reasons: (1) One would expect the feminine form of מַר (מָרָה) since a woman is in view. (2) The clause marks the word order by inverting the customary pronoun-participle sequence to participle-pronoun (וַיִּמְצֵא אִנִּי) (“finding” is focus-fronted). (3) The clause additionally marks the word order by fronting the comparative phrase “bitterer than death” before the accusative (cf. Neh 9:8). (4) The accusative “the woman” is specially marked with the sign of the accusative (אֶת־הַיְהוֹשֵׁפָה) even though syntactically the whole phrase functions as the complement of the verb (i.e., “I find [X (to be) bitter]”) (this usage emphasizes “the woman” topically [see Joüon-Muraoka §125j, 416–17]) (Seow, 261; HCM, 220).³⁴ Given the difficult syntax, Schoors interprets the clause as carrying a double accusative, with מַר as the predicate adjective and אֶת־

²⁹ P. Van Hecke, “Tasting Metaphor in Ancient Israel,” 108–110.

³⁰ Unless otherwise noted, all scriptural citations are from the New Revised Standard Version (New York: National Council of Churches, 1989).

³¹ S. Rin and S. Rin, “Ugaritic-Old Testament Affinities,” *BZ* 10 (1957): 174–92; M. Dahood, “Qoheleth and Recent Discoveries,” 308–310; M. Dahood, “The Phoenician Background of Qoheleth,” 276; L. Kutler, “A ‘Strong’ Case for Hebrew *mar*,” *UF* 16 (1984): 111–18; Whitley, 68. While this meaning fits well in Ezek 3:14, it does not accord with the context in this passage.

³² Dahood, “Qoheleth and Recent Discoveries,” 308.

³³ O. Loretz deems the view that the woman is stronger than death and hence immortal “absurd” both in this context and in the literature of the ANE (“Poetry and Prose in the Book of Qoheleth [1:1–3:22; 7:23–8:1; 9:6–10; 12:8–14],” in *Verse in Ancient Near Eastern Prose*, ed. J. C. de Moor and W. G. E. Watson, 155–89 [Neukirchener-Verlag, 1993], 183).

³⁴ On these unusual syntactical features, Ginsburg explains that the masculine form of the adjective occurs precisely because of the fronting (387). HCM comment that the customary pronoun-participle order is favored by a five-to-one margin over the participle-pronoun sequence in the Hebrew Bible (220).

הַפֶּה as the object accusative, leading him to render the first part as a nominal clause citing a maxim: “I find (the saying): More bitter than death is the woman.”³⁵ This reading prompts a larger question: Is Qohelet positing his own view or citing another’s? Several interpreters read here a conventional saying that Qohelet quotes and rejects.³⁶ This solution in turn ties to the larger question of identifying citations in Scripture. Michael Fox has proposed three useful criteria to identify biblical quotations: (1) another subject besides the primary speaker is present in the immediate vicinity of the quotation; (2) a virtual *verbum dicendi* (verb or noun implying speech) is used; or (3) a switch in grammatical person and number marks a change in perspective to the quoted voice.³⁷ Despite the difficult syntax and the general nature of these markers, none of the criteria appears here, making apt Fox’s warning about interpreters’ tendency to find quotations as a means of imposing their own presuppositions on the text.³⁸ Further, if Qohelet were citing an interlocutor, determining whether he does so with approval or disapproval would remain a challenge. Thus, without clear discourse markers to identify a quotation, this approach is unpersuasive and redolent of special pleading to absolve him of misogyny.

The Identity of the Female Figure

The next question turns to the identity of the woman who is bitterer than death and how she relates to Qohelet’s conclusions. There are five basic options regarding the nature and identity of the woman and the meaning of Qohelet’s discovery about her:³⁹ (1) The woman represents all women, and Qohelet denigrates women in general as dangerous.⁴⁰ (2) The woman represents all women, but Qohelet is expressly reflecting on Genesis to comment on the marred marital relationships that result from the fall.⁴¹ (3) The woman is a particular kind of woman,

³⁵ A. Schoors, *The Preacher Sought to Find Pleasing Words*, 188. Ogden takes a similar tack and remarks that the sign of the accusative is out of place (121).

³⁶ L. Schwienhorst-Schönberger, “‘Bitterer als der Tod ist die Frau’ (Koh 7,26): Zum Argumentationsgang von Koh 7,25–29,” in *Textarbeit: Studien zu Texten und ihrer Rezeption aus dem Alten Testament und der Umwelt Israels: Festschrift für Peter Weimar*, ed. K. Kiesow and T. Meurer, 443–55 (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2003), 447–48; Schwienhorst-Schönberger, 403; Michel, 226–31; Lohfink, 102; Whybray, 125.

³⁷ M. Fox, “The Identification of Quotations in Biblical Literature,” *ZAW* 92 (1980): 423.

³⁸ Fox writes: “The hypothesis of quotations, if applied without controls, can lead to the imposition of the exegete’s presuppositions on the text, allowing him to eliminate whatever does not seem to fit the context by attributing it to another speaker” (ibid., 431).

³⁹ Cf. the four options in L. Schwienhorst-Schönberger, “‘Bitterer als der Tod,’” 444.

⁴⁰ Fox 1999, 266–69; Ginsburg, 387; Delitzsch, 332; Zöckler, 181; Zapletal, 178; Lauha, 141; Longman, 204; Plumtre, 171; Pödechard, 385–86; Gordis, 282; Koosed, (*Per*)mutations of *Qohelet*, 78. Also fitting essentially within this category are the interpreters who view the statement as a quoted conventional saying (see note 34; e.g., Schwienhorst-Schönberger, Michel, Lohfink, Whybray, et al.).

⁴¹ D. A. Garrett, “Ecclesiastes 7:25–29 and the Feminist Hermeneutic,” *Criswell Theological Review* 2 (1988): 316; M. Seufert, “The Presence of Genesis in Ecclesiastes,” *WTJ* 78 (2016): 81.

such as the outside woman of Proverbs,⁴² a seductive “gold digger,”⁴³ or the daughters of foreign dignitaries enticing young Hellenistic Jewish men.⁴⁴ Qohelet is warning the wisdom-seeker to avoid contact with this type of woman, as she brings destruction to those who fall prey to her. (4) The woman is a specific woman, such as his own wife;⁴⁵ a spurned lover;⁴⁶ Agathoklea, the mistress of Ptolemy IV Philopator;⁴⁷ or Laodice, the estranged wife and murderer of Seleucid king Antiochus II.⁴⁸ In this view Qohelet expresses angst over his failed relationship with this woman or over the larger societal havoc this specific woman has wrought. (5) The woman is metaphorical (or quasi-metaphorical) and represents an abstract concept or archetype such as Lady Wisdom,⁴⁹ Lady Folly,⁵⁰ divine force,⁵¹ the feminine sex,⁵² pleasure/eroticism,⁵³ death,⁵⁴ or pagan philosophy.⁵⁵ Qohelet is providing in this view a sapiential conclusion, positive or negative, about the nature of wisdom/folly, divine sovereignty, or human life.

Which view best fits the context? Given the difficulty of the syntax, grammar alone does not resolve the issue. The fourth view (a specific woman) fails to convince due to its over-specificity, requiring the interpreter to mirror-read a particular socio-cultural occurrence from the life of the putative author. The second view (all [married] women in view of the fall) has some

⁴² Rashbam, 164; Hertzberg, 154; Zimmerli, 213; Loader, 92; Belcher, 281; Stuart, 224–25; Murphy, 76; Provan, 154; Levy, 110; Barton, 147; Brown, 83; Crenshaw, 146; J. Y. S. Pakk, “Women as Snares: A Metaphor of Warning in Qoh 7,26 and Sir 9,3,” in *Treasures of Wisdom: Studies in Ben Sira and in the Book of Wisdom: Festschrift M. Gilbert*, ed. N. Calduch-Benages and J. Vermeylen, 397–404 (Leuven: University Press, 1999), 398–400; H.-F. Richter, “Kohlelets Urteil über die Frauen: Zu Koh 7,26.28 und 9,9 in ihrem Kontext,” *ZAW* 108 (1996): 589; I. Riesener, “Frauenfeindschaft im Alten Testament? Zum Verständnis von Qoh 7,25–29,” in *Jedes Ding hat seine Zeit: Studien zur israelitischen und altorientalischen Weisheit*, ed. A. A. Diesel, R. G. Lehmann, E. Otto, and A. Wagner, 193–207 (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1996), 200; Shields, *The End of Wisdom*, 186–87.

⁴³ Bollhagen, 274–79. This view differs from the previous in that the woman’s primary aim is to swindle the man’s property.

⁴⁴ Heim, 143.

⁴⁵ This was a common rabbinical view. See the Babylonian Talmud, *Berakhot*, 8a; *Yevamot*, 63b: “The Gemara cites a related incident: Rav Yehuda was teaching Torah to Rav Yitzḥak, his son, and they encountered the verse: ‘And I find more bitter than death the woman’ (Ecclesiastes 7:26). His son said to him: ‘For example, whom?’ His father replied: ‘For example, your mother.’”

⁴⁶ E. Tamez, *When the Horizons Close: Rereading Ecclesiastes* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000), 102; Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 205.

⁴⁷ Hitzig, 265.

⁴⁸ Athas, 159.

⁴⁹ T. Krüger, “‘Frau Weisheit’ in Koh 7,26?” *Bib* 73 (1992): 394–403; Krüger, 147.

⁵⁰ T. Frydrych, *Living under the Sun*, 158–59; Seow, 262; Schellenberg, 120; Bartholomew, 226; Ogden and Zogbo, 268–69; P. J. Leithart, “Solomon’s Sexual Wisdom: Qohelet and the Song of Songs in the Postmodern Condition,” in *The Words of the Wise Are like Goats: Engaging Qohelet in the 21st Century*, ed. M. J. Boda, T. Longman III, and C. G. Rata, 443–60 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 454; Schellenberg, 120; Barrick, 135.

⁵¹ D. Rudman, “Woman as Divine Agent in Ecclesiastes,” *JBL* 116 (1997): 411–27; idem, *Determinism in the Book of Ecclesiastes*, 101–9. Rudman appears to combine the literal and metaphorical conceptions of the woman, as she is a real woman who nonetheless acts as “the agent of a deterministic force” (106) and as “an instrument of divine judgment on humanity” (107).

⁵² R. Irshai, “‘And I Find a Wife More Bitter than Death’ (Eccl 7:26): Feminist Hermeneutics, Women’s Midrashim, and the Boundaries of Acceptance in Modern Orthodox Judaism,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 33 (2017): 76; M. Sneed, “(Dis)closure in Qohelet: Qohelet Deconstructed,” *JSOT* 27 (2002): 115–26. This view has affinities with the first view but is distinct in that the authors identify the woman more abstractly as an “archetypal figure of a woman” (Irshai, 76) or as a figure who represents irrationality for Qohelet (Sneed, 122).

⁵³ Fontaine, “‘Many Devices’ (Qoheleth 7.23–8.1),” 147; Ibn Ezra, 121.

⁵⁴ Ogden, 121. Specifically, Ogden sees this as premature death which takes a man before his time.

⁵⁵ Leupold, 173; Hengstenberg, 185. Hengstenberg also connects the woman to the strange woman of Proverbs but sees that woman as the personification of folly.

merit in that Qohelet reflects elsewhere on Genesis, but the context does not support the conclusion that marital conflict is specifically the problem in view or that the woman poses a danger only inside the marriage relationship. This leaves most likely the first view (general misogyny), third view (a particular kind of woman), or fifth view (a metaphorical woman). The grammar and larger biblical and cultural contexts favor the third view, while telling against the first and fifth views for several reasons.

First, the definite article and accusative marker on אֶת־הָאִשָּׁה (“the woman”) suggest a particular class of women (“that [kind of] woman”) rather than women generally (Brown, 83). This is the generic use of the article, common in comparisons, one that “marks out not a particular single person or thing but a class of persons, things, or qualities that are unique and determined in themselves.”⁵⁶ Furthermore, this is the only use of the definite article on the singular אִשָּׁה across the corpus of biblical wisdom (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job, Canticles), suggesting perhaps a backward reference to a particular kind of woman, possibly the outside woman of Proverbs.⁵⁷

Second, the relative particle אֲשֶׁר that follows “the woman” is likely the restrictive use of the relative clause (“which”), which marks a particular kind of woman rather than a statement about all women (HCM, 221). In his exhaustive study of relative clauses in the Hebrew Bible, Robert Holmstedt defines restrictive relative clauses as those in which the relative marker (e.g., אֲשֶׁר) enables the listener or reader to distinguish the head noun from other possible or real items in the field of discourse as the referent about which the assertion is believed to be true.⁵⁸ All three of Holmstedt’s criteria for restrictive clauses fit here, as the head noun is explicit, definite, and generic rather than unique. The relative clause would thus identify a class of persons, with the purview relating to a particular kind of woman in contrast to all women. The sense would equate to “the woman, *namely the one who is a snare*. . . .”

A couple of possible objections to the restrictive meaning may be mentioned. One was raised long ago by Delitzsch, who asserted that the relative particle אֲשֶׁר does not modify “the woman” as a dependent relative clause because the pronoun הִיא should stand separate from אֲשֶׁר, as is the case with relative clauses where the pronoun heads a nominal clause (e.g., Gen 7:2; 17:12; Num 17:5; Deut 17:15) (Delitzsch, 332). In other words, according to Delitzsch, the sequence אֲשֶׁר-הִיא/הִיא never modifies the noun it follows as a dependent relative clause (with an embedded nominative clause) but stands independent as a construction that modern linguists would call a resumptive clause or, alternatively, a null head relative clause. This prompts Delitzsch to translate the verse as an indictment of all women: “I found woman more bitter than death; *she is* like hunting-nets. . . .” Holmstedt notes that while this is a rare syntactical construction, there are 30 relative clauses in the Hebrew Bible in which the resumption of the

⁵⁶ Waltke and O’Connor, *IBHS*, 244, §13.5.1f. Cf. *Williams’ Hebrew Syntax*, 39, §92; Joüon-Muraoka, 476, 479, §137i, 137n.

⁵⁷ Christianson, “Qoheleth the ‘Old Boy,’” 111n4.

⁵⁸ R. D. Holmstedt, *The Relative Clause in Biblical Hebrew*, LSAWS 10 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2016), 6. Holmstedt’s criteria for identifying a restrictive relative clause include the following: (1) the head noun is not a unique referent (e.g., “Yahweh” or “the sun”); (2) the relative clause modifies a head noun rather than a null head; and (3) the head noun is either a definite noun or a specific indefinite noun (209).

nominative occurs in null-copula clauses.⁵⁹ Of these 30 clauses, 14 place the resumptive pronoun directly after the relative particle.⁶⁰ Thus, despite its rarity, this clause arrangement has precedent and gives indication that it should be read as a restrictive relative clause, one of fifteen uses in the OT. A second possible objection to our reading is the Masoretic accentuation, which links the term מְצוּדִים (“snares”) to the following term וְחַרְמִים (“and nets”), thereby resulting in a *casus pendens* and in the translation “she is snares and nets” (see Whitley, 69). This rendering would be more in line with Delitzsch’s proposal than as a statement about a particular kind of woman (see Schoors, 575). The versions (LXX, Syr., Vg.), however, read the clause as a conventional relative clause along the lines that I have argued, and the MT accents fail to resolve the text’s difficulties.

Third, the larger biblical and extrabiblical contexts bolster the conclusion that the warning pertains to the danger posed by a strange/outside woman rather than all women generally. Within the biblical context, the corollaries between the bitter woman and the outside woman of Proverbs are intriguing.

Figure 1: The Outside Woman in Proverbs and Bitter Woman of Ecclesiastes.

Links between the “Bitter Woman” of Ecclesiastes and the “Strange/Outside Woman” of Proverbs	
The Bitter Woman (Ecclesiastes)	The Strange/Outside Woman (Proverbs)
She is more “bitter” (מָר) (7:26)	She is “bitter” (מָרָה) as wormwood (5:4)
She is compared to “death” (מָוֶת) (7:26)	Her house (2:8) and her feet (5:4) go down to “death” (מָוֶת)
She is “hunting snares” (מְצוּדִים), “nets” (חַרְמִים), and “fetters” (אֶסְרוֹר), and the sinner is “ensnared” (לִכְדוֹ) by her (7:26)	The man’s sexual appetites “ensnare” (לִכְדוֹ) him (5:22), and he is “taken” (לִקְחוֹ) by the woman (6:25) when she “hunts down” (צוּדוֹ) his precious life (6:26)
“Her heart is nets” (חַרְמִים לִבָּהּ) (7:26)	She is “wily of heart” (נְצֻרַת לֵב) (7:10)
Her allurement centers physically on her “hands/arms” (יָדַיִם) (7:26)	Her allurement centers physically on her “eyes” (עֵפְעָפִים) (6:25) and “mouth” (פִּי) (22:14)

⁵⁹ See *ibid.*, 166n44. These are relative clauses that embed a nominative clause. The examples are Gen 7:2, 8; 9:3; 17:12; 30:33; Lev 11:29, 39; Num 9:13; 17:5; 35:31; Deut 17:15; 20:15; 29:14; 1 Kgs 8:41; 9:20; 2 Kgs 25:19; Jer 40:7; Ezek 12:10; 20:9; 43:19; Hag 1:9; Ps 16:3; Song 1:6; Ruth 4:15; Eccl 4:2; 7:26; Neh 2:13, 18; 2 Chron 6:32; 8:7.

⁶⁰ Gen 9:3; Lev 11:39; Num 9:13; 35:31; Ruth 4:15; 2 Kgs 25:19; Neh 2:13, 18; Eccl 4:2; Song 1:6; Ezek 12:10; 20:9; 43:19; Hag 1:9.

The man who falls prey is a “sinner” (אטח) (7:26)	The cords of his “sin” (חטאת) entangle him (5:22)
The man who is good “before God” (לפני האלהים) eludes her (7:26)	The man’s actions are “before the eyes of YHWH” (עניי יהוה) (5:21)
The good man “escapes” (מלט) her (7:26)	Wisdom is given to “deliver” (נצל) from her (2:16)
The “Assembler” Qohelet (קהלת) warns about her (7:27)	The warning is applied in the midst of the “assembly” (קהל) (5:14)

In addition to these connections, a number of conceptual links relate to warnings about outside women in Egyptian wisdom literature.⁶¹ The third millennium B.C.E. (sixth dynasty) *Instruction of Ptahhotep* cautions about the dire consequences that ensue from entanglement with an outside woman:

If you desire to keep a friendship
 In the residence where you enter,
 As a master, as a brother, or as a friend,
 (L2) Amongst whatever people you are—
 Keep from approaching the women!
 The place where this is done cannot be good.
 The man who intrudes on them is imprudent:
 A thousand men are turned away from their best interests.
 (L2) One is aroused by the limbs of faience,
 (L2) But then she changes into carnelian.
 A brief moment, like a dream,
 And death is reached by knowing them.
 It is a vile principle, conceived by an enemy,
 One goes from doing it with the heart already spurning it.
 (L2) Don’t do it—it is indeed an abomination—
 (L2) And you will be spared from a daily penalty.
 He who fails by lusting after them,
 No design of his will succeed.⁶²

Several interesting parallels merit mention. First, Lana Troy has drawn attention to the dual nature of the woman as expressed by Ptahhotep, a nature that, as here, is both attractive and dangerous: “The seductress is described in terms of faience and carnelian. The blue-green faience of the woman’s limbs entrances man and once entrapped she turns into the fiery-orange

⁶¹ L. Sabbahy notes that “all ancient Egyptian wisdom literature contains advice for men about staying away from the second type of woman [i.e., the dangerous, outside woman] and the consequences he will suffer if he does not” (*The Encyclopedia of Ancient History*, s.v. “Women, Pharaonic Egypt,” by L. Sabbahy [Oxford: Blackwell, 2013], 3).

⁶² The *Instruction of Ptahhotep*, ll. 277–288, 292–297, author’s translation. See the text and translations in Z. Žába, *Les Maximes de Ptahhotep* (Prague: Czechoslovakian Academy of Sciences, 1956), 83–84; M. Lichtheim, ed., *Ancient Egyptian Literature* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2019), 103; L. Troy, “Good and Bad Women: Maxim 18/284–288 of the Instructions of Ptahhotep,” *Göttinger Miszellen* 80 (1984): 77–82; N. Shupak, “Female Imagery in Proverbs 1–9 in the Light of Egyptian Sources,” *VT* 61 (2011): 314–15; A. Depla, “Women in Ancient Egyptian Wisdom Literature,” in *Women in Ancient Societies: An Illusion of the Night*, ed. L. J. Archer, S. Fischler, and M. Wycke, 24–52 (New York: Routledge, 1994), 35–36.

of carnelian.”⁶³ Faience pertains to the bluish green hue of tin-glazed pottery, contrasted here with the red-orange gleam of carnelian, both colors connoting sexual imagery.⁶⁴ The man is ensnared by the attractive woman who in the end turns fiery red and scorches him to death, similar to the fate worse than death that Qohelet warns of. In Egyptian ideology, this duality of nature was evident in both the divine and human realms:

Hathor and the goddesses associated with her were perceived as having a dual nature. On the one hand, they were beneficent, bringing fertility and new life; on the other hand, they were dangerous, bringing destruction in their wake. . . . The duality manifested in the goddesses was also reflected in the Egyptian view of human nature, where women were seen as incorporating a good and a bad side. They were honorable if they met the standards of society, but there was always the danger that they would break the rules, in which case they were dishonorable and would be condemned.⁶⁵

This duality is evident in the later conclusion of the Demotic *Papyrus Insinger* that “the work of Mut and Hathor is what acts among women. It is in women that good fortune and bad fortune are upon the earth.”⁶⁶ This perception is likely also behind the advice given in the fifth-dynasty (ca. 2450–2300 B.C.E.) Egyptian writing *The Instruction of Prince Hardjedef*, which advises the wisdom-seeker to establish his household by taking a wife who is a “mistress of the heart.”⁶⁷ The latter phrase many take to denote a “heartly wife” or “strong woman,” but the phrase more likely suggests a woman who is in control of herself, as self-control was a quality prized in ancient Egypt.⁶⁸ Chaos or *isft* connoted the loss of control, as in fits of passion or anger, and was the opposite of idealized cosmic justice or *maat*. The outside woman who posed a danger was unruly and reckless, subverting the stability of society. Similarly, the outside woman of Proverbs is smooth and desirable, but she links ultimately to fire, death, and the underworld (Prov 5:5–6; 6:27–28; 7:25–27), metaphors for uncontrolled havoc and devastation.

Second, Ptahhotep mentions that a thousand men are led away by her to a self-destructive path. Qohelet likewise references a thousand men in the immediate context as producing only one, presumably upright, exemplar (v. 28). The reference to 1,000 men in these contexts is likely a generalization for the near universality of those who transgress. The outside woman in Proverbs also slays her multitude: “Many are those she has laid low, and numerous are her victims. Her house is the way to Sheol, going down to the chambers of death” (Prov 7:26–27). Third, the onus for maintaining chaste relationships lies primarily with the man, not the woman. While many see in Qohelet’s counsel the vestiges of ANE misogyny (Ginsburg, 387), it is important to note that in early Egyptian wisdom literature, as in Ecclesiastes, the man bears the primary responsibility for avoiding illicit sexual intercourse.⁶⁹ He must set the boundaries and avoid behaviors that would ensnare him in illicit relationships. While the alluring woman is the focal character for Qohelet, the young male addressee is tacitly given the responsibility for maintaining sexual norms.

⁶³ Troy, “Good and Bad Women,” 78.

⁶⁴ Depla, “Women in Ancient Egyptian Wisdom Literature,” 32.

⁶⁵ G. Robins, *Women in Ancient Egypt* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 18. Hathor would thus transform from a raging lioness to a music-loving house cat (see Troy, “Good and Bad Women,” 78). For a general overview of duality in Egyptian thought, see L. Troy, *Patterns of Queenship in Ancient Egyptian Myth and History* (Uppsala: Uppsala University Press, 1986).

⁶⁶ *Papyrus Insinger*, 8,18–19, in Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, 805.

⁶⁷ Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, 93.

⁶⁸ Depla, “Women in Ancient Egyptian Wisdom Literature,” 31.

⁶⁹ See Depla, “Women in Ancient Egyptian Wisdom Literature,” 37.

In addition, the *Instruction of Any*, written likely in the eighteenth dynasty (1550–1305 B.C.E.), likewise warns against involvement with an outside woman:

Beware of a woman who is a stranger,
 One not known in her town;
 Don't stare at her when she goes by,
 Don't know her carnally.
 A deep water whose course is unknown,
 Such is a woman away from her husband.
 'I am pretty,' she tells you daily,
 When she has no witnesses;
 She is ready to ensnare you,
 A great deadly crime when it is heard.⁷⁰

In similar advice to Qohelet's, the Egyptian sage here admonishes the man about the outside woman who possibly sets a trap: she carries the twofold danger of the unknown and of ensnarement in adultery, "a great deadly crime."⁷¹ Later, Any adds this advice: "Do not go after a woman, let her not steal your heart."⁷² The latter admonition also warns of the captivating allurements of adultery, as the tryst trammels the transgressor. Given these literary connections, Qohelet's advice fits neatly within the context of wisdom warnings against illicit relationships with outside women. The most likely view, then, is that the woman Qohelet speaks of is a literal, not metaphorical, woman, since Qohelet nowhere personifies abstract qualities such as wisdom as Proverbs does. Rather, the woman is likely a female figure who resides outside the family boundaries and who poses a risk to the male wisdom-seeker. Rather than pursuing her, he is to remain faithful all his days to the wife whom God has given him (Eccl 9:9).

The Woman's Snares

Following the restrictive relative clause headed by אֲשֶׁר, Qohelet offers three clauses to describe the woman: "(She) who is snares, whose heart is nets, and whose hands are fetters." The term מְצוּדִים is the plural form of מְצוּדָה, usually glossed as a "snare" or "net" (BDB, 844–45; HALOT, 622; DCH, 5:444). More specifically, the term relates to a device or instrument used stealthily to trap or kill quarry, metaphorically depicting the manipulative aggression people use to entice and entrap others (SDBH). The related verbal root צוּד, "to hunt," appears in Prov 6:26 to characterize the adulteress as one who "hunts down" the precious life of her victim.⁷³ The term מְצוּדָה appears four times in the OT (Job 19:6; Prov 12:12; Eccl 7:26; 9:14) and is identified commonly as possessing two homonyms: (I) a "snare" and (II) a "mountain stronghold" or "siegeworks" (BDB, 844–45; HALOT, 622; DCH, 5:444). The lexicons differ, however, on

⁷⁰ Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, 463.

⁷¹ Depla, "Women in Ancient Egyptian Wisdom Literature," 45–46. On the capital crime of adultery in ancient Egypt, see C. J. Eyre, "Crime and Adultery in Ancient Egypt," *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 70 (1984): 92–105.

⁷² Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, 470.

⁷³ Cf. also P. W. Skehan, "Tower of Death or Deadly Snare? (Sir 26,22)," *CBQ* 16 (Apr 1954): 154.

which of the homonyms appears where.⁷⁴ The second homonym seems clearly the meaning in Eccl 9:14, where a pitched battle against a city calls for the meaning of “siegeworks.” Here in 7:26 the meaning “snare” is most likely as a parallel to “nets” and “fettters” and as attested by the versions (LXX, Vg.). The plural here and in the following phrases likely signifies habitual behavior or a repeated series of actions: she continually ensnares her victims.⁷⁵

The second clause equates her heart with nets. The term *הַרְסָה* is taken here usually to be a second homonym meaning “drag-net” or “trawling net” (cf. Ezek 26:5, 14; 32:3; 47:10; Mic 7:2; Hab 1:15–17). distinct from the more common homonym *הַרְסָה*, “something devoted to destruction” or “an object or person put under the ban.”⁷⁶ Such nets were used in the ancient world for hunting and fishing. While the ancient world often idealized hunting and sometimes restricted the avocation to royalty, fishing was a common practice carried out by all classes.⁷⁷ In the Nile River, due to higher average water temperature and pervasive irrigation practices, more than 100 fish species flourished. Fishermen collected fish by stretching a trawling net between papyrus boats equipped with oars or by casting and retrieving a net into the river.⁷⁸ In the prophets, hunting and fishing with nets often carries a menacing tone as symbolic of divine judgment. The prophets declaimed that the children of Israel would be caught as an antelope in a net (Isa 51:20), that Yahweh would capture by hook or net various kings such as Zedekiah (Ezek 12:13) and Pharaoh (Ezek 29:4), and that the Babylonians would ensnare their vanquished enemies with a fishing net (Hab 1:15).⁷⁹ Aalders argues, in fact, that whenever hunting or fishing is used metaphorically in the OT the sense is always unfavorable, portraying evil intentions and actions brought upon the pursued objects.⁸⁰ “Her heart” here connotes more than the romantic affections threatening to ensnare. The heart includes all aspects of the mind—intellect, will, and emotions—as conniving to target and entrap the hapless victim. The wayward woman of Proverbs 7 displays such a character: “With much seductive speech she persuades him; with her smooth talk she compels him. Right away he follows her, and goes like an ox to the slaughter, or bounds like a stag toward the trap” (Prov 7:21–22).

The final phrase depicting the woman observes that “her hands are fetters.” The term *אֶסְרוֹת* is a rare OT term (although the verb form is more common), appearing three times (cf. Judg 15:14; Jer 37:15), and meaning “fetters,” “bonds,” or “cords” (BDB, 64; *HALOT*, 73; *DCH*, 1:345). The term specifies the material used to bind animals or people and suggests power and control over something or someone (SDBH). Captured animals were sometimes ritually bound following the hunt.⁸¹ The term connects more specifically to the OT semantic field of prisons and

⁷⁴ BDB places Job 19:6; Prov 12:12; and Eccl 7:26 under the first homonym, “snare,” with Eccl 9:14 under the second, “siegeworks.” *HALOT* suggests “siegeworks” for Prov 12:12. *DCH* is non-committal about Prov 12:12 but prefers “siegeworks” for Job 19:6.

⁷⁵ Waltke and O’Connor, *IBHS*, §7.4.2c, 121.

⁷⁶ See G. Dalman, *Arbeit und Sitte in Palästina* (reprint ed., Tübingen, Germany: Tobias, 2013), 6:361; *HALOT*, 354; *DCH*, 3:319. On the meaning of *הַרְסָה* as “something devoted to destruction,” see K. Dunham, “Yahweh War and *Herem*: The Role of Covenant, Land, and Purity in the Conquest of Canaan,” *DBSJ* 21 (2016): 7–30.

⁷⁷ *Dictionary of Daily Life*, s.v. “Fish and Fishing,” by T. Rata and M. R. Wilson, 678.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 681.

⁷⁹ See G. C. Aalders, “The Fishers and the Hunters,” *EvQ* 30 (Jul–Sept 1958): 134.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 136–37.

⁸¹ E. Otto, “An Ancient Egyptian Hunting Ritual,” *JNES* 9 (Jul 1950): 164–77.

incarceration.⁸² Prisoners in the ancient world were often shackled and placed in confinement such as in a pit or dungeon either as an isolating procedure in the case of dangerous criminals or as a holding place to await trial and execution. The psalmist’s poetic depiction of Joseph’s imprisonment thus notes: “His feet were hurt with fetters; his neck was put in a collar of iron” (Ps 105:18). Prisons were not viewed as rehabilitative institutions but as places of torture and anguish for demoralized criminals awaiting punishment.⁸³ The mental and physical suffering of prisoners is a common OT theme (Pss 79:11; 142:6–7; Isa 14:17; 42:22; Lam 3:34; Zech 9:11). In Judg 15:14 the term **אֶסְרוֹר** is used for the new ropes with which the Judahites bind Samson to deliver him to the Philistines, whereupon Samson breaks free and slaughters his enemies with a donkey’s jawbone. The Samson connection is intriguing, given his ensnaring dalliances with Delilah (Judg 16:4–22), his conflict in the context wherein he kills 1,000 men (Judg 15:15), and his miserable end in a Philistine prison (Judg 16:21, 25). The term **יָדַי** connotes more than simply the hands, including the fingers, wrists, and forearms, and is indicative of someone’s power and vitality.⁸⁴ The earlier-cited *Instruction of Ptahhotep* warns similarly of the desirable and entrancing limbs of the outside woman, conceptually connected to her alluring sexual energy that overpowers the heedless man.

The aggregation of terms related to hunting and warfare emphasizes that the evasion of the seductress is a matter of life and death. Yet Bartholomew surmises that Qohelet’s statement that he is finding this woman more bitter than death carries more than a hint that he himself or the literary figure he represents is the sinner who has been ensnared by her. His pursuits of wisdom and folly have brought him ironically and perhaps unwittingly into her embrace (267). After all, Qohelet has himself “discovered” this truth, and only one who has sampled the fare truly knows their bitter taste. Such a connection finds support in a number of lexical links to the narrative of Solomon’s marriage to foreign wives in 1 Kings 11.

Figure 2: Solomon’s Foreign Wives and the Bitter Woman of Ecclesiastes.

Links between the “Bitter, Ensnaring Woman” of Ecclesiastes and Solomon’s “Many Foreign Wives” in 1 Kings 11	
Bitter, Ensnaring Woman (Eccl 7:25-29)	Many Foreign Women (1 Kgs 11:1-13)
She is “the woman” (הָאִשָּׁה) (7:26)	Solomon married many “foreign women/wives” (אִשָּׁה appears in the plural 5x) (1 Kgs 11:1, 3 [2x], 4, 8)
“Her heart is nets” (חַרְמֵי לִבָּהּ) (7:26)	Solomon’s wives “turned away” (נִטָּה) “his heart” (לִבּוֹ) (11:3–4, 9)

⁸² Although this term is rare, there are around 15 related terms in this semantic field. See *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, s.v. “Prison, Prisoner,” by W. L. Liefeld, 4:869–70.

⁸³ *Dictionary of Daily Life*, s.v. “Police & Prisons,” by D. L. Harrison and T. M. Sigler, 1397.

⁸⁴ *NIDOTTE*, s.v. “יָדַי,” by M. Dreytza, 2:402–5.

She is compared to “death” (מָוֶת) (7:26)	Solomon becomes associated with the “detestable things” (שְׁקוּיִן) of foreign nations (11:5, 7), which results in death and destruction in the Deuteronomic covenant (Deut 29:16–21)
She is “snares” (מְצוּדָה), “nets” (חֲרָם), and “fettters” (אֶסוּרָה); the sinner is “taken” (לָכַד) by her (7:26)	Solomon “sticks, clings to” (דָּבַק) these women in love (11:2)
Qohelet has not found one (good, faithful?) woman/wife in 1,000 (7:28)	Solomon has 1,000 wives and concubines (11:3)
The man who is good “before God” (לְפָנַי הָאֱלֹהִים) escapes her (7:26)	The women turned his heart from following “after God” (אַחֲרַי אֱלֹהִים) (11:4)
The man who falls prey is a “sinner” (חַטָּא) (7:26)	The women cause Solomon to do “evil in the eyes of YHWH” (הָרַע בְּעֵינַי יְהוָה) (11:6)

Collectively these connections suggest that the king who stands as a cipher for Qohelet’s explorations was himself ensnared by the bitter, outside woman, a cautionary tale for the wisdom seeker.

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that Qohelet’s statement concerning the female figure who ensnares fits best within the biblical context as an intertextual reference to the outside woman of Proverbs and as a cautionary parallel to Solomon’s demise in his marriages to foreign wives in 1 Kings 11. Additional corollaries to Egyptian wisdom literature provide further warrant for interpreting the statement as a warning about the dangers posed by outside women to Qohelet’s young addressees who bear responsibility for maintaining social and sexual norms. In making these connections Qohelet reminds his readers that the benefits of wisdom may come to naught because of foolish missteps that nullify its value. Association with alluring outside women would prove detrimental and destructive. Through attentive evasion of her charms, the reader would be spared the sickening experience Qohelet himself seems to have suffered in succumbing to her wiles.