

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

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## I. 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 in 1:12–2:26 to mark a fresh phase of exploration. (1) Syntax tying 7:25 back to the royal autobiography. (2) Reintroduction of the “heart” with “I.” (3) High frequency of search terms. (4) The “editorial intrusion” of Qohelet in third person. (5) Closure features in 7:23–24. These literary aspects link to a chiasmic structure:

v. 25a “To seek” (בְּקֶשׁ)

v. 25a “Insight/Schemes” (חֲשָׁבוֹן)

v. 26a “I am finding” (מוֹצֵא)

v. 26b Bitter, ensnaring woman (הָאִשָּׁה)

v. 27 “Says Qohelet” (אָמְרָה קְהֵלֶת)

v. 28 Undiscovered woman (אִשָּׁה)

v. 29a “I have found” (מְצָאתִי)

v. 29b “Insight/Schemes” (חֲשָׁבוֹן)

v. 29b “They have sought” (בְּקֶשׁוּ)

## II. Text and translation of Eccl 7:25–29

<sup>25</sup> סְבוֹתִי אָנִי וְלִבִּי לְדַעַת וְלִתּוֹר וּבִקֵּשׁ חֲכָמָה וְחֲשָׁבוֹן וְלִדְעַת רֵשַׁע כְּסֵל וְהַסְכָּלוֹת הַזֵּלוֹת: <sup>26</sup> וּמוֹצֵא אָנִי מֵרַמְּמוֹת אֶת־הָאִשָּׁה אֲשֶׁר־הִיא מְצוּדִים וְחַרְמִים לִבָּהּ אֲסוּרִים יְדִיָּה טוֹב לִפְנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים יִמְלֹט מִמָּנָה וְחוֹטֵא יִלְכָּד בָּהּ: <sup>27</sup> רָאִה זֶה מְצָאתִי אָמְרָה קְהֵלֶת אַחַת לְאַחַת לְמִצָּא חֲשָׁבוֹן: <sup>28</sup> אֲשֶׁר עוֹד־בְּקֶשֶׁה נַפְשִׁי וְלֹא מְצָאתִי אָדָם אֲחַד מֵאֲלֵל מְצָאתִי וְאִשָּׁה בְּכָל־אֵלֶּה לֹא מְצָאתִי: <sup>29</sup> לִבִּד רָאִה־זֶה מְצָאתִי אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה הָאֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאָדָם יָשָׁר וְהִמָּה בְּקֶשׁוּ חֲשָׁבוֹת רַבִּים:

**25** So I turned with my mind 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. **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, says Qohelet, assessing one by one 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.

### III. Qohelet's Discovery

The significance of the term מצא lies in its sense as a “present discovery” and as a pericope keyword. The function of מצא with antanaclasis and wordplay with “catching” terminology.

### IV. More Bitter than Death

The meaning of מר as “bitter” (literal and metaphorical) rather than “strong.” Its conceptual ties to the semantic field of death. Difficult syntax presents challenges: (1) masculine form; (2) marked word order (participle); (3) marked word order (comparative clause); (4) definite accusative. Is the phrase a citation or original aphorism? Fox's criteria of identifying citations are missing here so it is likely an original saying.

### V. The Identity of the Female Figure

Five options regarding the identity and nature of the woman and of the discovery about her: (1) She represents all women, and Qohelet denigrates women in general as dangerous. (2) She represents all women, but Qohelet is reflecting on Genesis 3 and marred marital relationships. (3) She is a particular kind of woman, such as the outside woman of Proverbs, a seductive “gold digger,” or the daughters of foreign dignitaries enticing young Hellenistic Jewish men. (4) She is a specific woman, such as his own wife; a spurned lover; Agathoklea, the mistress of Ptolemy IV Philopator; or Laodice, the estranged wife and murderer of Antiochus II. (5) She is metaphorical (or quasi-metaphorical) and represents an abstract concept or archetype such as Lady Wisdom, Lady Folly, divine force, the feminine sex, pleasure/eroticism, death, or pagan philosophy.

The grammar and biblical and cultural contexts favor the third view. (1) The definite article and accusative marker suggest a particular class of women (“*that* [kind of] woman”). (2) The relative particle אשר is likely the restrictive use (“which”), marking a particular kind of woman rather all women (“the woman, *namely the one who is a snare*”). (3) The larger biblical and extrabiblical contexts suggest the warning pertains to the strange/outside woman. Numerous literary catchwords links to Proverbs:

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” (מר) (7:26)	She is “bitter” (מררה) 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” (מְצוּדָה), “nets” (חַרְסִים), and “fetters” (אֲסוּרָה), and the sinner is “ensnared” (לכד) by her (7:26)	The man's sexual appetites “ensnare” (לכד) him (5:22), and he is “taken” (לקח) by the woman (6:25) when she “hunts down” (צוד) his precious life (6:26)

“Her heart is nets” (חַרְמִים לְבָהּ) (7:26)	She is “wily of heart” (נִצְרָה לֵב) (7:10)
Her allurements centers physically on her “hands/arms” (יָדַיִם) (7:26)	Her allurements centers physically on her “eyes” (עַפְעָפַיִם) (6:25) and “mouth” (פִּי) (22:14)
The man who falls prey is a “sinner” (חַטָּא) (7:26)	The cords of his “sin” (חַטָּאת) entangle him (5:22)
The man who is good “before God” (לִפְנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים) eludes her (7:26)	The man’s actions are “before the eyes of YHWH” (עֵינֵי יְהוָה) (5:21)
The good man “escapes” (מִלֵּט) her (7:26)	Wisdom is given to “deliver” (נִצַּל) from her (2:16)
The “Assembler” Qohelet (קֹהֵלֶת) warns about her (7:27)	The warning is applied in the midst of the “assembly” (קְהָל) (5:14)

Resonances also with Egyptian wisdom literature include the third millennium (sixth dynasty) *Instruction of Ptahhotep*, the fifth-dynasty (ca. 2450–2300 B.C.E.) *The Instruction of Prince Hardjedef*, the eighteenth dynasty (1550–1305 B.C.E.) *Instruction of Any*, and the Demotic *Papyrus Insinger*: (1) the dual nature of the outside woman; (2) the destruction of 1,000 men; and (3) the responsibility for sexual norms residing with young men.

## VI. The Woman’s Snares

The meaning of snares, nets, and fetters along with catching terminology (hunting/fishing, prison). Qohelet as himself the one who has been ensnared.

<b>Links between the “Bitter, Ensnaring Woman” of Ecclesiastes and Solomon’s “Many Foreign Wives” in 1 Kings 11</b>	
<b>Bitter, Ensnaring Woman (Eccl 7:25-29)</b>	<b>Many Foreign Women (1 Kgs 11:1-13)</b>
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” (חַרְמִים לְבָהּ) (7:26)	Solomon’s wives “turned away” (נִטָּה) “his heart” (לִבּוֹ) (11:3–4, 9)
She is compared to “death” (מָוֶת) (7:26)	Solomon becomes associated with the “detestable things” (שִׁקּוּץ) of foreign nations (11:5, 7), which results in death and destruction in the Deuteronomic covenant (Deut 29:16–21)
She is “snares” (מִצּוּד), “nets” (חַרְמִים), and “fetters” (אֲסוּר); the sinner is “taken” (לִכְד) 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 אֱלֹהִים) 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 בְּעֵינֵי יְהוָה) (11:6)

## VII. Conclusion

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.