Qoheleth 6:5b in Light of 4QQoh² ii 2 and Rabbinic Literature

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I

The Hebrew substantive נוחה is a nominal derivative of the root נ-ח-מ, and its occurrences are usually translated and interpreted accordingly.¹ This unanimous understanding, however, faces several linguistic and exegetical difficulties in Qoheleth’s comparison between the destinies of a stillborn child and an old man (Qoh 6:4-5; the commas reflect the masoretic punctuation):

וכי.framework.
נץ פרושך לך, נוחת שמי כך
גס שמך לא ראה אלה יעד, נחת לכו מגה.

The most obvious question is lexical: what does this word mean in its context, and how should it be translated? Having identified the root as נ-ח-מ, in line with other occurrences of נוחה in Qoheleth (4:6; 9:17), all commentators have sought to explain נוחה in light of either biblical Hebrew (‘rest, comfort’ etc.)² or rabbinic Hebrew (‘satisfaction’, ‘better than’).³ Contraposing two modern translations illustrates the problem well:

² I am grateful to Profs. A. Rofé, S. Talmon and E. Tov, as well as to M. Segal for their helpful comments. Special thanks are due to S. Chavel whose careful reading improved both form and content of this paper.

³ With few exceptions such as נוחה וראוה יראות (Isa 30:30), “and show his arm sweeping down” (NEB), in which case the root is נ-ח-מ. Note that both נ-ח-מ and נ-וח-מ are weak roots, and as such they are exposed to etymological renderings; see, for instance, LXX Isa 30:15 in which נוחה was translated as if it was a derivative of נ-וח-מ, and LXX Job 36:16 in which it was translated as a derivative of נ-וח-מ. Cf. E. Tov, The Text-Critical Use of the Septuagint in Biblical Research (2nd ed.; Jerusalem: Simor, 1997) 172-180.

Its coming is an empty thing, it departs into darkness, and in darkness its name is hidden; it has never seen the sun or known anything [or: it], yet its state is better than his (NEB).

For it comes into vanity and goes into darkness, and in darkness its name is covered; moreover, it has not seen the sun or known anything; yet it finds rest rather than he (RSV).

The failure to agree upon the simple sense of the word suggests that none of those meanings fits the context properly.

The syntax of the verse is awkward as well. If both verbs ראה and שמע, as suggested by the masoretic punctuation, the elliptical phrase הנחת לוח מוה is enigmatic, and requires some kind of completion (who is the agent? what is the action or state of things?). Another difficulty is presented by the prepositional phrases לוח and MACHINE. Beyond the problem of identifying the referents of the deictic pronouns, one has to explain the function of the prepositions ל (basically: ‘to’) and מ (basically: ‘from’) in this specific context.

II

Translators and scholars have proposed essentially two solutions, but a thorough investigation of their origin proves them to be unlikely.

The first solution takes הנחת as the object of ראה against the masoretic punctuation, thus creating a kind of parallelism: הנחת לוח מוה הת לוח מוה. This syntactic structuring is reflected in some manuscripts of the Septuagint (ascribed to Aquila), in which one finds the accusative plural form ἀνάπαυσεῖς (‘times of rest’) rather than the nominative ἀνάπαυσις.

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4 They may mean, for instance, either that “the man (of v. 3a) is better than the still-born (of v. 3b)” or that “the still-born (of v. 3b) has a peace of mind because of his condition (described in v. 4-5a).”
Similarly, the “Three” read here the accusative singular form וַעֲצַמִּים. The resulting phrase רֹאֶה יְדֵי יְהוָה may be compared to רֹאֶה יְדֵי יְהוָה (Isa 59:8b), רֹאֶה יְדֵי יְהוָה (Prov 10:32) et sim.

However, attention should be paid to the tight semantic and stylistic connection between the two verbs רֹאֶה and יְדֵי, which often function in biblical Hebrew as a hendiadys. As such, the combination of רֹאֶה and יְדֵי can be realized in all the various forms in which a regular (nominal) hendiadys—such as זֶרֶךְ וּמֶשֶׁת מְכָסֶה or זֶרֶךְ וּמֶשֶׁת—that can be realized:

(i) Its components usually appear as a pair connected by a conjunction, for example:

1 Sam 12:17 — אַרְכֵּא אֲלֵה יְדֵי כְּלַל מַרְאֵה, וּדְעָה וַרְאָה כְּרֵצֵם רֶבֶה
Jer 2:19 — חָסֵר רַעְשִׁי מְשִׁבְתִּיךָ מְכָסֶה, וּדְעָה וַרְאָה כְּרֶךְ מַרְאֵה אֲלֵה הַאֲלָחָל
Cf.
Gen 23:4 — זֶרֶךְ וּמֶשֶׁת מְכָסֶה מִכָּסֶה
Ps 89:15 — מֶשֶׁת מְכָסֶה מִכָּסֶה
Ps 119:121 — חָסֵר מְשִׁבְתִּי מְכָסֶה

In all of these examples, the connected words express a single idea: Abraham is not as well as as נוּשָׁה, but rather זֶרֶךְ וּמֶשֶׁת (‘an alien settler’) in Canaan; similarly, according to Psalm 119, God is doing זֶרֶךְ וּמֶשֶׁת (‘a just trial’). By the same token, רֹאֶה יְדֵי should be understood as a single complex lexeme (‘to acknowledge, to come to conclusion’ etc.).


8 The semantic development of this combination was discussed by I. L. Seeligmann, “Erkenntnis Gottes und historisches Bewusstsein im alten Israel,” in
(ii) When a grammatical complement of some sort is added to the first component, the second one tends to duplicate it, even at the cost of syntactic ambiguity, for example:

Lev 5:1 — והוה יזרא אֲדֹנֵי
Deut 11:2 — לא יאובד אֲדֹנֵי בַּעַד הנֵחַ נַפְלָת וְנָשָׁר אֲדֹנֵי
Cf. Num 35:15 — לֶבַנֶּיה יְשָׁרִי אֱלֹהִים חָכוֹךָ
Lev 25:23 — כִּי תְנַשֵׁב אֵחָה עָמָרְךָ
Hos 2:21 — ואַרְשֵׁנִי לְבוֹאַ בְּמַמֵּשׁ
Qoh 3:16 — עֹזִיר רַחֲמִית... מַמֵּשׁ מַמֵּשׁ שְׁמֵה וּמַמֵּשׁ מַמֵּשׁ שְׁמֵה וּמַמֵּשׁ

(iii) The two components are sometimes integrated within a continuous syntactic phrase, for example:

Deut 4:35 — וַהֲקַמְתָּ֣ לְפָנֵי֮ הַגּוֹיִ֝ים הַגָּדוֹלִים
cf. Lev 25:47 — נֵכְרֵי לָרֶם-שֵׁשַׁבָּה
Deut 16:18 — רָמָשֶׁם אָּדֹנֵי וְהָנָּבָֽשׁ-אַלְפִּים

(iv) The two components sometimes appear to behave as synonyms, as indicated by their appearance in parallel (con)texts, for example:

Josh 24:31 — וַיַּעַשׂ יְהוָ֚ה אָֽדֹנֵי אֵֽתִי לְֽמַמֵּשׁ וּלְֽמַמֵּשׁ
Judg 2:7 — וַיַּעַשׂ יְהוָּה אָדֹנֵי אֵֽתִי לְֽמַמֵּשׁ וּלְֽמַמֵּשׁ
Ezek 21:4 — וַיַּעַשׂ יְהוָּה אָדֹנֵי אֵֽתִי לְֽמַמֵּשׁ וּלְֽמַמֵּשׁ
Ezek 21:10 — וַיַּעַשׂ יְהוָּה אָדֹנֵי אֵֽתִי לְֽמַמֵּשׁ וּלְֽמַמֵּשׁ
Cf. Lev 25:45 — וַיַּעַשׂ יְהוָּה אָדֹנֵי אֵֽתִי לְֽמַמֵּשׁ וּלְֽמַמֵּשׁ
Ezek 47:22 — וַיַּעַשׂ יְהוָּה אָדֹנֵי אֵֽתִי לְֽמַמֵּשׁ וּלְֽמַמֵּשׁ
Prov 16:11 — וַיַּעַשׂ יְהוָּה אָדֹנֵי אֵֽתִי לְֽמַמֵּשׁ וּלְֽמַמֵּשׁ
Job 31:6 — וַיַּעַשׂ יְהוָּה אָדֹנֵי אֵֽתִי לְֽמַמֵּשׁ וּלְֽמַמֵּשׁ

This interchangeability is evident among textual witnesses as well, for example:

MT Isa 47:8 — ולֹא אָדֹאנָא שָׁכָל אֵֽתִי לְֽמַמֵּשׁ וּלְֽמַמֵּשׁ
1QIsa* XXXIX 28 — וַיַּעַשׂ יְהוָּה אָדֹנֵי אֵֽתִי לְֽמַמֵּשׁ וּלְֽמַמֵּשׁ

(v) Finally, the two components may break up between the cola of a parallelism, for example:

Isa 58:3 — לְמַמֵּשׁ וְלֹא אָדֹאנָא שָׁכָל אֵֽתִי לְֽמַמֵּשׁ וּלְֽמַמֵּשׁ
Ps 138:6 — וַיַּעַשׂ יְהוָּה אָדֹנֵי אֵֽתִי לְֽמַמֵּשׁ וּלְֽמַמֵּשׁ
Cf. Ps 39:13 — וַיַּעַשׂ יְהוָּה אָדֹנֵי אֵֽתִי לְֽמַמֵּשׁ וּלְֽמַמֵּשׁ
Ps 72:2 – ידיע צניע בצרק // זוגה ינשפת

Note that in such cases, it is possible to restore the underlying sentence by coupling the components that were detached in the poetic structure, for example:


The recognition that this is a hendiadys makes clear that Qoh 6:5bغنוה לא ראית ולאידע belongs to type ii (repetitious grammatical complements), but not to type v (broken-up parallelism), since the underlying sentence cannot be restored and its possible restorations turn to be ungrammatical, e.g.

גנוה שמם ונהנת ולא ראית ולאידע להו מהו
גנוה שמם וכוה מהו ולא ראית ולאידע

Stylistic analysis thus rules out the aforementioned first solution, and reinforces the masoretic punctuation.

III

A second solution compares the verse with similar talmudic expressions.9 An interesting and thematically related example occurs in b. Erub. 13b: נון וללאים שלוא נבואר יתר משנברא, “It is better for man not to have been created (rather) than to have been created.”10 This epigram supplies a structural and thematic equivalent to every component of the biblical verse: the problematic noun ננה is conveniently paralleled by the adverb להו; נון is paralleled by וללאים, which clearly refers to a person; and מהו is paralleled by יתר משנברא.


However, even though the prepositional phrases נָמַי הָאָרֶץ (referring to a specific action or condition) and - נָמַי הָאָרֶץ (referring to a specific person) are found in other rabbinic sources, they are never combined to produce a single construction with the sense of ‘better than’ in early rabbinic Hebrew, and only rarely does it occur in late sources, such as Qoh. Rab. 9:11\(^{11}\): נָמַי הָאָרֶץ לַפְּלָשִׁי הָאָרֶץ לַפְּלָשִׁי הָאָרֶץ. The sense of ‘It is better for X (to)... rather than (to)...’ is usually expressed in rabbinic Hebrew not with the help of two prepositional phrases, but rather with a compound sentence including a negation (‘It is better..., and not...’), for instance:

y. Git. 1:1 43b\(^{12}\) אל אֵין חָשַׁב בַּנֶּא אִי

Midr. Psalms 18:34 §264\(^{13}\) אל אֵין חָשַׁב בַּנֶּא אִי

b. Ber. 43b\(^{14}\) וְאֵין לַאֲרוֹם שֶפֶלֶת לָתַּרְקַג אֶסַּמְרָה וְאֵין לַאֲרוֹם פָּרָח בַּרְבּוּס

y. Sabbath 1:2 3b\(^{15}\) הַלַּרְקַג שֶפֶלֶת— וְאֵין לַעַלְפַּד וְאֵין לַאֲרוֹם שֶפֶלֶת וְאֵין לַעַלְפַּד

That this construction belongs to a very late stratum within rabbinic Hebrew can clearly be seen when comparing a very late collection such as Yalkut Shimoni (compiled in the 13th century) with one of its earlier sources:\(^{16}\)

Midr. Psalms 18:27 §183\(^{17}\) וְאֵין לַאֲרוֹם וְאֵין לַאֲרוֹם שֶפֶלֶת וְאֵין לַעַלְפַּד וְאֵין לַעַלְפַּד

\(^{11}\) I have used the common edition (Wilna: Wittwe & Gebrüder Romm, 1887); cf. Qoh. Zuta 9:11 (below, n. 37) 148.

\(^{12}\) The Palestinian Talmud: Leiden Ms. Cod. Scal. 3 (Jerusalem: Kedem, 1970) II 316.

\(^{13}\) S. Buber, Midrasch Tehillim: Schocher Tob (Wilna: Wittwe & Gebrüder Romm, 1891) 161.


\(^{15}\) The Palestinian Talmud, III 199.


\(^{17}\) Buber, Midrasch Tehillim, 161.
Another comparison reveals that indeed, not only is this construction non-biblical, it also functions as a linguistic and stylistic marker that distinguishes the rabbinic paraphrase from its biblical origin:

Qoh 5:4

טוח אשת לא חורים משלוחור ולא שלו

Midr. Proverbs 25:14

ונת לא לאמה שלאל יזרע משיחור ולא שלו

The second solution seems, therefore, to be a forced imposition of a later (clear) syntactic structure or stylistic formulation upon an earlier (problematic) text.

The rabbinic construction may have inspired the masoretic vocalization, though it is more probable that the Masoretes had in their mind a biblical usage such as霓יה ויהיו לארץ כל אערביה, ‘God gave rest (i.e., security) to Israel from all their enemies’ (Josh 23:1; cf. Deut 25:19; 2 Sam 7:1; Isa 14:3 etc.). This may have been reinforced by the fact that biblical Hebrew sometimes employs נヌ to denote death (e.g., Prov 21:16; Dan 12:13). In other words, one can understand the way MT has developed, but it hardly reflects the original reading.

IV

A different approach can be offered by taking into consideration the ambiguous variant in 4QQoh* ii 2, which reads וינוה instead of וינוה. At first glance this reading does not seem like a real divergence from MT, since it is possible to view it as a morphological variation. The form is similar to


21 But the analysis implied in the preliminary edition of 4QQoh* is not very useful; see J. Muilenburg, “A Qoheleth Scroll from Qumran,” BASOR 135 (1954) 25.
Furthermore, this reading brings into line the prepositional phrases הַלַּיְלָה וְאֶל הָאָדָם, in accordance with the preceding verse. The still-born ‘came from vanity (חבשך לילה) and will go in darkness (חבשך 어), and in darkness its name will be covered up (חבשך שם יכזה’), that is, from womb to grave the still-born’s ‘journey’ takes place in complete darkness. By the same token, the still-born descends (נהר) to the dark underworld (וליה) from its dark being in the womb (מלת), without ever seeing the sunlight (שם שלם לא ראו ידיע). According to this line of thought, vv. 4 and 5 have an identical thematic division: their first part portrays the semi-existence of the still-born in the darkness of the womb (vv. 4a, 5a), while their second part is a figurative description of its final non-existence in the darkness of the grave (vv. 4b, 5b).\(^{28}\)

v. 4 כי בaltı אנכיحتيا ליילך, וחבשך שם יכזה
v. 5 וסמתו לא ראו ידיע *נהר ילה מתי

Qoheleth has used the same demonstrative pronoun twice, because in both cases he referred to the same thing, that is, the darkness of non-being (both before birth and after death).

Noteworthy in this context is Qoheleth’s use of the word בְּקָל (‘still-born’), which is derived from the root בְּכֶל (literally: ‘to fall down’; metaphorically: ‘to die’),\(^{29}\) thus integrating into the overall metaphor of the passage: the inevitable movement down to death.

The above interpretation resolves the semantic and syntactic difficulties and ambiguities that the common interpretations face. The elliptical phrase

...שָׁמַע שָׁבָר אֲלֵךְ...’שָׁמַע שָׁמַע מְלֵת הַאָדָם (Gen 18:10), “And he said: ‘I shall return to you...’ while Sarah was listening by the tent.”

\(^{28}\) A similar interpretation is echoed in the second part of the double rendering of the Targum to v. 3b: אֶל וְיָדַע בְּכֶל מבְּכֶל יַעַשֶּׁה, יֵלֶבֶת בְּכֶל עַל הָאָדָם אַחֲרוֹנָא, “and it did not discern between good and evil, to differentiate between this world and the other world”; see A. Sperber, The Bible in Aramaic, IVa: The Hagiographa (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1968) 158. For a critical assessment of the various editions of the Targum of Qoheleth see E. G. Clarke, “Reflections on the Preparation of a Critical Edition of the Targum of Koheleth,” Textus 16 (1991) 79–94.

\(^{29}\) BDB, 656b–657a, s.v. בְּכֶל, §1–2.
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is in fact a perfectly good sentence and the prepositions are used in their simplest (locative) sense. Moreover, the identity of the deictic pronouns is explained by the essential identity of their referents. Finally, the overall picture portrayed in the verse is well founded in biblical cosmology and, consequently, in biblical metaphorical language. As will be seen below, this is also evident when parallel passages are brought under scrutiny.

V

Qoheleth portrays a very similar picture in 3:20-21:

פְּרַקַּת הַחֲלֹל הָאָלָם אֲלֵמַת הָאָלָם: הָאָלָם מַגִּיס הַחֲלֹל, הָאָלָם שֶׁב הַחֲלֹל.

Mi yîyôh: ru'ah b'ni'ru'ah — ha'elibal ha-lîmûa.

וַהֲוָה הָבֵיתָה — מִרְדָּחַ הָיָה לְפָרָשְׁהוּ לְאָרֶץ?

All go to the same place: all came from the dust, and to the dust all return.

Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upword or whether the spirit of the beast goes downward to the earth? (NEB).

This passage insists that the same destiny awaits all living creatures: a descent to the underworld. The figurative language used to refer to death is the same as in 6:3-6—going or descending (active participle forms!) from one place to another—with the exception that Qoheleth employs here the Hebrew root הָרָי rather than the Aramaic הָרִים.

Another parallel is found in Job’s description of his miserable condition (17:12-16):

לִלָּה לָוָּה יִשְׁמַר, אֲנָהּ קְרוּב מַפְגִּינַת שָׁהַק.

וְאִם אוֹכַל שְׁאלוּ בֵיהָ, בְּחֶשֶׁךְ פָּדִית וּזְיוֹרָה.

לִשְׁתָּה קְרֵאתָ אֶבָּר אֲבֹתָה, נִאמְרוּ, רַאֲשֵׁית לְרֵמָה.

לָא צֹאֵה אֵין חָקוֹתְךָ? תְּקוֹתְךָ מִי יֵשָׁרֵנֵה?

בְּנֵי שָׁלָה הָרַגְנָה, אֲנָהּ שֶׁב הָשָׁפָר בְּנָחָה.

Day is turned into night, and morning light is darkened before me. If I measure the underworld for my house, if I spread my couch in the darkness, if I call the grave ‘my father’, and the worm ‘my mother’ or ‘my sister’; where, then, will my hope be, and who will take account of my piety? I cannot take them down to the underworld with me, nor can they descend with me into the earth (NEB slightly altered).
The only direct midrashic treatment of Qoh 6:5 appears in the form of a parable preserved in the relatively late composition of Qohelet Rabbah (edited around the 8th century). The parable plays on the phonetic resemblance between the rabbinic Hebrew רָם, רָע to be/feel better than’ and the Aramaic רָמַן ‘to descend’:

38 Germ Shemesh la Rava Rava Dinu: 1
Meshal Leveni bni Adam Yaro'va Beis bEmuna.
Keshangaiy levom
Yiner" Atho Mese nechmi loRene.
Rova Shem Chome Modakel, Chome Meshakh Reshal.
Keshorot bespinon?
Amar lo: Vata Shiratza Goliletha?
Amar lo: Vata Shiratza Goliletha?
Amar lo: K cholam Teten?
Amar lo: Lamo.
Amar lo: Arayith Chome Modakel, Chome Meshakh Reshal.
Amar lo: Adana Goliletha - Noma Legefino?
Adana Goliletha - Noma Legefino?
Daha ova ephemt: Zehu Lado Mado.


38 Qoh. Zuta and Yal. Shim. add the name of the informant: אמבר ‘ מקרה, ‘R. Pinhas said’.


40 Yal. Shim.: Nathan.
‘It has never seen the sun or known anything’:
A parable of two people who were sailing in a ship.
When they reached the harbor,
one of them disembarked and entered the city.

He saw there lots of food, lots of drink, and contentment.
When he returned to the ship
he said to his friend: ‘Why didn’t you enter the city?’
He said to him: ‘And you who disembarked and entered,
what did you see there?’

He said to him: ‘I saw lots of food, lots of drink, and contentment.’
He said to him: ‘Did you enjoy any of it?’
He said to him: ‘No.’
He said to him: ‘I, who did not enter, am much better off than you,
because I did not disembark and see.’

That is what scripture is talking about when it says: נחלות לא מנה.

Two aspects of the parable reflect the author’s awareness of both the
masoretic reading נחלות and the variant reading ננה (or possibly the perfect
form ננה). The first consists of the rhetorical climax of the text. The final
words of the narrative, which serve as the punch line and anticipate the
biblical verse, quote the assertion of the man who did not disembark. The
main clause alludes to the masoretic reading: גנה יִלְּטֵן מִנְיָן, but the causal
clause alludes to the variant reading: דְּלָא נְחַלְתָּה לְאִוְּתָה מִנְיָן. The diction as
well as the combination of derivatives of ננה and ננה are striking, and
should not be attributed to mere paronomasia.

The second aspect is the figurative texture of the parable. The entire image
disembarking (literally: ‘descending’, i.e., from the boat), and the specific
term used to denote it (line 4), are related to ננה, either semantically or
etymologically. At the same time, the notion of having ננה is
metonymically literalized by the bounty and contentment seen by the
visitor (lines 5, 10). If one ignores the possibility that the image of
disembarking goes back to an original variant reading, it is difficult to
explain what the prooftext has to do with the parable.

Note that in hermeneutical terms the midrash has turned the biblical verse
upside down: the “descent” (=disembarking) is a symbol of birth, not of death.
Both the conceptual meaning and the literary dynamics of this parable thus indicate that the author is playing on the morphological and semantic ambiguity of the consonantal הָדָן, and dramatizes its two possible vocalizations. For a cautious approach it will suffice to point to the fact that these vocalizations are actually documented as textual readings. A bolder comment would suggest that this rabbinic source preserves the two readings by creatively conflating them within the midrash.

Conclusion

In view of all the evidence, it seems reasonable to consider ‘Qumranic’ הָדָן (namely, הָדָן) as a variant of the MT הָדָן. It seems to be the original reading, since it does not cause all the difficulties posed by the masoretic reading, and, more importantly, it is both possible and plausible in its context. The resulting image has a profound existential signification, which is well conveyed with the help of another great poet, though a very different one:

Descend lower, descend only
Into the world of perpetual solitude
World not world, but that which is not world
Internal darkness, deprivation
And destitution of all property

(T. S. Eliot, “Burnt Norton,” Four Quartets)