The Text and Interpretation of Ecclesiastes 5:19

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This passage: בות ותוא הַיָּבֵד וַתְּעָשֵׁה וַיִּשָּׁה וַיִּמְלָכֶה לַבֵּית presents great difficulties, which have long been recognized by interpreters. The Hiph. part. מַלָּכֶה may be from the root (I) יָלֶד "to answer," or from the root (II) יָלֶד "to be engrossed, anxious, wearied with," identical with the Ar. מַלָּכֶה and the Syr. מַלָּכֶה. (III) Some have understood the verb in the sense of the Syr. מַלָּכֶה, Ar. מַלָּכֶה "to sing," and (IV) still others with מַלָּכֶה "to be rich." Recent commentators have, however, varied between (I) and (II), and the other suggestions do not need serious consideration.

In favor of (I) יָלֶד, "to answer," the names of Döderlein, Rosenmüller, Gesenius, Ewald, Delitzsch, Nowack, Wright, and McNeile may be quoted. In favor of (II) יָלֶד "to engross," Knobel, De Jong, Siegfried, Wildeboer, and Haupt (Eccl., p. 28 and JBL, xix. p. 71).

In either case a difficulty is felt in that as the text stands the verb has no object. Various emendations of the text have accordingly been suggested, the one most popular being the emendation of מַלָּכֶה to מַלָּכֶה, so that מַלָּכֶה will no longer be a genitive and may become the object of the verb.

The real solution of the problem is, I think, found in an appeal to the versions. So far as I know, all the elements of the solution have never been put together by a single commentator, though Siegfried closely approaches it.

6 reads: ὅτι οὐκ ἕλλα μενοθήσεται τὰς ἡμέρας τῆς ζωῆς αὐτοῦ. ὅτι ο θεὸς περισσὰ αὐτὸν ἐν εὐφροσύνῃ καρδίας αὐτοῦ, i.e. the LXX took מַלָּכֶה to be from (II) יָלֶד, and had before them the reading מַלָּכֶה. This latter point McNeile has perceived (Ecclesiastes, p. 144), but has overlooked the former.
S reads:

[in the text]

in which the root ḫ_teams in Heb. might mean "answer" or "engross, occupy," and is accordingly ambiguous, but which clearly supports the reading מָלְנוֹלָה.

The D reads: "Non enim satis recordabitur dierum vitae sua, eo quod Deus occupet deliciis cor ejus." This supports those who connect מָלְנוֹלָה with (II) לוֹל, but does not favor the reading מָלְנוֹלָה. It supports instead the reading מָלְנוֹלָה.

G does not translate, but gives a paraphrase, in which it is evident that they connected מָלְנוֹלָה with "to humble, afflict."

The Arabic reads the last half of the verse:

[in the text]

i.e. "For God attracts him by the pleasure of his heart," supporting both the interpretation of מָלְנוֹלָה as from (II) לוֹל and the reading מָלְנוֹלָה.

Professor Haupt (JBL, xix. p. 71) claims that we should emend the passage according to D. It seems to me clear, however, that G the oldest version supplies a simpler and clearer reading, which is supported by the Syr. and Ar., and that we should follow its rendering, "For not much will he notice (וֹל) the days of his life, for God engrosses him with the joy of his heart." This fits the preceding context admirably, and gives a much more appropriate meaning than "answer." The chief difficulty in the passage was created by the falling out of a 1 at the end of מָלְנוֹלָה.