A NOTE ON "JOY" IN NEHEMIAH VIII 10

The "joy of Yahweh" in Neh. viii 10 is usually understood as a reference to the joy of the people in Yahweh i.e. $yhuw$ is taken as an objective, rather than a subjective, genitive. There are, of course, good reasons for this almost unanimous opinion amongst scholars: the people are repeatedly told to rejoice during festival days (Deut. xii 12, xiv 26, xvi 11-12), the theme of the people rejoicing is prevalent in the verses immediately following (Neh. viii 12, 17; cf. Ezra vi 22), and joy exhibited by the people may seem to be a better parallel to the immediately preceding command to refrain from grieving. In short, both the immediate and wider contexts stress the appropriateness of people rejoicing on days which are holy to Yahweh. The purpose of this short note is not so much to refute this widely held view as to suggest that the alternative has much to commend it as well.

I begin by noting that $ma^\text{a}uzz\text{e}kem$ is most naturally translated as "your refuge or protection" (cf. Ps. xxvii 1, xxviii 8, xxxvii 39), from the root $^\text{a}\text{uz}$ "to take refuge". Thus, for example, in their translations, Rudolph and Williamson offer "eure Schutzwehr" and "your protection" respectively. The context favours understanding this as a refuge or protection from the anger or judgements of Yahweh over failures exposed by the reading and understanding of the law. It is likely that the weeping of the people arose because they realized that they had been in neglect of the law. They were grieving in sadness and possibly also in fear of the consequences of this neglect. In one sense, then, weeping was a totally appropriate response to what had just happened. Yet at that time, Ezra sought to lift the people out of their grief by reminding them that the joy of Yahweh was their protection. Which interpretation of $hedwatu yhuw$ would suit Ezra's argument better? Did he intend to say that the people's rejoicing would somehow protect them from Yahweh's anger, or that Yahweh's joy over them was their protec-
tion? It is not immediately clear how the people’s rejoicing in Yahweh serves as their protection. Batten (p. 358) recognizes the difficulty and tentatively suggests that the people will find refuge from the dire threats of the law by filling themselves with a divine joy. He does not, however, explain how this provides protection. Ryle (p. 245) writes that “(g)ladness in Him is in proportion to the faith in the protection which He gives”. In other words, the people’s rejoicing is an expression of their faith in Yahweh’s protection, and, by implication, this faith will save or protect them. Similarly, Rudolph (p. 149) quotes the Koran to illuminate his understanding of the statement here: “es gibt keine Zuflucht vor Gott als zu ihm hin”. This implies that the only refuge from God’s anger comes by taking refuge in him, which must mean, in this context, rejoicing in him. Therefore, in these explanations of Ryle and Rudolph, the point is that rejoicing in Yahweh is a sign of the kind of faith which saves or protects. But if rejoicing is taken as a measure of the people’s faith, does this not imply that grieving is a measure of their unbelief? Yet grieving over one’s sin is not, in itself, presented as an unworthy response in Neh. ix 1-2 (cf. Ezra x 1). In any case, it is not immediately clear how one’s rejoicing in Yahweh serves as one’s protection. It is unlikely that we should think that Yahweh’s anger will be appeased by the joyful praises which the people express. On the other hand, if one thinks of the people’s joy in celebrating Yahweh’s gracious favour in protecting Israel, then it is Yahweh’s favour and not the people’s joy which is their refuge. But this is precisely the understanding which would result in accepting the alternative view of kedwat yhwh. Thus, on this holy day, it is the grace and favour which Yahweh bestows on his people which is celebrated, and it is this grace and favour which is their assurance of protection. In other words, it is Yahweh’s joy over his people that is the basis for the hope that they will be saved or protected from his anger. Because of his joy over them, they can rejoice. This is why weeping on a day which celebrates Yahweh’s gracious favour to them is inappropriate. Yahweh’s joy is the basis of their protection from the consequences of their neglect of the law. I regard this interpretation as more likely than the other view which implies that Ezra believed that the people’s rejoicing would in some way be the basis of their protection.

As indirect support for the plausibility of taking yhwh here as a subjective genitive, one might cite Zeph. iii 17b for the concept of