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The allegory of old age and death as an attempt of the interpretation of Ecc 12,1-7

1. Introduction

The Book of Ecclesiastes is an exceptional work, not only within biblical literature, but also within the entire scope of literary writings. Some of the passages contained therein have entered language and now function as maxims. Many people repeat, albeit not always knowingly as to the authorship of the phrase, such words of the wise Qohelet as: *vanitas vanitatum, nihil novum sub sole* or *ad afflictio spiritus*. The Book also belongs to the most difficult ones in interpretation among the books of the Bible. Its canonicity was disputed even in antiquity. Those arguments arose from the fact that while interpreting the meaning of the Book, one cannot employ the method of allegorization¹. Thus, the history of the canonicity of the Book of Ecclesiastes presents the reversal of that of the Song of Songs. The latter book was also doubted for similar reason, however the allegorical interpretations, especially in the light of the message of the OT prophets (e.g. Hosea, Jeremiah, Ezekiel), helped to discover the beautiful meaning it communicates. The Book of Ecclesiastes, however, with its explicit language and imagery — often crude or even shocking — makes it very clear that any attempt of interpretation through allegorical reading is a futile exercise. Interesting in this context is the text of Ecc 12,1-7, with images so vivid that they seem to urge the reader to use imagination. Here, Qohelet used the imagery of the world of nature and daily life to describe the twilight of the human life and death. The article presented seeks to determine what lies beneath these images, as well as to which method could be applied to their interpretation.

2. Text of Ecc 12,1-7 and its place in the Book of Ecclesiastes

The text of Ecc 12,1-7 is found in the final section of the second part of the Book, preceding the verse which constitutes the first ending (Ecc 12,8). The pre-

¹ Cf. R. SCOTT, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, AB 18, New York 1965, p. 191.

ceding context contains a call or an incentive to joy, directed to a youth (cf. Ecc 11,7-10). In a way, these two passages mutually complement each other through structural and verbal links, as well as the fact that they both are intended for the same addressee. The principal difference is that the main subject of Ecc 11,7-10 is youth, while in Ecc 12,1-7 it is old age. Thus, a break in the text can be made between Ecc 11,10 and 12,1. This way, the entire body of Ecc 11,7–12,7² is divided into two parts: Ecc 11,7-10 and 12,1-7. What immediately follows Ecc 12,1-7 is a maxim given at the very beginning of the Book and repeated several times throughout: “‘Utterly meaningless,’ says Qohelet, ‘everything is meaningless!’” (Ecc 12,8; cf. 1,2). It is a conclusion summarizing individual fragments. It is, thus, reasonable to separate Ecc 12,8 from the previous part, since the passage constitutes a closure not only to this pericope, but the entire Book. It should be noted, however, that the commentators are divided on the matter and some of them see the ending of the description of old age and death in Ecc 12,8³. Nevertheless, the images evoked by Qohelet end in Ecc 12,7.

3. Three categories of interpretation of 12,1-7

The text of Ecc 12,1-7 has a very rich record of interpretations, which can be grouped into three principal categories, namely: literal, symbolic and allegorical reading of meaning⁴. The first one, although it does not entirely denounce the fact that in Ecc 12,1-7 metaphorical language is used (particularly in verses 2 and 7), it nevertheless assumes that literal approach should be applied to the reading of images used⁵. Thus, the analyzed fragment presents an image of destruction of a household or the condition of a community in the face of death and mourning of a close person, someone relatively well-known and respected. Thus, the text of Ecc 12,1-7 becomes a lamentation of sorts (Hebr. *qina*). Indeed, certain analogies with other examples of this literary genre can be observed, such as 2 Sam 1,17-27; 3,33ff. However, considering the entirety of the text, it can hardly be defined as

² Cf. SCOTT, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*, p. 253–255; A. LAUHA, *Kohelet*, BKAT XIX, Neukirchen-Vluyn 1978, p. 204–216; R. WHYBRAY, *Ecclesiastes*, NCBC, Grand Rapids 1989, p. 91; J. CRENSHAW, *Qohelet. A Commentary*, OTL, Philadelphia 1987, p. 8; R. MURPHY, *Ecclesiastes*, WBC 23A, Dallas 1992, p. 111–122; M. NIEKERK, *Qohelet's advice to the young of his time — and to ours today? Chapter 11:7-12:8 as a text of the pre-Christian era*, OTE 7 (1994), p. 371f; L. MAZZINGHI, “*Ho cercato e ho esplorato*”. *Studi sul Qohelet*, Bologna 2001, p. 270–273. A different division (this means Ecc 11:9-12:7.8) is proposed by L. SCHWIENHORST-SCHÖNBERGER, *Kohelet*, HThKAT, Freiburg 2004, p. 520–541. While D. FREDERICKS, *Life's Storms and Structural Unity in Qoheleth 11.1-12.8*, JSOT 51 (1991), p. 100–105 indicates that Ecc 12:1-7 has a concentric structure.

³ Cf. G. OGDEN, *Qoheleth XI 7–XII 8: Qoheleth's Summons to Enjoyment and Reflection*, VT 34 (1984), p. 27f.

⁴ Cf. M. FOX, *A Time to Tear Down and A Time to Build Up. A Rereading of Ecclesiastes*, Grand Rapids 1999, p. 333–349.

⁵ Cf. OGDEN, *Qoheleth XI 7–XII 8*, p. 27–38.

a lamentation. An example of such reading of Ecc 12,1-7 is the suggestion put forward by M. Gilbert⁶. He interprets the poem as a description of reality of the old age drawing near: shaking, trembling, bending, and blindness. In Ecc 12,1-7 — according to him — a different group of people are described.

The complexity and multiplicity of images used in Ecc 12,1-7 brought exegetes to symbolic explanation of this pericope. In this case, the Qohelet's poem would illustrate the observation of aging and death from the point of view of an external observer; the explanation of these critical and difficult stages of human existence is presented in eschatological terms⁷. Thus, although death does not cause cosmic phenomena, it is presented through images thereof. This relates to the prophetic writings, which contain elements of eschatological symbolism, such as: Isa 13,9f; Jer 25,10f; Ezek 32,7f; Joel 2,2.6.10⁸. The prophets and Qohelet evoke the images of mourning in the context of a universal cataclysm. The difference is that the prophets describe the end of nation and Qohelet portrays the end of human life in individual dimension⁹.

Finally, attempts of allegorical approach to the interpretation of Ecc 12,1-7 were made¹⁰. In this respect, Qohelet proceeds from literal description towards a profound and unambiguously received portrayal of old age and death through evoking various aspects of reality: home, plants, animals, human activity or cosmic

⁶ Cf. M. GILBERT, *La description de la vieillesse en Qohelet XII 1-7 est-elle allégorique?*, VTS 32 (1981), p. 96–109.

⁷ Cf. C. SEOW, *Qohelet's Eschatological Poem*, JBL 118 (1999), p. 209–234 — the author comments individual images of Ecc 12:1-7 as a picture of the end of the world and the cosmic catastrophe.

⁸ Cf. M. FOX, *Aging and Death in Qoheleth 12*, JSOT 42 (1988), p. 64f.

⁹ In the current of the allegorical interpretation follows H. KRUGER, *Old Age Frailty versus Cosmic Deterioration? A Few Remarks on the Interpretation of Qohelet 11,7-12,8*, in: A. SCHOORS (ed.), *Qohelet in the Context of Wisdom*, BETL CXXXVI, Leuven 1998, p. 399–411. The author claims that Ecc 12:1-7 is a symbolic description of the total destruction of cosmos. For example, "trembling guards" means pillars of the earth, "a silver cord" is Milky Way, and "a broken jar" signifies Sun's passing from the constellation of *Pisces* to *Aquarius*.

¹⁰ Cf. G. BARTON, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes*, ICC, Edinburgh 1908, p. 187–190; SCOTT, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*, p. 253–255; L. DI FONZO, *Ecclesiaste*, Torino 1967, p. 316–328; W. ZIMMERLI, *Das Buch des Predigers Salomo*, ATD 16/1, Göttingen 1967², p. 241–243; R. GORDIS, *Koheleth — The Man and His World*, New York 1968, p. 338f; LAUHA, *Kohelet*, p. 210–215; H. WITZENRATH, «*Süss ist das Licht...*»: *Eine literaturwissenschaftliche Untersuchung zu Koh 11,7-12,7*, ATSAT 11, St. Ottilien 1979, p. 49; NIEKERK, *Qohelet's advice to the young of his time*, p. 370–380; FREDERICKS, *Life's Storms and Structural Unity*, p. 95–114; D. GARRETT, *Proverbs. Ecclesiastes. Song of Songs*, NAC 14, Nashville 1993, p. 340–343 (the author claims that "the poem is not an allegory" (p. 340), but he calls images, which are used in Ecc 12:1-17, as "series of metaphors" and interprets them in an allegorical way); W. CHROSTOWSKI, *Alegoryczne przedstawienie starości i śmierci w Koh 12,1-7*, in: W. CHROSTOWSKI (ed.), *Duch i Oblubienica mówią: "Przyjdź"*. *Księga Pamiątkowa dla Ojca Profesora Augustyna Jankowskiego OSB w 85. rocznicę urodzin*, Warszawa 2001, p. 91–108. Whereas J. CRENSHAW, *Youth and Old Age in Qoheleth*, HAR 10 (1986), p. 10 — the author allows such possibility on assumption that it is rather human body than property. He finally concludes that it is better to avoid allegorical interpretation of Ecc 12:1-7.

forces¹¹. All this serves as a fuller representation of the truth about the most severe attributes of old age and the inevitability of death. This is the oldest interpretation which has already occurred in Targum, Midrash, Talmud (b.Sab. 151b-152a), Rabbinic literature (Lev. Rab. 18)¹², also in the commentaries of the Father of the Church (e.g. Jerome, *Commentarius in Ecclesiasten*, PL 1105–1112)¹³ and is quite popular in the recent commentaries.

4. Exegesis of the Ecc 12,1-7

The structure of the poem is very clear. The body of the text begins with an imperative form of the noun with the זָכַר root, conveying the idea of remembering, committing to memory. Next, three sections of varied length can be distinguished, all beginning with a constant phrase לְעֵד אֲשֶׁר לֹא – „before”, followed by a verb in *imperfectum*: Ecc 12,1b.2-5.6-7¹⁴. The first two portions present old age, the final one portrays the death itself and the human fate afterwards¹⁵.

Verse 1:

זָכַר אֶת־בּוֹרְאֵיךְ בְּיָמֶיךָ בְּחַוְרַתְךָ

עַד אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יָבֹאוּ יְמֵי הָרָעָה וְהַגִּיעוּ שָׁנִים אֲשֶׁר תֹּאמַר אֵין־לִי בָהֶם חֶפְצִין:

Remember now your Creator in the days of your youth,

before the days of misery come, and the years draw near when you say: “I have no pleasure in them”.

The poem begins with a call to remember — the imperative form of a verb derived from the זָכַר root, which conveys the idea of remembering, committing to memory¹⁶. This *imperativus* performs an important function here. It links the following text with the preceding one, and at the same time it introduces a new

¹¹ Differently in M. LEAHY, *The Meaning of Ecclesiastes 12,1-5*, ITQ 19 (1952), p. 297–300, who accepts an allegorical interpretation, however the imageries — which occur in Ecc 12:1-7 — concern “thunder-storm”.

¹² Cf. DI FONZO, *Ecclesiaste*, p. 316; MAZZINGHI, “*Ho cercato e ho esplorato*”, p. 304; T. KRÜGER, *Qoheleth. A Commentary*, trans. O. Dean, Hermeneia, Minneapolis 2004, p. 198f.

¹³ Cf. S. LEANZA, *Eccl 12,1-7: L'interpretazione escatologica dei Padri e degli esegeti medievali*, Aug 18 (1978), p. 191–207.

¹⁴ Cf. H. HERTZBERG, *Der Prediger*, KAT 17/4, Gütersloh 1963, p. 210; WHYBRAY, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 91; OGDEN, *Qoheleth XI 7–XII 8*, p. 29; NIEKERK, *Qohelet's advice to the young of his time*, p. 375; KRÜGER, *Qoheleth*, p. 200f.

¹⁵ Differently in OGDEN, *Qoheleth XI 7–XII 8*, p. 35, who sees the description of death in all section and every part of it, although in different imageries, has the same purpose — to show death as inevitable end of man.

¹⁶ Cf. F. BROWN, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon with an appendix containing the Biblical Aramaic*, Peabody 2005⁹, p. 269–271; L. KOEHLER, W. BAUMGARTNER, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon on the Old Testament*, v. I, trans. T. Richardson, Leiden 2001, p. 269f.

subject. The addressee of the command to remember is the same as in Ecc 11,7-10, and the expression **בְּחַיַּיְתֶיךָ** – “in the days of your youth” is also used in Ecc 11,9¹⁷. It can be thus noted that **זָכַר** has a very important function within the entire structure of Ecc 11,7-12,7 — the several times repeated call for rejoicing and enjoying youth is followed by order to remember before old age and death come. This results in a specific atmosphere being created as early into the text as the first word. This relation is explicitly emphasized by preceding the imperative with a conjunction *waw*. *Imperativus* does not need a conjunction here (cf. Ex 13,3; 20,8; 24,9; 25, 17; Josh 1,13; Ps 132,1). Nevertheless, it occurs analogically to **וַיִּזְכֹּר** in Ecc 11,8¹⁸. This way, the continuity between 11,7-10 and 12,1-7 is preserved and the motif of memory emphasized.

What remains problematic, however, is the object which is to be committed to memory. The expression **בְּרֵאֵיךָ** is unclear, as evidenced by the critical apparatus in BHS. In the grammatical sense, it is present participle of the basic conjugation of masculine plural form derived from the **בָּרָא** root (it conveys the idea of creating of something new and applies to Divine activity, cf. Gen 1,1.27; Isa 40,26; 45,12; Jer 31,22¹⁹) with 2nd person singular possessive pronoun suffix, and thus, the Hebrew text reads literally “remember on your creators”. The root **בָּרָא** in the present participle form often denotes God and is translated as “Creator” (cf. Isa 40,28; 42,5; Am 4,13). In Isa 43,1, a similar form occurs – **בְּרֵאֶךָ**, the difference being that it is a singular form of this participle (“your Creator”). Plural participle is sometimes interpreted as *pluralis intensitatis* or *pluralis maiestaticus*. Such explanation, however, is rather dubious, and it can be rejected in the context of the entire Book of Ecclesiastes. Since Qohelet seldom refers to God directly, it is at least doubtful that he “suddenly” chose such a peculiar form to name Him.

The critical apparatus in BHS, as well as certain commentaries²⁰, suggest a simple change of **בְּרֵאֵיךָ** into **בְּוֹרְךָ**. The resulting expression means “your tomb” (lit. “your well”), alternatively “your sheol” (cf. Isa 38,18; Prov 1,12). Arguments supporting such a change are strong. The pronunciation of both these expressions is very similar: *bôrejkā* – *bôrekā*. It is therefore possible that the spelling was changed, especially if the text was dictated. What is more, the noun **בְּוֹר** occurs in Ecc 12,6, where it is used in its basic meaning (“well”), but there it could also mean a tomb. Accordingly, the suggested change makes the final resting place of man the object of remembering. Following the incentive to rejoice in youth, the exhortations take

¹⁷ The only difference is the spelling — in Ecc 11.9 it is *scriptio plena*, cf. OGDEN, *Qoheleth XI 7–XII 8*, p. 29.

¹⁸ Cf. OGDEN, *Qoheleth XI 7–XII 8*, p. 28.

¹⁹ Cf. BROWN, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, p. 135; KOEHLER, BAUMGARTNER, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon*, v. I, p. 153f.

²⁰ Cf. SCOTT, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*, p. 254f; LAUHA, *Kohelet*, p. 205.

a turn: “remember your tomb”, or “your sheol”. Additionally, in the wisdom literature the noun בּוֹר sometimes metaphorically means wife, e.g. as it is used in the expression בְּאֵרְךָ (“your well”) in Prov 5,15 (cf. also Isa 51,1f). This is why some commentators, accepting the aforementioned correction, propose to interpret the call in Ecc 12,1 as an urging to remember one’s spouse²¹.

Nevertheless, according to the rules of textual criticism, the expression בּוֹרְאֵיךָ should be perceived as *lectio difficilior*. Moreover, the ancient translations agree as to the translation of the phrase: LXX — τοῦ κτίσαντός σε, Targ — ברייך, Vlg — *creatoris tui*. They all contain a reference to God as Creator. The only way the texts depart from the Hebrew original is the use of the singular. The plural in the Hebrew text can be used *per analogiam* to e.g. Isa 54,5; Ps 149,2 or Job 35,10, where the participle forms of עֲשָׂה or בַּעַל are used when they apply to God²².

The denotation of God as “Creator” immediately brings to mind the very act of creation. It is a known fact that Qohelet often alludes to the Book of Genesis²³, e.g. God as Creator (cf. Ecc 3,11.14; 7,13f.29; 8,17) and to His presence in the life of the people (cf. Ecc 1,13; 2,24-26; 3,13.17f; 6,2; 8,15; 9,1.7-9). It could also be the case here. Then old age and death would be considered in the context of creation. Therefore, preserving the expression בּוֹרְאֵיךָ and rendering it after ancient translations as “your Creator” seems to be fully legitimate²⁴. Thus, it can be said that there is a certain relation between God and man that is highlighted, God who is present in human life from the beginning to the end and whom man must always remember. For Qohelet God is One who gives life and sustains it. He also determines its end (cf. Ecc 3,19-21). Therefore Qohelet invites his hearer/reader to remember God, also in his youth²⁵.

After the call to remember one’s Creator, the first section follows, beginning with a phrase לֹא עֵד אֲשֶׁר לֹא – “before”. It brings a certain measure of universal appeal to the poem in Ecc 12,1-7 and expands the circle of the audience. Even though overt references to youth occur prior to it (בְּחַרְוֹתֶיךָ, בְּחַרְוֵךְ, cf. Ecc 11,9; 12,1), and at quite an early stage (יְלֻדְוֹתֶיךָ, cf. Ecc 11,9; הַיְלָדוֹת, Ecc 11,10), that “before” may refer to all persons who are not old yet.

The time of old age is described in Ecc 12,1 as יְמֵי הָרָעָה – “days of misery”. The noun רָעָה has several meanings. Generally it means “evil”, “misery”, “un-

²¹ Cf. GORDIS, *Koheleth*, p. 340; CRENSHAW, *Qohelet*, p. 184f; WHYBRAY, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 163.

²² Cf. A. SCHENKER (ed.), *General Introduction and Megilloth. Biblia Hebraica Quinta 18*, Stuttgart, p. 109*f. The commentary adds that it also can be “a matter of late orthography”

²³ Cf. C. FORMAN, *Koheleth’s use of Genesis*, JSS 5 (1960), p. 256–263.

²⁴ Cf. GILBERT, *La description*, p. 100; B. DAVIS, *Ecclesiastes 12:1-8: Death, an Impetus for Life*, BSac 148 (1991), p. 304; MAZZINGHI, “*Ho cercato e ho esplorato*”, p. 282f.

²⁵ Cf. OGDEN, *Qoheleth XI 7–XII 8*, p. 33f; DAVIS, *Ecclesiastes 12:1-8*, p. 302f.

happiness”²⁶. It can refer to a bad condition, both morally (cf. Gen 6,5; Judg 9,56; Prov 24,1), as well as physically (cf. Gen 19,19; 1 Sam 23,9; 1 Kings 14,20). In the case of the analyzed text, as well as Ecc 5,12, the latter meaning should be assumed. Qohelet means all harsh and painful aspects of old age, which he explicitly expresses in the later part²⁷.

The “misery” of old age is confirmed in the following part of the verse: וְהִנְיָעוּ וְהִנְיָעוּ – “and the years draw near when you say, ‘I have no pleasure in them’”. Here, the character of Qohelet as a wise man is made evident, as well as his pedagogy and the method of learning about the world and human life through one’s own experiences. Prior reference to the “days of misery” is, as may be presumed, spoken of from the perspective of his personal knowledge (or that of an old person). Now, he discreetly presages that a man enjoying his youth prior to that “before”, will come to know it personally and remembering the days of youth he will say: “I have no pleasure in them” Then, the knowledge of the old age foretold here will be realized and the proper judgment of it will be made.

Verse 2:

עַד אֲשֶׁר לֹא תִחַשְׁדּוּ הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ וְהָאֵוֶר וְהַיָּרֵחַ וְהַכּוֹכָבִים
וְשָׁבוּ הָעָבִים אַחֲרֵי הַגֶּשֶׁם:

Before the Sun and the light, the Moon and the stars are darkened,
and the clouds return after the rain.

According the division criterion assumed earlier, a new section of the poem about old age begins here. This verse presents it in general and quite obvious terms, namely as the opposition of light and darkness. The sequence of celestial bodies listed (שֶׁמֶשׁ – “the Sun”, יָרֵחַ – “the Moon”, כּוֹכָבִים – “stars”) again brings to mind the description of the creation of the universe (cf. Gen 1,14-19). Interestingly — as in the description of *hexaëmeron* — “the light” (אֹר) is listed independently from “the bodies that govern day and night” (cf. Gen 1,3-5). Similarly, a close relation with the preceding context occurs here. In Ecc 11,7, both אֹר, and שֶׁמֶשׁ, are mentioned. They are referred to as, respectively: מְתוּק – “pleasant/sweet” and טוֹב – “good”. In this verse, the noun עֵינַיִם – “eyes” also appears. Thus, a transposition to Ecc 12,1 is made possible and one can identify the noun תִּחְשַׁד as a description of the condition of the human race. The root חִשַׁד conveys an idea of dimming,

²⁶ Cf. BROWN, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, p. 949; KOEHLER BAUM-GARTNER, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon*, v. II, p. 1262–1264.

²⁷ Differently in J. SAWYER, *The Ruined House in Ecclesiastes 12: A Reconstruction of the Original Parable*, JBL 94 (1975), p. 523 — the author is of the opinion that it refers to the unpredictability of the results of human actions. A review of opinions on the expression הִרְעָה יָמֵי in OGDEN, *Qoheleth XI 7–XII 8*, p. 33f.

becoming dark²⁸. From it the noun חֹשֶׁךְ – “darkness” — is derived. Verbal forms of the root חֹשֶׁךְ often refer to both natural (cf. Am 5,8; Hi 3,9; 18,6) and supernatural (cf. Ex 10,15; Joel 3,4; Ps 105,28) darkening of the astral bodies. The verb חֹשֶׁךְ sometimes also describes “eyes growing dim”, that is blindness (cf. Ps 69,24; Lam 5,17). Similarly, keeping the allegorical interpretation in Ecc 12,2, one may see the gradual weakening of sight. In this eschatological sense, such an eclipse refers to the future cosmic judgment, which will lead to the destruction of the Sun, the Moon and the stars²⁹.

The second part of the verse mentions clouds returning. The text in this case is not as obvious as in the preceding passage. This is why it was interpreted in various ways. In order to avoid this “meteorological absurdity” a suggestion was made to translate the preposition אִתָּהּ as “together” (cf. Ruth 1,15). This way, the phrase means: “the clouds return with the rain”³⁰. It is therefore a logically rendered order of events – the clouds gather and the rain falls (cf. 1Kings 18,45; Ecc 11,3). It may be then an explicit reference to the rain season in Israel, which lasts about 6 months. In this period, the sky is indeed very cloudy. Next, the clouds disappear and the dry, summer season begins.

Nevertheless, the image evoked by Qohelet in this place does not necessarily require the introduction of a secondary meaning of the preposition אִתָּהּ. Even if it is to some extent an absurdity, by far not the only one in this Book, its appeal presents a very vivid image. For as after the rain season there was hope for more light, I have none of it left in my old age. After the dark autumn an even deeper darkness comes. The lack of light is not of a transitional nature but constant and intensifying. This way, the bad condition of eyesight in old age is emphasized even more strongly, e.g. glaucoma³¹. Perhaps the clouds also mean a constantly “overcast” face, indicating sorrow and apathy³².

Verse 3:

בַּיּוֹם שֶׁיָּצֵא שֶׁמֶרִי הַבַּיִת וְהַתְּעוֹתוֹ אֲנֹשֵׁי הַחֵיִל
וּבְטִלּוֹ הַטְּחָנוֹת כִּי מִגִּטּוֹ וְחֹשֶׁךְ הָרְאוֹת בְּאַרְבוֹת:

²⁸ Cf. BROWN, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, p. 364f; KOEHLER BAUMGARTNER, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon*, v. 1, p. 361.

²⁹ Cf. DAVIS, *Ecclesiastes 12:1-8*, p. 306.

³⁰ Cf. SCOTT, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*, p. 255; M. DAHOOD, *Qohelet and Northwest Semitic Philology*, Bib 43 (1962), p. 363f.

³¹ Cf. CRENSHAW, *Qoheleth*, p. 185; GARRETT, *Proverbs. Ecclesiastes. Song of Songs*, p. 341. Adversly DAVIS, *Ecclesiastes 12:1-8*, p. 307.

³² Cf. CHROSTOWSKI, *Alegoryczne przedstawienie starości*, p. 304 — the author claims that the clouds in Ecc 12:2 mean that old age is continuous a life of misery because they are a symbol of the troubles (cf. Ezek 13:11-13; 38:22; Songs 2:11). Although indeed the clouds are sometimes a symbol of the difficult situation of a man, but in the analyzed verses are not mentioned.

In the day when the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men bend down,
and when the grinders cease because they are few left, and those that look through the
windows grow dim.

The author of the Book proceeds from natural phenomena to a description of a household, where men and women perform their daily duties and chores. The image of a household often occurs in a figurative sense, especially in wisdom literature (cf. Job 20,28; Ps 127,1; Prov 9,1). In this context, a stable and well-furnished house is a synonym of wisdom, while stupidity is symbolized by a house falling apart (cf. Prov 14,1). Certain biblical analogies lead to the conclusion that the meaninglessness of human efforts is discussed here. The house became broken down and deserted not because of the stupidity of its builders or the laziness of its inhabitants but because such is the fate of human efforts (Hebr. עָמַל, since they are meaningless (Hebr. הֶבֶל)³³

The text, however, speaks not so much of a household as of inhabitants working therein³⁴. Keeping with the allegorical interpretation, those “strong men” and “women” can be perceived as an allegory of the human body, which begins to function differently from before. The symmetrically constructed text allows one to distinguish four groups of people related to different domestic activities. Firstly, a balance between men and women is noticeable³⁵. The first part of the verse names typically male activities: keeping the house and looking after its safety. Then, female duties are listed: grinding the grain and looking out of the window. In this way, Qohelet alludes to individual body parts³⁶.

The first expression speaks of שְׁמֹרֵי הַבַּיִת – “keepers of the house”. The root שָׁמַר conveys the idea of guarding³⁷. In the form of *Qal* conjugation present participle (as it is the case in Ecc 12,3) it denotes those who mind or guard a person or a place; this is why it is often translated as “keeper/keepers” (cf. Gen 4,9; 2 King 12,10; Song 5,7). Their activity is expressed with a verb derived from the root זָרַע, which communicates the idea of movement. Its verbal forms occur only 3 times within the Hebrew part of the OT³⁸ and this is why it is quite difficult to give its precise meaning. In Esth 5,9 it is used in קוֹם הָתוֹ לְלֵאָרָאֵפּ to describe the behavior of Mordechai towards Haman: וְלֹא־קָם וְלֹא־זָעַ מִמֶּנּוּ – “he did not

³³ Cf. SAWYER, *The Ruined House in Ecclesiastes 12*, p. 519–531 — the author provides reasoning for his thesis by reference to closer and further context. he explicitly states, though, that the text is often interpreted allegorically.

³⁴ Cf. GILBERT, *La description de la vieillesse*, p. 103.

³⁵ Cf. DAVIS, *Ecclesiastes 12:1-8*, p. 308.

³⁶ Cf. BARTON, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, p. 188 — the author gives a (too?) detailed list of body parts which is hidden in imagery in Ecc 12:1-7.

³⁷ Cf. BROWN, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, p. 1036f; KOEHLER BAUMGARTNER, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon*, v. II, p. 1581–1584.

³⁸ The verb זָרַע also occurs in the Aramaic part of the OT, precisely in Dan 5:19; 6:27.

stand or move [perhaps in the sense of “tremble”] before him”. In Hab 2,7 (also in proximity of קרַם), there are some oppressors mentioned, perhaps those who evoke fear and trembling in somebody (the conjugation *Pilpel* used here permits one to apply the translation). Both examples show that the root occurs in negative contexts. This is why the meaning “to tremble” in Ecc 12,3 seems entirely reasonable. The act of trembling in the context of the human body being described is mostly associated with hands. Those “keepers of the house” can therefore mean the hands and arms³⁹.

The next expression is אַנְשֵׁי הַחַיִל – “strong men” (lit. “men of strength”). This expression often occurs within the OT (cf. Gen 47,6; Ex 18,2.25; Judg 20,44.46; 2 Sam 11,16; 2 Kings 24,16; Neh 11,6; Ps 76,6; Nah 2,4). It is worth noting that in these expressions חַיִל is used only once, outside of Ecc 12,3, with a definite article, and then it lacks the military context. This is in 2 Kings 24,16, where it refers to various tradesmen kidnapped from Jerusalem and taken to Babylon. In other cases, without the definite article in *nomen rectum*, it denotes brave warriors. Consequently, military context in Ecc 12,3 can be eliminated and the meaning of those “strong men” should be sought within the context and in what 2 Kings 24,16 suggests. Earlier, those “keepers of the house” were identified as arms and hands. It was also noted that Ecc 12,3 consists of two parallel sentences, which in turn also have two parallel parts. As a consequence, “strong men” may denote legs⁴⁰. Their condition is expressed by the verb הִתְעַוְּתוּ. Grammatically, it is the 3rd person plural *Hitpael perfectum* from the root עוּת, which conveys the idea of bending, bowing, breaking⁴¹. It occurs 12 times in the OT, 9 of which are in the wisdom books (Job, Ps, Ecc). It is used with abstract nouns such as law (cf. Job 8,3; 34,12) or in the sense of oppression (cf. Job 19,6; Ps 119,78; Isa 50,4; Lam 3,36). In Ecc 12,3, this verb means the slow bending of legs in old age, which prevents agile movement.

The following portion of the verse employs feminine participles; analogically then, one should read it as actions and behavior of women. First, הַטְּחַנְוֹת is mentioned. The root טַחַן (8 occurrences in the OT) refers to the act of grinding or mincing of both: of grain (cf. Judg 16,21; Isa 47,2; Job 31,10), manna (cf. Num 11,8) or metal (cf. Ex 32,20; Deut 9,21)⁴². The grinding of grain was one of the most basic and at the same time hardest of domestic chores. For this reason, it was often done by servants and slaves (cf. Ex 11,5). It was an activity which provided

³⁹ Cf. GARRETT, *Proverbs. Ecclesiastes. Song of Songs*, p. 341.

⁴⁰ Cf. KOEHLER BAUMGARTNER, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon*, v. I, p. 311; GARRETT, *Proverbs. Ecclesiastes. Song of Songs*, p. 341.

⁴¹ Cf. BROWN, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, p. 736; KOEHLER BAUMGARTNER, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon*, v. I, p. 804.

⁴² Cf. BROWN, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, p. 377; KOEHLER BAUMGARTNER, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon*, v. I, p. 374.

bread and other baked goods for members of the household. The action of “the grinders” is expressed with the verb **בָּטְלוּ**. It is a *hapax legomenon*. The root **בטל** expresses the idea of ceasing to perform an action⁴³. “The grinders” will thus cease to perform their action, and the reason will be that “they are few” The root **מעט** expresses the idea of being or becoming small, as well as becoming scarce, decreasing⁴⁴. Both actions — grinding and becoming scarce — are most closely associated with teeth in the description of the human body. As years go by, “the grinders” become scarce, which means that there are fewer and fewer teeth which work gradually slower, until a moment comes when there are none left⁴⁵.

Another image is hidden in the expression **הִרְאוֹת בְּאֲרָבוֹת** – “looking through the windows” The OT contains several mentions of women looking out of the window to see someone or something. This is how the mother of Sisera awaits her son’s return (cf. Judg 5,28), Michal watches David (cf. 2 Sam 6,16), Jezebel looks at Jehu (cf. 2 Kings 9,30). It is always looking with curiosity or even waiting. In Ecc 12,3, those “looking ones” will “grow dim” (**חָשְׁכוּ**). The root **חשך** was already used in the previous verse in reference to weakening eyesight. A similar meaning seems reasonable here. “Those that look through the windows grow dim” can be therefore seen as a metaphor of eyes⁴⁶.

The analysis of Ecc 12,3 shows a balance between chosen images. Masculine motifs and actions are expressed through the function of hands and legs, while feminine ones through teeth and eyes. The description of old age is extremely moving here. As keepers and strong men cannot perform their duties properly, thus the hands and legs of an old man no longer work as they used to, since they tremble and bend. Teeth and eyes behave similarly. It should be stressed once again that women looking through the window do so with a certain measure of curiosity (cf. Judg 5,28; 2 Sam 6,16; 2 Kings 9,30). Such action entails a certain amount of spare time, rest or even lack of activity. The expression **הִרְאוֹת בְּאֲרָבוֹת** in Ecc 12,3 may therefore mean the condition of abstaining from actions one used to perform. This brings to mind another attribute of old age, namely the lack of strength to do anything. Weakening of individual members of the body in a way forces one to remain more and more idle.

⁴³ Cf. BROWN, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, p. 105; KOEHLER BAUMGARTNER, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon*, v. I, p. 121. For the use in The Book of Qohelet cf. A. SCHOORS, *The Preacher Sought to Find Pleasing Words. A Study of the Language of Qoheleth (Part II. Vocabulary)*, OAL 143, Leuven 2004, p. 459.

⁴⁴ Cf. BROWN, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, p. 589; KOEHLER BAUMGARTNER, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon*, v. I, p. 611.

⁴⁵ Cf. GARRETT, *Proverbs. Ecclesiastes. Song of Songs*, p. 341.

⁴⁶ Cf. GARRETT, *Proverbs. Ecclesiastes. Song of Songs*, p. 341f.

Verse 4:

וּסְגְרוּ דְלָתַיִם בְּשׁוֹק בְּשֹׁפֵל קוֹל הַטְּחִנָּה
וַיִּקּוּם לְקוֹל הַצִּפּוֹר וַיִּשְׁחַח כָּל-בְּנוֹת הַשִּׁיר:

And the doors to the street are shut, and when the sound of the mill is low
and the sound of a bird rises up and all the daughters of song grow weak.

This time, Qohelet proceeds to the image of a household only. He begins his description with דְּלָתַיִם בְּשׁוֹק – “doors to the street”. Such setting of the image is not accidental. For people entering the house, the outside door is the first element they see and pass, for those who exit – it is the last one. Therefore, the author of the Book, inviting his listener/reader into a house, brings him to the door and then draws for him the following images.

“Doors to the street” are to remain closed. What is noticeable in this expression, is the form דְּלָתַיִם. It is *dualis* of the noun דֶּלֶת – “door”. Although this form is used in the OT in reference to a door (cf. Deut 3,5; 1 Sam 23,7; Isa 45,1; Mal 1,10), a certain analogy can be noticed with nouns describing even-numbered body parts. Very often they are used in dual, for example: יָדַיִם – “(two) hands” (cf. 2 Sam 17,2; Isa 35,3; Ecc 10,18), רַגְלָיִם – “(two) legs” (cf. Lev 11,23; 2 Sam 9,3; Ps 122,2), עֵינָיִם – “(two) eyes” (cf. Gen 20,16; Ha 1,13; Ecc 6,9), אָזְנָיִם – “(two) ears” (cf. Deut 29,3; Isa 43,8; Ps 40,7)⁴⁷. Moreover, the form of the verb וּסְגְרוּ (the 3rd person plural *Pual* perfectum) explicitly demonstrates that the action is not performed by the doors but that they are its receiver⁴⁸. The image itself is not as clear as the previous ones. However, the following portion of the verse helps to understand it. It mentions growing silence, and as such, experiences related to hearing⁴⁹. The image of closing the doors is then an allusion to the gradual loss of hearing. As sounds, such as of what is happening in the street, still penetrate more or less an open door people receive sounds though their ears. Once they are closed, all noise grows weaker and weaker, until nothing can be heard. In this way, a slow gradual isolation from the outside world ensues. Thus, an elderly person is someone sequestered in a silent house and the only way to find out what is happening outside is through other people. The passive form of the root סָגַר clearly indicates that it is not a volitional isolation from the external clatter, but a condition which befalls people regardless of their will.

⁴⁷ Cf. T. LONGMANN III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, NICOT, Grand Rapids 1998, p. 271.

⁴⁸ LXX and Vlg have active voice in this place, respectively: κλείουσιν (the 3rd person plural *indicatives futuri active* => κλείω) and *claudent*. However the passive voice is better here, cf. *General Introduction and Megilloth*, p. 110*.

⁴⁹ Cf. GARRETT, *Proverbs. Ecclesiastes. Song of Songs*, p. 342.

Next, **קול הַטְחָנָה** is mentioned – “the sound of the mill”. The noun **טְחָנָה** derived from the root **טחן**, which already occurs in the previous verse⁵⁰. For this reason, searching for the interpretation of this image can begin with an analogy. “The grinders” (or “the grinding ones”, as such a translation is also correct) meant teeth. The subordinate tense form, expressed by the means of preposition **ב**. and *infinitivus absolutus* (**בִּשְׁפֹל**), renders both events simultaneous⁵¹, and thus — to simplify this somewhat complex linguistic treatise — when teeth begin to fall out, hearing also becomes worse. The deteriorating condition spreads to other members of the body. Quern-stones, that is two grinding stones placed one over the other in such a way as to enable the grinding of grain, did indeed make a noise. It is also the case with “Qohelet’s grinders”, that is teeth. A person may make such a noise, grinding their teeth while eating. However, as time progresses, they become more and more scarce and as a result — quieter. The same is expressed by a verb derived from the verb **שָׁפַל**.

The beginning of the second portion of the analyzed verse poses more problems⁵². The critical apparatus suggests a correction of the phrase **וַיִּקּוּם לוֹ קוֹל** **וַיִּקּוּם לְקוֹל הַצִּפּוֹר** – “and his voice rises up”, which would mean the changes in an old man’s voice pitch. Yet, retaining the original Hebrew text in the unchanged form⁵³ causes the entire phrase to gain the same interpretation – the voice of an old man resembles “the sound of a bird” the pitch of which is usually high. It is worth to call upon the Targumic interpretation here, which saw the raising of the sound of bird as the allusion to the short and shallow sleep of an old man. The song awakens him or he wakes of his own accord because of sleeplessness at the break of dawn, when birds raise their songs⁵⁴.

The last part of Ecc 12,4 evokes **כָּל-בָּנוֹת הַשִּׁיר** – “all the daughters of song”. It can mean singing girls, analogically to the expression like **בְּנֵי-עוֹלָה** – “the wicked” (cf. 2 Sam 3,34; Hos 10,9), **בְּנֵי-מָרִי** – “the rebels” (cf. Num 17,25), **בֶּן-מִשְׁקָ** – “heir” (cf. Gen 15,2), **בֶּן-נְבִיא** – “a prophet”. Perhaps this image hides an allusion to singing during work. Young girls working in the field or in the vineyard used to sing during work. It has a special appeal during the harvest of grapes in summertime. The vineyards could be filled with girls and their songs. It

⁵⁰ Cf. SCHOORS, *The Preacher Sought to Find Pleasing Words (Part II)*, p. 462.

⁵¹ Cf. DAVIS, *Ecclesiastes 12:1-8*, p. 311.

⁵² A detailed analysis of this expression is given by C. SEOW, *Ecclesiastes. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 18C, New York 1997, p. 357–359; IDEM, *Qohelet’s Eschatological Poem*, p. 218–220.

⁵³ Cf. *General Introduction and Megilloth*, p. 110*.

⁵⁴ Cf. WHYBRAY, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 165; CRENSHAW, *Qoheleth*, p. 186f; IDEM, *Youth and Old Age in Qoheleth*, p. 9.

was also the sign of joy. The singing growing silent meant the end of harvest time. Allegorical weakening of “all the daughters of song” may mean the time when a person ceased to work or even that no fruit comes from it (in the sense of giving life). Therefore, an old man whose eyesight and hearing fail him, hands trembling and legs bent, remains in his own isolation.

Verse 5:

גַּם מִגְבוּהַ יִרְאוּ וְחַתְחֻתִּים בְּדַרְךְ וַיִּנְאֵץ הַשֶּׁקֶד וַיִּסְתַּבֵּל הַחֲנָב וְתַפַּר הָאֲבִינָה
כִּי־הִלֵּךְ הָאָדָם אֶל־בֵּית עוֹלָמוֹ וְסָבְבוּ בְּשׂוּק הַסְּפָרִים:

They shall be afraid of height and fear shall come upon the road. The almond tree shall blossom and locust shall grow heavy, and capers shall begin to break,
for man goes to the home of his eternity, and the mourners shall go about the streets.

The biblical wise man continues onto a description of an old man’s life. This time, the outside area becomes the focus. The spatial structure of the poem is clearly noticeable here. Beginning with a description of a person, Qohelet then proceeds to a portrayal of a household, eventually stepping “outdoors”. Doing so, he shows the audience around a gallery of a kind, presenting to them images of old age.

In Ecc 12,5, fear of walking down a road becomes the dominating subject. For an elderly person, naturally sloped areas pose an obstacle⁵⁵. An interesting expression appears here, namely חַתְחֻתִּים. It is a *hapax legomenon*⁵⁶. Usually, it is translated as “fear”. The expression בְּדַרְךְ – “on the road” – infuses the noun with a personal aspect. Fear will be present on the road as any other pedestrian. Most probably, it calls for general, abstract imagery. It does not mean the fear of something from the outside (such as of lurking bandits), but rather a trepidation whether the destination will be reached. As it was earlier discussed, strong “men shall bend down” (cf. Ecc 12,3), that is, legs will no longer function properly. Here, this fact is given a specific image. It is worth noting that in the Rabbinic exegesis the entire phrase בְּדַרְךְ חַתְחֻתִּים was associated with constipation. Undoubtedly, this unpleasant condition is one of the aspects of old age. However, the noun דַּרְךְ occurs in parallel with גְּבוּהַ, and it also is used in its literal sense.

The following examples are taken from wildlife, both fauna and flora. First, שֶׁקֶד – “the almond tree” is mentioned. Gen 43,11 lists it as one of the most precious products of the land inhabited by the clan of Jacob, although it refers rather to the fruit of the tree. It is used similarly in Num 17,23. It also appears in the vision of Jeremiah (cf. Jer 1,11). All these texts refer to the almond tree as one which

⁵⁵ Cf. DAVIS, *Ecclesiastes 12:1-8*, p. 312.

⁵⁶ Cf. SCHOORS, *The Preacher Sought to Find Pleasing Words (Part II)*, p. 461f.

bears fruit or blossom. The image contains therefore vitality and fertility. The almond tree can reach 8 m in height. It is the first tree to blossom in the rainy season (at the end of January), with flowers ranging from pink to pure white⁵⁷. This creates a strong contrast with the whiteness of the blooming tree against the surroundings. The action of the tree is expressed by the verb **צָנַץ**, derived from the root **צָנַץ**, which conveys the idea of sparkling, shining, and in the *Hifil* conjugation — of blossoming⁵⁸. In Song of Songs it has the same meaning as in Ecc 12,5. The almond tree blooming white with flowers in the verse discussed may be an allegory of hair turning gray as one grows old⁵⁹.

Next, the text mentions a locust. The insect is referred to by one of the nouns denoting the species – **חֲנֹכֶבֶת** (cf. Lev 11,22; Num 13,33; Isa 40,22; 2Chr 7,13)⁶⁰. It most likely means the type of species which lives in large swarms and moves very quickly, migrating from place to place. It used to be a massively destructive plague. The arriving locusts used to devour everything around them, virtually destroying fields, vineyards and orchards. For this reason it is compared to a consuming fire (cf. Joel 2,3-5). According to Ecc 12,5, the locust is to grow heavy (**וַיִּסְתַּבֵּל**). The root **סָבַל** in the *Qal* conjugation expresses the idea of bearing a burden — both literally (cf. Gen 49,15) and metaphorically (cf. Isa 46,4.7; 53,4.11; Lam 5,7). In reflexive passive conjugations, however, it gains the meaning “to become heavy” (cf. Ps 144,14)⁶¹. The appeal of the image of “locust grown heavy” is thus very clear. It is an allegory of the various parts of the human body, which become heavy in old age. What used to be fit and fast as the locust, with the passing of years becomes slower and heavier⁶².

⁵⁷ Cf. H. MOLDENKE, A. MOLDENKE, *Plants of the Bible*, Waltham 1952, p. 35–38; J. TREVER, *Almond*, in: G. BUTTRICK (ed.), *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, v. I, Nashville – New York 1992, p. 86f; I. JACOB, W. JACOB, *Flora*, in: D. FREEDMAN (ed.), *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, v. II, New York 1992, p. 806.

⁵⁸ Cf. . SCHOORS, *The Preacher Sought to Find Pleasing Words. A Study of the Language of Qoheleth*, OAL 41, Leuven 1992, p. 41f; *General Introduction and Megilloth*, p. 110.

⁵⁹ Cf. R. MURPHY, *On Translating Ecclesiastes*, CBQ 53 (1991), p. 571–579; GARRETT, *Proverbs. Ecclesiastes. Song of Songs*, p. 342.

⁶⁰ Cf. J. THOMPSON, *Translation of the Words for Locusts*, BiTr 25 (1974), p. 405–411; Y. PALMONI, *Locust*, in: *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, v. III, p. 144–148. The Targum translates **חֲנֹכֶבֶת** as **אִיסְתוֹר** – “ankles”. The interpretation of “locust” as “ankles” was known by Jerome, cf. *General Introduction and Megilloth*, p. 110*; SCHOORS, *The Preacher Sought to Find Pleasing Words (Part II)*, p. 383.

⁶¹ Cf. BROWN, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, p. 687; KOEHLER, BAUMGARTNER, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon*, v. I, p. 741. A critical discussion about the verb **וַיִּסְתַּבֵּל** and its ancient translations (LXX, Targ, Peš, Vlg) cf. *General Introduction and Megilloth*, p. 110*. In the light of LXX this verb also can become from the root **סָבַל**.

⁶² Cf. GARRETT, *Proverbs. Ecclesiastes. Song of Songs*, p. 342; GILBERT, *La description de la vieillesse*, p. 105 — the author expresses an opinion that the matter could consist in the weakening of stomach and digestive functions, which results in a feeling of heaviness and slowness.

The last image from nature is אֲבִי־יִנְנָה. Again, it is a *hapax legomenon*⁶³. In order to state its definite meaning, ancient translations should be consulted. LXX translates this noun through ἡ καππαρίη, Vlg – *capparis*. On this basis, אֲבִי־יִנְנָה is identified as capers (*Capparis spinosa*). They are shrubs with deeply green leaves, resistant to breaking and very flexible. They are very common on the rocks along the Mediterranean Sea as well as in the cracks of the walls of Jerusalem. The plant flourishes at night, it wilts during the day. Throughout most of the year capers only have buds, which makes them seem dead or asleep. Only when the blooming season arrives, they come to life. What happens with capers is depicted in Ecc 12,5 with the verb וְהִפָּרַר. The root פָּרַר denotes the idea of breaking. It very often refers to the breaking of the covenant with God (cf. Lev 26,15; Deut 31,16; Isa 24,5; Jer 11,10) or denouncing His Law and commandments (cf. Num 15,31; Ps 119,126; Ezra 9,14). The verb also means devastation of relations between people (cf. 1 Kings 15,19; Zech 11,14) or thwarting someone's plans (cf. Ezra 4:5; Neh 4,9; Job 5,12)⁶⁴. Nevertheless, its semantic field contains not only abstract nouns, but also specific ones; hence the references to the destruction of earth (cf. Isa 24,19) and sea (cf. Ps 74,13). This is what Ecc 2,5 refers to. Capers, although flexible and infrangible, will begin to break. The same happens to the members of the body of an old man. They will grow weaker and more fragile, thus becoming prone to breaking. Again the Targumic tradition and Rabbinic exegesis should be consulted here. Capers had sexual connotations. Perhaps they were considered an aphrodisiac. Therefore, the Targum of Qohelet interprets such breaking as the ceasing of sexual activity⁶⁵.

It can be generally concluded that the allegorical depiction of old age employs images of nature to show heaviness and slowness, which results from the weakening or ceasing of the physical functions of the human body.

The second part of the poem in Ecc 12,5 abandons the allegorical portrayal of old age in various images and explicitly states: כִּי-הֵלֵךְ הָאָדָם אֶל-בַּיִת עוֹלָמוֹ – “for a man goes to the home of his eternity”. This statement is in stark contrast with the previous part of the verse. Accordingly, if the almond tree, capers or locust live in all seasons of the year, and their seasonal sleep is only a temporary state, after which they fully return to life, for old age there is only one destination, namely death. The phrase בַּיִת עוֹלָמוֹ – “the house of his eternity”, means tomb. This is

⁶³ Cf. SCHOORS, *The Preacher Sought to Find Pleasing Words (Part II)*, p. 455f. One could therefore note that the language in Ecc 12:1-7 is very sophisticated, as it contains a large number of *hapax legomena* words or those occurring in the OT several times.

⁶⁴ Cf. BROWN, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, p. 830; KOEHLER, BAUMGARTNER, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon*, v. I, p. 974f.

⁶⁵ Cf. GILBERT, *La description de la vieillesse*, p. 105; CRENSHAW, *Qoheleth*, p. 188; IDEM, *Youth and Old Age in Qoheleth*, p. 9.

how the Targum translates and explains the expression: בית־קבורתיה – “the house of his tomb”. The verb קָבַר (“tomb”) is associated with בית עולם in Ps 49,12, it also appears in non-biblical texts, such as Egyptian, Punic or Palmyrene⁶⁶. Advancing towards that place is expressed with the present participle of the *Qal* conjugation of the verb derived from the root הִלַךְ. It is one of the most common verbs in the OT and refers to one of the most basic human activities, namely walking. The participle form conveys a certain continuity and steadiness of the act of moving towards this “home of eternity”. It is, therefore, the aim of the walking in a man’s life. Both wisdom and the didactic character of the Book of Ecclesiastes is evident here. In Heidegger’s phrase, the participle %leho expresses “existence towards death” The “home of eternity” itself indicates in turn the irreversible nature of human life.

The final part of Ecc 12,5 contains a reference to funeral mourners. It was a well established institution in the Ancient Near East. Women, and sometimes also men, were associated in a specific professional group, whose cries and wailing were indispensable in the funeral rites⁶⁷. Confirmation can be found in a number of OT texts (cf. Jer 9,16-18; 16,5-7; Am 5,16; Zech 12,10-14)⁶⁸. This motif, as well as the preceding phrase about going to “the home of eternity”, both introduces the subject of the third, final part of the poem Ecc 12,1-7.

Verse 6:

עַד אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יִרְתַּק חֶבֶל הַכֶּסֶף וְתָרַץ גִּלְתַּת הַזָּהָב
וְחִשְׁבֵּר כֶּד עַל־הַמְּבֹועַ וְנָרַץ הַנְּגִילָה אֶל־הַבּוֹר:

Before the silver cord is severed⁶⁹ and the golden bowl is broken,
the pitcher is shattered at the fountain and the wheel broken at the well.

The expression עַד אֲשֶׁר begins a new unit in 12,1-7. Following depictions of old age in Ecc 12,1b and 2-5, Qohelet proceeds to discuss the final human necessity, namely death. Again, he employs imagery from everyday life: lamp, pitcher and well. Expressions חֶבֶל הַכֶּסֶף – “silver cord” and גִּלְתַּת הַזָּהָב – “golden bowl” refer to a lamp. Although two images are used, in fact they constitute one

⁶⁶ Cf. F. PIOTTI, *Osservazioni su alcuni usi paralleli extrabiblici nell' 'allegoria della vecchiaia' (Qohelet 12,1-7)*, BeO 21 (1977), p. 126; CRENSHAW, *Youth and Old Age in Qoheleth*, p. 9; FREDERICKS, *Life's Storms and Structural Unity*, p. 126; S. BURKES, *Death in Qoheleth and Egyptian Biographies of the Late Period*, SBLDS 170, Atlanta 1997, p. 90f.

⁶⁷ Cf. M. SZMAJDZIŃSKI, *Starotestamentowe aluzje o „matzonce Jahwe”* [=The Allusions to “the Wife of Yahweh” in the Old Testament], SLOV 8 (2006), p. 330-333.

⁶⁸ Cf. DAVIS, *Ecclesiastes 12:1-8*, p. 314f.

⁶⁹ The translation adopted the version the *Qere*. This is *Nif'al* imperfect of the root רתק instead of רתק – *Qal* imperfect of רתק. Cf. A. SCHOORS, *The Preacher Sought to Find Pleasing Words*, p. 39f; *General Introduction and Megilloth*, p. 111*.

entity and one metaphor⁷⁰. The nouns **כֶּסֶף** and **זָהָב** suggest that it is a valuable, perhaps festive, lamp (cf. Zech 4,2f). It is quenched when the cord holding the flame is severed. The fire, then, has nothing to burn on. The bowl, that is the oil container, is broken, thus removing the supply which feeds the flame. Human life is also associated with a lamp in Prov 20,27: “the spirit of a man is the lamp of the Lord”. Therefore, when the cord is severed and the bowl is broken, the flame is quenched and a man dies. It should be noted here that Qohelet uses nouns indicating valuable metals (**כֶּסֶף** and **זָהָב**). This seems to emphasize the immense value of human life. There is another meaning to be extracted from these images. The value of gold and silver never diminishes, even with the passage of time. Similarly, “the golden bowl” with “the silver cord” just before extinguishing, as a man before his death, is still of high value, the highest in a sense. This style is typical of Qohelet, who even in the most pessimistic situations and negative conditions can see the light of hope and infuse reality with optimism.

The two following images refer to drawing water from a well, and — as the lamp — they constitute one entity. The pitcher used to draw water is to be shattered. As in the preceding images, the emphasis is placed not on the object itself, but rather its function. Shattering the pitcher makes it impossible to draw water which is essential for human life. The broken wheel, which was used to obtain water from a deep well, evokes a similar effect. So both images can depict allegorically the inevitability of death.

Verse 7:

וְיָשָׁב הָעֶפֶר עַל־הָאָרֶץ כַּשֶּׁהָיָה
וְהָרוּחַ תָּשׁוּב אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר נָתַנָּה:

Then the dust will return to the earth as it was,
and the spirit will return to God who gave it.

The analogy to the Book of Genesis is evident here. The text of Gen 2,7 says that God formed man from dust (**עֶפֶר**) of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath (**רוּחַ**) of life. The noun **עֶפֶר** is sometimes used in the OT as a symbolical reference to human carnal nature and very often indicates his earthly origin (cf. Job 10,9), as well as physical weakness (cf. Ps 103,14). Gen 3,19 contains the prediction of future death — man is to return (**שׁוּב**) to his place, namely the ground. Ecc 12,1 uses the root **בָּרָא**, which brings to mind the so-called “first description of creation of the world” (cf. Gen 1,1–2,4a). The discussed verse contains a reference

⁷⁰ Cf. DAVIS, *Ecclesiastes 12:1-8*, p. 315; BARTON, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, p. 192; WHYBRAY, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 167.

to the “second description” (cf. Gen 2,4b-25). Thus, a composition intended by the author emerges, which provides a framework for Ecc 12,1-7. The opening contains a reference to the very “beginning” (cf. Gen 1,1 and Ecc 12,1), while the conclusion refers to the ending of man. (cf. Gen 3,19). Qohelet, however, enriches this earthly fate of man with a new perspective. He goes further than e.g. Gen 3,19. Man for him is not merely “dust” which returns to the ground, but also the spirit which returns to God. Along with the theological perspective⁷¹, hidden hope, characteristic for Qohelet’s style, is present. In the nothingness which makes the dust return to the ground, the wise man shows another value entirely.

5. Conclusion

Images emerging in the presented analysis place Qohelet’s understanding of old age and death in a universal perspective. He speaks suggestively and competently, which implies experience in the matter, as he does so in an honest and comprehensive manner, but without pessimism and hopelessness. The biblical wise man, while addressing a youth, first and foremost wants to “familiarize” old age and death. It is done by sharing the memory that everyone will go through these experiences of the human condition. The awareness of death, with all of its ailments, and death, as quenching, should accompany a man from young age. This is not to be taken, however, as fear and desperation. On the contrary, it gives an opportunity to live one’s life well, knowing what in a given period is nothingness and what brings hope and gives optimism for the future. The awareness of “years in which one has no pleasure” is what gives life — and, first of all, young age — full value. Moreover, Qohelet shows the necessity of patience in sharing one’s experience and knowledge with the young.

In conclusion, an issue may be raised — why does Qohelet, so literal in his Book, employ allegorical language while speaking of old age and death? The answer seems to be that in case of the final end of a man in his earthly dimension, a literal approach is impossible. Such phrasing would cause frustration and feelings of complete meaninglessness, whereas allegorical language is of enormous help in a proper preparation for the arrival of this difficult period. Qohelet is aware that no one and nothing is capable of reversing the course of events, and human life inexorably leads to its final stage. Therefore, as a wise man, he makes an effort to

⁷¹ Commentators are divided as to whether Ecc 12:7 speaks of immortality. It should be noted that even though eschatological accents are absent here, it can be one of the first heralds of intuition, which will develop in the youngest writings of the OT, to gain its final shape in NT.

“familiarize” this fact through allegory which — with discretion and beauty, but also realism — depicts it with appropriately selected images.

However, at the end this presentation it should be noted that the allegorical interpretation of Ecc 12,1-7 has a faint point. This is a difficulty of “the anatomical presentation”, because there is clear connection between all the imagery which occurs in this poem, especially in Ecc 12,2-5. The world in Ecc 12,2 belongs to a different field of the pictures which are described in Ecc 12,3-5. Moreover, there is not any imagery in Ecc 12,5a. Therefore, though the allegorical interpretation is really beautiful and it invites the reader to use his imagination, it should be said very clear that it is only one possibility to read and comment this text.

Alegoria starości i śmierci — próba interpretacji Koh 12,1-7

STRESZCZENIE

Obrazy przywołane w prezentowanej analizie pozwalają zobaczyć czytelnikowi pojmowanie starości i śmierci przez Koheleta w perspektywie uniwersalnej. Mówi on o tym zagadnieniu w sposób sugestywny i kompetentny, który potwierdza jego doświadczenie. W użytych przez niego słowach—sformułowaniach nie można zauważyć utraty nadziei czy pesymizmu. Biblijny mędrzec adresując swoje słowa do młodych, próbuje zaznajomić ich z doświadczeniem starości i śmierci. Dzieliąc się swoją pamięcią, wskazuje, że każdy człowiek przejdzie drogę doświadczeń różnych stanów ludzkiej egzystencji. Świadomość śmierci i związanych z nią cierpień (choroby, dolegliwości) — śmierci jako zgaśnięcia powinna towarzyszyć ludziom już od najmłodszych lat. Świadomość ta nie powinna być odbierana jako strach czy desperacja. Powinna być odbierana na sposób odwrotny. Winna stworzyć szansę człowiekowi, by ten przemierzył swoje życie drogą dobra, by wiedział, co w danym okresie życia jest marnością, a co nadzieją przynoszącą optymistyczne widoki na przyszłość. Świadomość „przeżycia lat bez szczęścia w przyszłości”, czyli tego, co może przynieść los, jest wypełnieniem wartości życia młodych ludzi. Kohelet pokazał, że dzielenie się swoim doświadczeniem i wiedzą z młodymi wymaga wiele cierpliwości.

Konkludując, należy zwrócić uwagę na jeszcze jedno zagadnienie. Otóż warto postawić pytanie: Dlaczego Kohelet tak dosłowny w całej księdze używa tak alegorycznego języka mówiąc o starości i śmierci? Odpowiedzią zdaje się być fakt końca ziemskiej egzystencji człowieka, do którego nie da się podejść w sposób dosłowny. Takie bowiem wyrażenie tego stanu mogłoby przyczynić się do załamania człowieka i spowodowania u niego uczucia beznadziejności. W tym wypadku język alegoryczny jest wielką pomocą w odpowiednim przygotowaniu człowieka do nadejścia tej trudnej chwili. Kohelet jest świadomy, że nikt i nic nie jest w stanie odwrócić biegu wypadków życia ludzkiego, które nieubłaganie prowadzą do jego końca. Za pomocą przenośni mędrzec stara się zaznajomić innych z tym faktem. Przywołuje więc odpowiednie obrazy, rysując je dyskretnie, z poczuciem piękna i dozą realizmu. Jed-

nakże na zakończenie tej prezentacji należy zaznaczyć, że alegoryczna interpretacja Koh 12,1-7 jest słabym punktem. Jest to trudność „prezentacji egzegetycznej”, ponieważ w przytoczonym fragmencie występują nawiązania pomiędzy wszystkimi ukazanymi symbolami (szczególnie we fragmencie Koh 12,2-5). Świat w Koh 12,2 należy do zupełnie różnego rodzaju obrazów, niż te, których opis pojawia się w Koh 12,3-5, co więcej, w Koh 12,5a nie ma żadnej symboliki. Mimo że alegoryczna interpretacja tego fragmentu rzeczywiście posiada bardzo wysokie walory estetyczne i potrafi zachęcić czytelnika do użycia swojej wyobraźni, to należy tutaj zaznaczyć bardzo jasno, że jest to jedyna możliwość komentowania i czytania tego tekstu na sposób dosłowny.