

ALLEGORIES OF LIFE, DEATH AND IMMORTALITY IN THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES 12:5b–7

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ABSTRACT. Analyzing the famous passage *Eccl.* 12:5b–7, the author of the article comes to the conclusion that the expression "the almond tree blossomed" (12:5b α) contains the allegory of man's birth and his young years; the phrase "the locust/locust tree became loaded" (12:5b β) can be interpreted as an indication of the mature, productive/fruitful years of human life activity; the allegory of the caper, falling to winter ("and the caper bush fell"; 12:5b γ), correlates with the metaphorical description of old age and the approach of death in *Eccl.* 12:1b–2. So, one can assume that the passage *Eccl.* 12:5b α – γ includes the allegories of man's earthly birth, making up of his personality, maturity and old age in the form of natural phenomena that take place in Judea throughout the year — approximately from the second half of January to December. The allegory of the breaking "silver cord" (*Eccl.* 12:6a α), symbolizing the earthly demise, can be understood as a break in the connection between the spirit and the flesh of man (cf.: *Eccl.* 12:7). In 12:6a β –b, Ecclesiastes adduces the allegories of death, expressed through the broken vessels ("golden bowl", "jar", a certain "vessel"), symbolizing the human body. The context also suggests that an allusion to the human spirit implicitly present in these allegories as well, which is symbolized by olive oil (in the "golden bowl") and water (in the "jar" and in the "vessel"), — not directly called, but contextually implied — returning to their eternal Fountain (cf.: *Jer.* 2:13, 17:13, also: *Ps.* 36:10) when their temporary receptacles are broken. The "spring" and the "well" (*Eccl.* 12:6b) are veritable symbols of life, and in the light of *Eccl.* 12:7b — perhaps symbols of eternal life in the Book of Ecclesiastes. As for the allegory of "the golden bowl", it clearly goes back to *Zech.* 4:2–3. In the light of the allegorical picture attested in *Zech.*, chap. 4, and the text of *Eccl.* 12:7b, the allegory of *Eccl.* 12:6a β — "the golden bowl will crack" — can presuppose implicitly not only the death of the body/"the golden bowl", but also that its contents — "oil", symbolizing the spirit abided in the body — will merge with the "oil" of the Divine Luminary, *scil.*, with the Spirit of God.

KEYWORDS: Ecclesiastes, Zechariah, chap. 3–4, allegory, symbol, life, death, immortality, youth, maturity, old age.

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I

The author of the Book of Ecclesiastes¹, contrasting in its final part the joy of young years with the sad years of old age and portraying the bitterness of the latter in a series of depressing metaphors (*Eccl.* 11:7–12:5a), completes his work with some allegories (*Eccl.* 12:5b–7), revealing of the meaning and logic of which causes great difficulties, as well as the textual interpretation of this passage itself.² In our translation the text of *Eccl.* 12:5b–7 runs as follows:

5b. The almond tree blossomed³;
 the locust (tree?⁴ — *I. T.*) became loaded;
 and the caper bush fell (*scil.*, lost its foliage. — *I. T.*)⁵ —
 then man⁶ goes to his eternal home.
 And (hired) mourners will go about the street-bazaar
 6. until the silver cord breaks;
 and the golden bowl will crack,
 the jar will be broken at/over the spring,
 and the vessel will split at/over⁷ the well.
 7. And dust will return to the earth as it was,
 and the spirit will return to God who gave it.

It seems expedient to begin our analysis of the text with consideration of the allegories of "the almond tree", "the locust", and "the caper". In Judea, the almond tree (*šāqēd*, lat. *Prunus amygdalus*)⁸ begins to bloom from the second half of Jan-

¹ The dating of the book creation varies in the interval from the last quarter of the 6th to the 3rd cent. BCE. See, *e. g.*: Seow 1997, 21–38; Tantlevskij 2014, 139–141; Idem 2017, 133, 140–143; Idem 2018, 77f., n. 15; Duncan 2017, XXf. The oldest extant fragments of the Book of Ecclesiastes manuscript originating from the 4th Qumran cave, *4Q Qoh^a*, are paleographically dated to *ca.* 175–150 BCE (see, *e. g.*: Seow *Op. cit.*, 6; Abegg, Flint, Ulrich (eds.) 1999, 619). Among the numerous contemporary works devoted to the Book of Ecclesiastes, let us note, *e. g.*: Seow *Op. cit.*; Bartholomew 2009; Brown 2011; Enns 2011; Eswine 2014; Atkinson 2015; Duncan *Op. cit.*

² Variants of ancient and modern interpretations of this passage in the main languages of the world can be found in: BW 2015.

³ Masoretic vocalization *wěyānēʿš* in accordance with *Qere*: *wěyānēš*, assuming *nšš*, "to blossom"; this reading is supported by the Septuagint, Syro-Hexaplar version, Peshitta, and Vulgate.

⁴ On this interpretation see below.

⁵ On this interpretation of the root *pr* in *Hiph'il* cf., *e. g.*: Seow, 363. See further: n. 23.

⁶ The term *hā-ādām* can be interpreted in this passage as "the human", "humanity", as well. Cf.: *Eccl.* 1:4a.

⁷ On this interpretation see: n. 26.

⁸ See, *e. g.*: Moldenke 1952, 35; Zohary 1982, 66.

uary (often before the appearance of leaflets on the tree), the *first* of the fruit trees of the country — as a harbinger of the revival, "awakening" of spring (NB: the verb *šāqad* having the same consonant composition, as the word *šāqēd*, means "to stay awake", "keep watch/vigil"⁹). This circumstance a priori makes unlikely a popular opinion that the image of blooming almonds in *Eccl.* 12:5bα could be used as a "vegetable" allegory of old age. In the light of this, as well as because almond blossoms are not only white, but also white and pink, and light pink, they could hardly be considered as a universal image of gray hair, as some researchers believe.¹⁰

Almond blossoms only until the middle of March. Its fruits (used in antiquity for food, for making oils, in the production of cosmetics, perfumes, in medicine, in embalming, etc.)¹¹ mature for a long time, until September. (Cf., e. g., The Proverbs of Ahikar 2:7 (Syr. A): "My son, be not in a hurry, like the almond-tree whose blossom is the first to appear, but whose fruit is the last to be eaten..."¹²) Therefore, even if one admits the unlikely interpretation "the almond tree blossoms (will) fall"¹³, etc., this can't at all be an allegory of the *proximity* of a person's demise — rather, as an indication of an important stage in the process of his maturation on the way to manhood.

Blossoms of the almond tree have the shape of a cup (*gābī^a*; *Ex.* 25:33–34, 37:19–20). In view of the fact that in the next verse of the Book of Ecclesiastes (12:6aβ-b) a person (more precisely, his flesh¹⁴) three times correlates with different vessels, and also taking into account the above mentioned botanical features of the almond tree, it can be assumed that the phrase "the almond tree blossomed" contains the allegory of man's birth¹⁵ — "awakening" to life — and his young, joyous, bright years.

As for the locust (*ḥāgāb*), it is a migratory phase of the grasshopper (*Schistocerca gregaria*), which is regularly found throughout the Near East.¹⁶ Reproduction of locusts (most individuals have a length of 2–4 cm) usually occurs in May–June. When

⁹ Cf. the play of words *šāqēd* and *šōqēd*, "vigilant", in *Jer.* 1:11–12.

¹⁰ See, e. g.: Seow 1997, 379.

¹¹ See, e. g.: *Gen.* 43:11.

¹² Cf. *Num.* 17:23[8]: "...Moses entered into the Tabernacle of Testimony, and behold, Aaron's rod waxed bloomed <...>: buds came out, flowers blossomed, and the fruits of almond (*šēqēdīm*) ripened".

¹³ See, e. g.: Diakonoff 1973, 652. Cf., on the other hand: Seow 1997, 347, 361f.

¹⁴ See further below.

¹⁵ On the origination of man cf.: *Eccl.* 11:5a.

¹⁶ Uvarov 1966–1977.

mating, the male suspends the spermatophore (consisting of a main part, a "vial" containing spermatozoa, and an additional — designated as spermatophilax, which is in fact an adhesive nutrient) to the end of the female abdomen. The spermatophore suspended to the abdomen of a female — with the spermatophilax *weighting* it — makes it difficult for the female to move and prevents repeated mating. Egg laying usually occurs in the second half of the summer.

The verb *yistabbēl* used in *Eccl.* 12:5bβ (the *Hithpa'el* form occurs nowhere else in the Hebrew Bible) is derived from the root *sbl*, "to carry (a load, burden)", "to be laden", attested elsewhere in the Bible in *Qal* and *Pu'al* and in the latter form meaning most probably "to be pregnant" (*Ps.* 144:14). Thus, the interpretation "the locust became loaded" quite agrees with the locust propagation peculiarities described above.

In general, this phrase can be interpreted as an indication of the mature, *productive* years of human life.

On the other hand, however, as C. L. Seow reasonably points out¹⁷, "mentioned between almond and caper, it seems most likely that *ḥāḡāb* 'locust', properly 'grasshopper', refers not to the insect but to some kind of plant. The word 'locust' in English refers to a wide variety of plants throughout the world, most of which have pods that apparently remind one of the insect (in its form; cf. below. — *I. T.*).¹⁸ In the Levant, too, this association between the insect and certain types of trees seems to have been made. Indeed, the Greek word *ákris* 'locust', used normally of the insect, may have referred to pods of the carob tree, as well. It has long been argued that the 'locusts' eaten by John the Baptist (*Matt.* 3:4; cf. also: *Lk.* 15:16. — *I. T.*) may, in fact, have been such 'locust' pods. There is ample evidence, however, that the insect was consumed by people in the Levant in ancient times, as many bedouin do even today. So, the locusts consumed by John the Baptist may have been the insect, after all. Nevertheless, it is significant that many interpreters in antiquity assumed the "locusts" to be legumes. This is an interpretation of *ákris* 'locust' found in the apocryphal Gospel to the Ebionites and followed by Athanasius, Chrysostom, and others¹⁹. It appears that even in Levantine antiquity, 'locust' was recognized as a term used for a kind of plant. It makes sense to think that *ḥāḡāb* refers to a plant, perhaps the carob tree (*ḥārûb*), whose pods remind one of locusts".

Let us also mention that *ḥāḡāb*, "locust", in the passage under consideration has traditionally been taken figuratively, in particular as referring to penis. In

¹⁷ Seow 1997, 362.

¹⁸ OEL 1989, VIII, 1093f.

¹⁹ See the citations in: Lampe 1961, 65.

b. Šabb. 152a it is said that *ḥāḡāb* refers to one's 'gbwt, a reference to the male sexual organ (cf.: *šîr 'āḡābîm*, "love-song", in *Ezek.* 33:32; *'āḡābātāh*, "her lust", in *Ezek.* 23:11; the verb 'gb meaning "to have (sexual) desire"). And this is an interpretation at the allegorical level accepted by Rashi and Ibn Ezra.²⁰ It seems that this allegory could have arisen because of the smell of the carob tree blossoms (for specific pungent odor comes from them, reminiscent of the smell of human sperm) and especially of the shape of its fruits: the legums of the evergreen tree *Ceratonia siliqua*²¹, commonly known as the carob tree or simply locust tree — having a length of about 10–20 cm and a width up to 3–4 cm — in size, shape and even texture often resemble the male genital organ in a state of erection.

The carob tree fruits begin to ripen since May, and they are harvested until the rainy season (in Israel, more intense precipitation begins to fall from the end of October). Fresh fruits have a sharp astringent taste and are therefore not suitable for eating; they are collected immature and laid out on the ground where they ripen. The pulp contains up to 48–56% of sugar. Various mammals (goats, sheep, cows, etc.) are feeding on the legumes of the carob tree.²² Parasites do not live on this tree, as a result of which many peoples considered it sacred. The carob tree is likened to the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil in Gan Eden in *1 Enoch* 32:4.

Thus, the phrase "the locust (tree) became loaded" could also be interpreted as an indication of a mature, *fruitful* period of human life activity.

The last "vegetable" allegory — "and the caper bush fell" (12:5bγ) — probably implies that it lost its foliage.²³ The caper bush (*Capparis spinosa*)²⁴ blooms con-

²⁰ Levy 1912, 135; Seow 1997, 362, 379.

²¹ See, e. g.: Battle, Tous 1997. The designation *Ceratonia siliqua* derives from the Greek *kerátion*, "fruit of the carob" (from *kéras*, "horn"), and Latin *siliqua*, "pod". The unit "carat", used for weighing precious metal and stones, also comes from *kerátion*, as alluding to an ancient practice of weighing gold and gemstones against the seeds of the carob tree, having approximately the same weight of about 0.2 grams.

In late Roman times, the pure gold coin known as the *solidus* weighed 24 carat seeds, and, as a result, the carat also designates a measure of purity for gold: 24-carat gold means pure gold, etc.

²² Cf., e. g.: *Lk.* 15:16.

²³ The verb form *tāpēr*, as pointed in *Codex Leningradensis*, appears to be the *Hiph'il* of *pr* "to break, frustrate, make ineffectual, bring to naught", or the like. The Septuagint, Symmachus, Syro-Hexaplar and Coptic versions take the verb to indicate that the fruit is scattered or dispersed, i. e. the caper bush fruits have split open and their seeds are scattered.

On the other hand, C. L. Seow suggests that "perhaps we should take the root *pr* to mean 'to fall off, drop off'. One may compare Ugaritic *pr* 'to break, break from' (*KTU* 1.15.III.30; 1.19.III.14, 28), which is related to Arabic *farra*, a verb that in the causative stem

tinuously from April–May to October, the fruit ripening is stretched from June to October. Throughout this period, it is possible to collect blossom buds (shaped like berries and used as appetite stimulants, also considered as aphrodisiacs) or fruits, as they mature. Roots are collected in late autumn. The leaves of the caper bush fall in December, when the season of *intense* rains begins. So, the allegory of the caper, falling to winter, clearly correlates with the metaphorical description of old age and the approach of death in *Eccl.* 12:1b–2:

<...> the bad days come
and the years approach when you will say,
“I find no pleasure in them”;
the sun darkens (for you), (even) the light,
and the moon and the stars,
and the clouds return after the rain <...>.

So, one can assume that the passage *Eccl.* 12:5b α – γ includes the allegories of man's earthly birth, making up of his personality, maturity and old age in the form of natural phenomena that take place throughout the year — approximately from the second half of January to December.

II

...Then man goes to his eternal home.
And (hired) mourners will go about the street-bazaar
until the silver cord breaks (12:5c–6a α).

In the light of the aforesaid, the allegory of the breaking "silver cord" (*Eccl.* 12:6a α), symbolizing the earthly demise, can be understood as a break in the connection between the spirit and the flesh of man (cf.: *Eccl.* 12:7). Further, Ecclesiastes adduces the allegories of death, expressed through the broken vessels, symbolizing the human body:

And the golden bowl will crack,
the jar will be broken at/over the spring,
and the vessel²⁵ will split at/over²⁶ the well (12:6a β –b).

may mean ‘to fall off, to shed’. If this interpretation is correct, the Hiph'il of the root in Hebrew may also mean ‘to shed, to cause to fall off’. The point, then, is that the caper bush is defoliated...” (Seow 1997, 363).

²⁴ See, e. g.: Danin 2010, 179–185.

²⁵ The noun *ggl* here seems to refer not to a waterwheel (a pulley), but to a vessel of some sort. This is suggested already by the parallelism of *ggl* in *Eccl.* 12:6b α with *kad*,

But the context suggests that an allusion to the *human spirit* implicitly present in these allegories as well, which is symbolized by olive oil and water — not directly called, but contextually implied — returning to their source when their temporary receptacles are broken. Thus, in the second and third allegorical images, there are references to the spring and the well, *scil.*, veritable symbols of life, and in the light of *Eccl.* 12:7b — "and the spirit will return to God who gave it" — perhaps symbols of eternal life in the Book of Ecclesiastes.²⁷ In *Jer.* 2:13 and 17:13, the Lord Himself is referred to as the "Fountain (*mĕqôr*) of living water"²⁸ (cf. also the image of a "well of living water" in *Gen.* 26:19). Thus, the ceramic vessel, which symbolizes the body, "returns to the earth as it was" (*Eccl.* 12:7a), and its contents — the "living water", implying the spirit of man — to its Fountain.

As for the allegory of "the golden bowl", it clearly goes back to *Zech.* 4:2–3:

There is a lampstand (*mĕnôrâh*) entirely of gold with its bowl at the top of it; it holds seven lamps <...>. By it are two olive trees, one to the right of the bowl and the other to the left.

The term *gullâh*, "bowl", refers here to the receptacle of olive oil for the lamps. (NB: this noun is attested in the Hebrew Bible only in *Zech.* 4:2–3 and in *Eccl.* 12:6aβ.) In *Zech.* 4:10b, these seven lamps are designated as "the eyes of the LORD". Since, according to *Zech.* 4:14, "these (two olive trees. — *I. T.*) are the two anointed ones in attendance on the LORD of the whole world", one may conclude that in *Zech.*, chap. 4, the *mĕnôrâh* symbolizes God.²⁹ Olive oil giving light, judging by

"jar" (see, *e. g.*: Dahood 1952, 213f.; Seow 1997, 367). The noun *glgl* should probably be vocalized as **golgōl* (from earlier **gulgul*), a noun related to *gullâ* "basin", "bowl", and *gulgōlet*, "skull". As was pointed out by Seow (*ibid.*), "it refers, perhaps, to a globular vessel. In Akkadian, *gulgullu* and *gulgullatu*, usually meaning 'skull', are also names of cooking pots, and *gullu* and *gullatu* also refer to various vessels (see *CAD* V, 128–129). Dahood calls attention to the word *glgl* inscribed in Punic on a vase (*RES* 907). Cf. also Ugaritic *gl*, which refers to a drinking vessel (*KTU* 1.14.II.18–19, IV.1–2; cf. Akkadian *gullu*").

²⁶ In parallelism with '*al-hammabbû*', "at/over the spring", here one would expect the spelling '*al-habbôr*', "at/over the well" (cf.: '*al-habbôr*' in *Isa.* 24:22; but, on the other hand, cf.: '*el-habbôr*', lit. "into the pit" in *Gen.* 37:22); see further, *e. g.*: Seow 1997, 367. NB: the spelling '*al*' is attested in the next verse (*Eccl.* 12:7a) in *Codex Leningradensis* instead of the preposition '*el*' which is natural here; the latter spelling is confirmed by many Jewish manuscripts and the Peshitta.

²⁷ Cf. also *Eccl.* 3:17cβ: "...and (judgment) over every act – there", *i. e.*, in the other world.

²⁸ Cf. also *Ps.* 36:10: "For with You is the fountain of life, in Your light we shall see light".

²⁹ Cf., *e. g.*: Seow 1997, 10.

Zech. 4:4–6 and 10b, may symbolize here the Spirit (*ru^ah*) of God (cf.: *Zech.* 4:6c), so that the priestly and lay Judean leaders turn out to be the anointed (*Zech.* 4:14) of the Spirit³⁰, present, according to *Zech.*, chap. 3–4, in the heavenly court.

In the light of the allegorical picture attested in *Zech.*, chap. 4, and the text of *Eccl.* 12:7b ("and the spirit will return to God who gave it"), the allegory of *Eccl.* 12:6aβ — "the golden bowl will crack" — can presuppose implicitly not only the death of the body/"the golden bowl", but also that its contents — "oil", symbolizing the spirit abided in the body — will merge with the "oil" of the Divine Luminary, *scil.*, with the Spirit of God.

So, it turns out that in all three allegories the solid irrevocably broken walls of the vessels symbolize the human body, and the supposed moving contents of them — the fountains of life (water) and light (oil) — the human immortal spirit, returning to its Creator.

It can be assumed that in *Eccl.* 12:5cα–β and 12:7a–b a chiasmic parallelism is present: the phrase "then man goes to his eternal home³¹" correlates with the statement "and the spirit will return to God who gave it", and the words "(hired) mourners will go about the street-bazaar" — with the statement "and dust will return to the earth as it was".

The assumption that the phrase "and the spirit will return to God who gave it" is not simply an euphemistic, circumlocutional expression equivalent to "breathe one's last", meaning the transition, in fact, to nonexistence, — as some scholars believe³² — is confirmed by the text of *Eccl.* 3:21:

Who knows if the human spirit (*ru^ah*) ascends upward
or if the animal spirit goes downward to the earth?³³

This passage shows that the idea of the ascent of the spirit "upwards", *i. e.*, "to God," is fundamentally different from the widely spread view of the descent of the spirits of dead people³⁴ and (NB!) animals into the underground realm of shadows.³⁵

In conclusion, let us note one nuance. In the text *Eccl.* 11:8bβ the author writes:

Everything that appears ("arises". — *I. T.*)³⁶ is transient^{37, 38}.

³⁰ Cf., *e. g.*: *Isa.* 61:1–2.

³¹ In everyday speech the phrase "eternal home" usually means a tomb or a grave, but in the context of *Eccl.* 12: 5b–7 this notion takes on special transcendent connotations.

³² Cf., *e. g.*: Seow 1997, 367f., 382.

³³ Cf.: *Eccl.* 8:7.

³⁴ See, *e. g.*: *Ἐκκλ.* 3:19–20, 21b, 6:4–6, 9:10b.

³⁵ See further: Tantlevskij 2018, 76–83; cf.: *Idem* 2017, 133f.

³⁶ *Scil.* "under the sun"; lit: "all that comes". Cf.: *Eccl.* 8:8; *Job* 7:7, 16.

That is, everything that has a beginning, that was created by God, sooner or later dies, disappears. But, according to the Biblical tradition, God puts *His* Spirit in man³⁹, and therefore the spirit of man is a particle of the *eternal* Spirit of God — *beginningless* and *infinite*; thereby the human spirit itself is eternal. Returning to its Source, the spirit of man arrives at its "Eternal Home".

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³⁷ Lit. "vapor".

³⁸ Cf. the statement of Xenophanes of Colophon as it is conveyed by Diogenes Laertius (Lives, Teachings, and Sayings of Famous Philosophers, IX, 19):

Everything that arises is subject to destruction.

³⁹ See, e. g.: *Gen.* 2:7, 6:3; *Job* 27:3, 32:8, 33:4. Cf. also, e. g.: *Gen.* 1:26–27; 5:1; 9:6.

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