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## WHY IS “THE DAY OF DEATH” BETTER THAN “THE DAY OF BIRTH?” THE AXIOLOGY OF QOHELETH IN THE LIGHT OF THE BETTER-PROVERBS IN QOH 7:1-4

One of the most intriguing parts of the Hebrew Bible is the Book of Ecclesiastes, called initially Qoheleth. From this text the famous expression *vanitas vanitatis* is derived. The unknown author(s) (later on called Qoh, both the author and the book), most likely from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC Ptolemaic Jerusalem<sup>1</sup>, tried to position the faith of the Judeans into the dialogue with popular Greek philosophy.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, this unexpected shift from the rough Mosaism of other biblical books caused various interpretations, creating confusion among commentators.

A great perplexity was triggered by a Hebrew phrase *hābēl hābālim*.<sup>3</sup> The question of the etymology of the word *hēbel* remains open.<sup>4</sup> Its possible appearance in the context of some Old Testament polemics with the Canaanite gods<sup>5</sup> or regarding the biblical character of Abel<sup>6</sup> has been disputed. The onomatopoeic origin is shown by the use of both vowels and consonants.<sup>7</sup> The semantic range even though being extensive leads towards “breath,” “vapour,”<sup>8</sup> but is open to other shades of meaning.<sup>9</sup> This way the

1 M. Hengel, *Ebrei, Greci e Barbari*, Brescia 1981, p. 196.

2 A. Bonora, *Il libro di Qoèlet*, [in:] *Commenti Spirituali. Antico Testamento*, ed. G. Ravasi, Roma 1992, p. 9.

3 Transliteration of Hebrew text according to: BHT: Transliterated BHS Hebrew Old Testament 2001. BHT database is Copyright © 2001 by Matthew Anstey. This database used as its base the CCAT Michigan-Clairemont-Westminster electronic database. This was used with the permission of the German Bible Society for the Bible Works™.

4 Vocalized as *hēbel* anywhere else except for 1:2 and 12:8. It is disputable whether the vocalization in 1:2 and 12:8 is an Aramaism or not. Cf. D.C. Fredericks, *Qoheleth's Language. Reevaluating its Nature and Date*, [in:] *Ancient Near Eastern Texts and Studies*, vol. 3, Lewiston 1988, p. 212 and 222.

5 H.M. Barstad, *HBL als Bezeichnung der fremden Götter im Alten Testament und der Gott Hubal*, „Studia Theologica Lund”, vol. 32 (1978), pp. 58-60, presents Jer 8:19; 10:3.8.15; 14:22 and Zach 10:2 as the texts showing a possible appearance of the representations of a Canaanite god Hubal.

6 E. Dor-Shav, *Ecclesiastes, Fleeting and Timeless. Part I*, „The Jewish Bible Quarterly”, vol. 36 (2008), pp. 215-218.

7 K. Seybold, *hbl*, [in:] *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament*, ed. G.J. Botterweck, H. Ringgren, H.-J. Fabry, vol. 2, Stuttgart 1977, p. 335.

8 W.H.U. Anderson, *The Semantic Implications of hēbel and rāʿūt in the Hebrew Bible and for Qoheleth*, „Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages”, vol. 25 (1999), p. 60.

9 K. Seybold, *op. cit.*, p. 337.

symbolic use of the expression might correspond with the diversity of contexts. The metaphorical meanings led translators to various attempts of reflecting these nuances in English. The numerous versions may be organized into three translation groups expressing the idea of (1) insubstantiality, (2) transience or (3) foulness.<sup>10</sup> The first group includes expressions similar to “futility” and “vanity,” the second one: “frailty,” “ephemerality,” and the third one: “meaninglessness,” “absurdity.”<sup>11</sup> Such a wide range of denotation affected interpretations of the entire book. According to its translation, the phrase: *Vanity of vanities* (or any other shade of it) caused the fact that Qoh was called a pessimist, an optimist, a nihilist, an atheist, a singer of joy, a hedonist or a stoic. May his system of values be brought towards a better understanding by the detailed analysis of some passages other than *hāḇēl hāḇālīm*?

The comparative of the adjective *good* may express a simple diversification of values. Biblical Hebrew does this by using the phrase: *ṭōḇ A min B*, which for the first time was identified as a literary device by Zimmerli,<sup>12</sup> who called it in German: *Ṭōḇ-Spruch*. The “better-proverbs,” characteristic for biblical Wisdom Literature, often occurs in the ancient Middle East and Greek literary works.<sup>13</sup> In Qoh there are more than twenty such expressions.<sup>14</sup> Qualifying one element (A) as better than the other (B), the author expresses something more than a simple comparison – he enters the world of the values undermining the previously voiced statement of the meaninglessness of everything.

A few examples of the expression *ṭōḇ A min B* in Qoh occur in passage 7:1-4. The English translation of the text according to the NASB<sup>15</sup> is as follows:

7:1: A good name is better than a good ointment, And the day of *one's* death is better than the day of one's birth. 7:2: It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, because that is the end of every man, and the living takes *it* to heart. 7:3: Sorrow is better than laughter, because a sad face is good for the heart. 7:4: The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of pleasure.

The first verse contains two better-proverbs (7:1a and 7:1b). They share the same *ṭōḇ* (the one from 7:1a serves for both), making them parallel. They, however, contain

10 D.B. Miller, *Qohelet's Symbolic Use of hēḇel*, „Journal of Biblical Literature”, vol. 117 (1998), p. 443.

11 The LXX translates *hēḇel* in Qoh as *mataiotēs* which corresponds with the ideas expressed in Hebrew; Cf. G. Bertram, *Hebräischer und griechischer Qohelet. Ein Beitrag zur Theologie der hellenistischen Bibel*, „Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft”, vol. 64 (1952), p. 30.

12 W. Zimmerli, *Zur Struktur der alttestamentlichen Weisheit*, „Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft”, vol. 51 (1933), p. 192.

13 See N. Lazaridis, *Wisdom in Loose Form. The Language of Egyptian and Greek Proverbs in Collections of the Hellenistic and Roman Periods*, Leiden 2007, p. 65.

14 The precise number varies according to various interpretations. There is no consensus whether the expression *ʔēn-ṭōḇ* (“there is nothing good in” or “nothing better than”) may be included into the list of the *Ṭōḇ-Sprüche* of Qoh.

15 Scripture text taken from the New American Standard Bible, © Copyright The Lockman Foundation 1995. Used by permission.

expressions with slightly different meanings. Moreover, while the first (7:1a) most probably has a popular origin, the other (7:1b) does not seem to be of this provenance.<sup>16</sup> That is why they need to be analyzed separately, even though being strictly connected.

An alliteration characterizes the first colon (7:1a). This phenomenon, also called *paranomasia* may have a mnemotechnical function. Sometimes a magical or spiritual meaning may be added by such a repetition of sounds. It may also indicate a phrase's origin from a popular saying. The initial *tôḅ* is an adjective of qualification, obviously with predicate and not attributive function – the noun “name” (*šēm*) contains already the value of high quality in this context. The most apparent meaning of *šēm* in the Hebrew Bible is a “name” of a person, but it may also mean: “fame,” “renown,” “importance” or “control.”<sup>17</sup> In Qoh it occurs in two more places: in 6:4 it is used as “reputation”, and in 6:10 as “existence.” The literal meaning of *šēmen* (“oil of olives”) may have a metaphorical sense. In the Ancient Middle East, the oil was one of the most needed foodstuffs, so the word may symbolise richness. Being used for the anointment of the body and hair for a feast, it represents joy, as a product of the earth it recalls God's blessing, and as a cure for healing wounds or leprosy, it evokes health. Its religious connotations come from the fact that it is used to consecrate of priests, kings and as a liturgical offering. Finally, the oil of olives was an important ingredient of mixtures used for embalming the bodies, and as such, its symbolic meaning touches the world of funeral rites or death itself.<sup>18</sup> In Qoh *šēmen* occurs as a symbol of happiness and joy in 9:8 and as a perfume ingredient in 10:1. In 7:1a, however, the attributive *tôḅ*, added at the end, suggests the high value of the oil is probably expensive and precious. It is a luxury, available for rich men only, whether used as food, medicine, hair-body lotion or embalming ointment. That is why some commentators basing their reading on the parallel in Prov 22:1<sup>19</sup> translate the phrase as similar to: “A good name is better than fragrant oil.”<sup>20</sup>

This comparison may be analyzed on various levels: on the physical characteristics of oil, its symbolic meaning and metaphorical connotations. In the first case, it is to be noted that oil floating on water runs down quickly, and its scent is ephemeral. Here the word “better” describes the superiority of long-lasting. The “name” as one's reputation is more important than the temporary, short-lived things, both material

16 A. Lauha, *Kohelet*, Neukirchen-Vluyn 1978, p. 147.

17 H. Ringgren, F.V. Reiterer and H.-J. Fabry, *šēm*, [in:] *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament*, ed. G.J. Botterweck, H. Ringgren, H.-J. Fabry, vol. 8, Stuttgart 1995, p. 128.

18 H. Ringgren, *šēmen*, [in:] *ibidem*, pp. 252-253.

19 Prov 22:1: “A good name is more desirable than great riches; to be esteemed is better than silver or gold.”

20 M.V. Fox, *Ecclesiastes. The Traditional Hebrew Text With The New JPS Translation*, Philadelphia 2004, p. 43: “A good name is better than precious ointment”; J.L. Crenshaw, *op. cit.*, p. 132: “Better is a good name than fine ointment.”

(belongings) and non-material (short-term fame).<sup>21</sup> On the symbolic meaning of “oil” as “abundance,” the comparison declares the importance of one’s identity over richness and luxury. It may have some common elements with the previous level, but in this case the transitory aspect is not underlined. If floating oil’s short-time effect was compared to a long-lasting reputation on the first level, now the abundance of blessing, success, richness is compared to the truth about who the man is.<sup>22</sup> Finally, the metaphorical meaning of “name” and “oil” revokes the beginning of existence, whereas “oil” by being used for embalming goes towards the funeral or the death as the end of existence. Here the word “better” enters moral categories.<sup>23</sup> Each level of this comparison (physical features, symbolic and metaphorical meaning) is contained in just one compact phrase, making it even more interesting from the esthetical point of view.

Unlike the first part (7:1a), the second (7:1b) does not seem to have a traditional origin. Both pieces are connected by *waw*, and the initial *ʔôb* from 7:1a has its function in 7:1b where it is not repeated. The expression “the day of death” is not specified, meanwhile “the day of birth” has the suffix of the personal pronoun. However, the third person masculine form can indicate the general and impersonal character of the entire statement.<sup>24</sup> The contrast between both parts may be explained in different ways. Some commentators presume the second being a personal explanation of the first by the author: as if the author was giving his point of view to a traditional saying: “It is said that ... but I say that ...”. Others see here an ironic twist that should preserve the “satirical edge.”<sup>25</sup> However, if the parallel character of the bicolon needs to be maintained, there are at least two ways of interpretation. The first is to see all individual members as parallel to each other. The second is to read *waw* as the so-called *waw adaequationis* meaning “in the same way as”. In the first case, the relationship: “name” – “day of death” needs to be identical with the relation: “oil” – “day of birth”.<sup>26</sup> The metaphorical character thus would be: “the reputation on the day of death is better (more important) than the one on the day of anointing the newborn.” In this case, the nature of comparison would be

21 A.J. Rosenberg, *Lamentations. Ecclesiastes. Translation of Text, Rashi, and Other Commentaries*, [in:] *The Five Megilloth*, ed. A.J. Rosenberg, vol. 2, New York 1992, p. 75: “For this reason, a good name is compared to good oil more than to other liquids, for oil – you put water into it, and it floats and rises, and is recognizable, but other liquids – you put water into them, and they absorb it. [...] A good name, which spreads long distances for a person because of his good deeds, is better than good oil, which wafts a fragrant odor, for the fragrance of good oil dissipates, whereas a good name becomes constantly stronger.”

22 See R. Braun, *Kohelet und die frühhellenistische Popularphilosophie*, Berlin 1973, p. 128.

23 See F. Zimmermann, *The Inner World of Qohelet*, New York 1973, p. 85.

24 L. Di Fonzo, *Ecclesiaste*, Torino 1967, p. 224.

25 See i.a. R.E. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, Dallas 1992, p. 63; I.J.J. Spangenberg, *Irony in the Book of Qohelet*, „Journal for the Study of the Old Testament”, vol. 72 (1996), p. 64-65.

26 Here “day” seen as a “time” – the moment in which something happens rather than a twenty four hour period of time.

such that the element “better” determines the “importance” for evaluating one’s life: “You know more about somebody after his death than at the moment of his birth”.

The other possible interpretation (with *waw adaequationis*) indeed shows the superiority of “death” over “life” and would go together with the point of view expressed in Qoh 4:2: “And those now dead, I declared more fortunate in death than are the living to be still alive.” or in Qoh 6:3: “Should a man have a hundred children and live many years, no matter to what great age, still if he has not the full benefit of his goods, or if he is deprived of burial, of this man I proclaim that the child born dead is more fortunate than he.” Does not it show Qoh, who is “neurotically hopeless” about the future and for whom everything is vanity?

There might be, however, another way to interpret this twisted comparison without assuming its pessimistic personality. The pararellism may put “the day of death” into the same relationship with “the day of birth” as “a good name” with “a precious oil”. At first glance, the precious oil should be desired by everyone – it shows the material status of the one who possesses it and its metaphorical meaning brings to mind God’s blessing, the healing and the feast. However, the “good name” is considered as “better,” which means that “fame,” “reputation,” “recognition” as constituting the real status of a person are more important. In the same way, on the surface, the “day of birth” seems to be good, while the “day of death” appears to have negative connotations. Qoh compares these realities and gives the advantage to the second one. To understand the reasons, one needs to analyze the next verse (7:2) that continues the thread.

Commentators noticed<sup>27</sup> that Qoh 7:2 is constructed in a very precise way. It consists of two parts (*tôb* A *min* B: “It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting” and the explanatory phrase: “because that is the end of every man, and the living takes *it* to heart,”) each having nine words, which makes twenty-eight letters. There is a similar poetry inside these parts: both elements of the comparison (A: “to go to a house of mourning” and B: “to go to a house of feasting”) are made up of four words that add up to twelve letters altogether, identically like the two halves of the sentence following it: “that is the end of every man” and: “the living takes *it* to heart.” These symmetrical numbers of letters and words cannot be accidental: the author’s poetical craft shines here brightly.

Both elements of the comparison are expressed by infinitives which is a rare phenomenon for Qoh. They are followed by the preposition <sup>2</sup>*el* and the destination expressed by nucleus noun *bêt* followed by the modifiers <sup>2</sup>*êbel* and *mište<sup>h</sup>*. It is only the last element that is different, thus drawing attention. The expression *bêt-<sup>2</sup>êbel* may be seen as having the meaning of a place where mourners have gathered to lament over a person’s death. Going there is considered “better” than going to *bêt-mište<sup>h</sup>*, which is

27 See D. Ingram, *Ambiguity in Ecclesiastes*, London 2006, p. 215.

a “house of banquet.” It is not said whether it is a feast for a newborn child or a wedding. Does “better” mean that if there are two events simultaneously, a funeral and a wedding, one should rather go to the first one? Or is it that the feasts on the occasions of funerals were better than those on other events? All these cannot be completely ruled out. However, if the category of the “better” goes beyond the accepted behavior and meets the philosophical or theological level of Qoh, there might be another interpretation. Both the sentence preceding and the one explaining the proverb lead the reader in this direction.

First of all the relative marker *ba<sup>ʔ</sup>āšher* (preposition *bə* connected with particle *ʔāšher*) may be understood as causal conjunction in the sense of “in that,” “in as much as,” “seeing that,” “because,” “in view of the fact that,” which signals a clarification. After the conjunction, there are two phrases connected with *waw*. The first phrase is a nominal sentence with a personal pronoun of 3rd person singular as a subject. The pronoun seems to refer to the “house of mourning” even if the closest member would be the “house of feast”. The fact that death awaits at the “end” of human life constitutes the real explanation. If at the end of everyone’s life there is death, one should never forget it, and this fact should impact all one’s life. Taking it to heart appeals to intelligence and rational thinking rather than to emotions. Since the second phrase has “the living” as its subject, used as an adjective with a definite article prefixed, referring to “any living person,” the statement receives a universal base. As a consequence of the previous statement, this phrase directs the reader’s thinking towards the interpretation of the entire verse: the necessity of taking the perspective of death should determine the whole life. The mourning after somebody’s death may be an occasion to reflect on the invisible values.

The next verse connects with the previous one by the term “heart.” Its opening may be called provocative, disturbing or even paradoxical in form. The first element of the comparison, *ká<sup>c</sup>as* (“anger”) is surprisingly considered as “better” than *šəḥōq* (“laughter.”) The apparent meaning of *ká<sup>c</sup>as* is “anger,” even if seen here as “better than laughter” it is rebuked later on, in Qoh 7:9: “Do not be quickly provoked in your spirit, for anger resides in the lap of fools.” One might argue over two different meanings to harmonise the text: “seriousness of disposition” in 7:3 and “uncontrolled bad temper” in 7:9.<sup>28</sup> It is also possible to distinguish not as much between the meanings of the word *ká<sup>c</sup>as* as between its applications: in 7:9 it will be the anger of unfortunate events, meanwhile here it is the anger of reproof. The term *ká<sup>c</sup>as* in 7:3 may be translated as a “concern,” meaning the realistic approach to life.<sup>29</sup> Thus, the interpretation would be:

28 R. Gordis, *Koheleth. The Man and His World*, New York 1951, p. 262.

29 J. Bollhagen, *Ecclesiastes*, Saint Louis 2011, p. 238: “This visible display of emotion shows that a person is not hiding his head in the sand nor trying to laugh off his problems. A sad countenance results from looking realistically at life and trying somehow to come to grips with it.”

“It is better to face up the vexations of life than to assume an attitude of carefree levity.”<sup>30</sup> It is possible to read the entire verse as parallel to the previous one. So *ká<sup>C</sup>as* would be parallel to “going to the house of mourning” just like *śəḥōq* parallel to “going to house of feast.” In the second case, the used terms correspond to each other; *ká<sup>C</sup>as*, however, would need to be translated as “sorrow.” That is the case of many modern translations, probably basing on Luther’s intuition despite the lack of any philological justification: the text itself does not give any linguistic indication of these nuances of the meaning except the context that points at “death,” “mourning” and naturally indicates “sorrow.”

The casual *kî* introduces the explanatory part that takes the form of a subordinate clause whose subject is *lēb*. Since *pānîm* is the outermost part of the body representing the person during the contact with somebody else, the contrast with *lēb* might mean the difference between what is outside and inside a human being: “When the outside is bad, the inside may be good.” The problem here is the causal character of *kî* that makes such an interpretation quite improbable. The possible ways to understand this passage (7:3b) would be as follows: 1) moral interpretation, 2) “joy” interpretation, and 3) “wisdom” interpretation.<sup>31</sup> The first one tries to find a reason for the statement in 7:3a by improving personal morality. The Vulgate translates 7:3b: *per tristitiam vultus corrigitur animus delinquentis*. This understanding was popular in the 19th century, but its weak point is that the idea of suffering being able to improve morality seems strange for Qoh. There is also no indication of moral self-improvement in the immediate context. The second possibility is to translate the 7:3b as: “the sad face may go with a cheerful heart.” The problem here is the presence of *kî*: it would have to have an adversative character. Theoretically, it is possible but much less probable than the usage of a causal *kî*. The third interpretation would translate the phrase as: “Sorrow is better than mirth, for when the face is sad, the mind improves.” This way the first part of the sentence (7:3a) is connected with the second (7:3b) reasoning like this: “sorrow” is superior to “laughter” because it leads to the attainment of wisdom. Such a connection between “wisdom” and “sorrow” also occurs in the immediate context (7:4). In addition, it meets the fact that the “heart” in biblical literature is the organ responsible for reasoning, not for the feelings.<sup>32</sup> Thus sorrowful episodes in life make people grow in wisdom and experience somehow more than it could result from joyful events. The superiority of *ká<sup>C</sup>as* over *śəḥōq* has its meaning in the context of achieving wisdom,

30 R.N. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes. Based on the Revised Standard Version*, Grand Rapids 1989, p. 114.

31 D. Rudman, *The Anatomy of the Wise Man. Wisdom, Sorrow and Joy in the Book of Ecclesiastes*, [in:] *Qohelet in the Context of Wisdom. Rapports de la 46e session des Journées Bibliques, 30 juillet – 1 août 1997*, ed. A. Schoors, Leuven 1998, pp. 466-468.

32 M.A. Eaton, *Suffering and Sin. Ecclesiastes 7:1-8:1*, [in:] *Reflecting with Solomon. Selected Studies on the Book of Ecclesiastes*, ed. R.B. Zuck, Grand Rapids 1994, p. 291: “The heart is amongst other things the center of a man’s attention, thought, understanding and memory.”

experience and understanding. In other words, it is better to experience sorrow than to experience joy because the former improves the mind and makes one wiser.

The next verse (7:4) refers to 7:3b by the occurrence of the word *lēb*. It is also quite closely connected at the semantic level with verse 7:2 by the expression *bēt-<sup>7</sup>ēḥel* as well as by the possible synonyms of the following ones: *bēt-mište<sup>h</sup>* and *bēt-šimhā<sup>h</sup>*. It is as if 7:4 took the content of 7:2 into the context of wisdom. It was already signalled in 7:3 by engaging “heart” as the centre of reason into life and death problems. Such a comparison is not expressed by a classical comparison (A better than B). The superiority of the “house of mourning” over the “house of joy” is underlined by the presence of qualifying elements such as “wise” and “stupid” in the form of an antithetic parallelism. The verse seems to be a conclusion of the entire passage as a micro-unit. It explains the previous verse and refers to the first two. The superiority (“wise” against “stupid”) of the experience of death over the experience of joy leads to interesting conclusions. Wisdom is the awareness of one’s temporariness and the inevitability of death. Death demands a specific, more serious approach: two houses may symbolize the two sides of human purpose that are both serious and flippant in their inability to be avoided. The importance of death is emphasized as overshadowing any other possible experience. The advantage of the “house of mourning” over the “house of joy” lies in the perspective of improving one’s life by studying the reality of death. It is real progress towards wisdom: the reflection on the frailty of life and the inevitability of death can make one wiser.

In this way, the thread returns to the superiority of “name” over “oil” as the *imponderabilia*’s superiority over material things. In such a light, the “better”-factor turns towards a practical function: it is “better” (more useful) to have the proper perspective in life. The absolute worthlessness of all expressed by Qoh is not strengthened by the superiority of “the day of one’s death” over his “birthday” since it is not a pessimistic statement. That is rather a remark on how to achieve greater wisdom while observing one’s passing away.

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### Why is “the day of death” better than “the day of birth?”

#### The axiology of Qoheleth in the light of the better-proverbs in Qoh 7:1-4

SUMMARY: The article is an exegetic analysis of the passage Qoh 7:1-4 from the Book of Ecclesiastes. The excerpt challenges the absolute statement repeated many times throughout the book about the worthlessness of all things (“vanity of vanities.”) Some values are recognised as “better” than others which may be the evidence of Qoh's axiology relativity. At first sight, he qualifies the universal lack of values as absolute.. The superiority “good name” over “precious oil” denies the supposed meaninglessness (vanity, ephemerality) of everything. The in-depth analysis of other comparisons present in the passage (“the day of death is better than the day of birth,” “it is better to go to a mourning house than to a wedding house”) shows that a passage which has a pessimistic character due to the elevation of death, may also be interpreted differently.

The detailed study of the ancient Hebrew vocabulary in the text also revealed the various levels of the used metaphors.

KEYWORDS: Hebrew Bible – Qoheleth – Ecclesiastes – Better-proverb – comparisons

### Dlaczego „dzień śmierci” jest lepszy niż „dzień urodzenia”?

#### Aksjologia Koheleta w świetle przysłów z Koh 7: 1-4

STRESZCZENIE: Artykuł analizuje w sposób egzegetyczny fragment Koh 7, 1-4 z Księgi Koheleta. Fragment ten stanowi swoiste zaprzeczenie wielokrotnie powtarzającego się w całej księdze refrenu o „marność nad marnościami”. Kategoryzacja pewnych idei jako „lepsze” od innych może być dowodem na względność aksjologii Koheleta, która na pierwszy rzut oka absolutyzuje uniwersalny brak wartości czegokolwiek. Wyższość „dobrego imienia” nad „kosztownym olejkim” zaprzecza rzekomemu bezsensowi (marność, ulotność) wszystkiego. Dogłębna analiza innych porównań zawartych

w tekście („dzień śmierci lepszy od dnia narodzin”, „lepiej iść do domu żałoby niż do domu wesela”) pokazuje, że fragment o pozornie pesymistycznym charakterze, ze względu na uwznioślenie śmierci, może być zinterpretowany również w innym kluczu. Szczegółowe badanie słownictwa użytego (w języku starożytnym hebrajskim) pozwoliło również ukazać różne poziomy metafor użytych w tekście.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: Biblia Hebrajska – Kohelet – Księga Eklezjastesa – przysłowia – porównania