

**Zeitschrift:** Judaica : Beiträge zum Verstehen des Judentums  
**Herausgeber:** Zürcher Institut für interreligiösen Dialog  
**Band:** 69 (2013)

**Artikel:** Rabbinic and patristic interpretations of Qohelet's vision of unfairness of death, reward and punishment  
**Autor:** Oleneva, Julia  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-960945>

#### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

#### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

#### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 13.02.2026

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

# Rabbinic and Patristic Interpretations of Qohelet's Vision of Unfairness of Death, Reward and Punishment

By *Julia Oleneva\**

## 1. Introduction

The unusual form and style of the book of Qohelet, the intricate and difficult world of its author, contradiction and irony of the thoughts cause rather different and controversial interpretations than definite treatment. Some scholars suggest that the book is paralyzed by pessimism, and others see in Qohelet optimistic world view. This ambiguous nature of the book that is incapable of only one understanding and interpretation is very successfully described by Carol A. Newsom: "Since one of Qohelet's themes is the inability of human enterprise to seize and hold, to take possession of a thing, it is perhaps no accident that the book eludes the attempts of interpretive activity to fix its meaning determinately."<sup>1</sup> The numerous contradictory, skeptical, pessimistic and sometimes freethinking expressions and thoughts of the book raised discussions and differences of opinion also among its ancient commentators. The rabbinic sages discussed its inspiration and canonicity. On the whole, the rabbis recognized Qohelet as a sacred book – largely because it was authored by King Solomon. They did not take into account the fact that Qohelet never refers to himself as Solomon. Nevertheless, when discussing the origin of Qohelet, the rabbis argued that the book was not written in the spirit of prophesy. Some rabbis suggested that Qohelet's views contradict the spirit and teaching of the Torah, and therefore are not inspired.<sup>2</sup> However, in spite of its contradictions, Qohelet was

---

\* Dr *Julia Oleneva*, University of Latvia, Faculty of Theology, Raina bulvaris 19, Riga, LV-1586.

1 CAROL A. NEWSOM, *Job and Ecclesiastes*, in JAMES L. MAYS / DAVID L. PETERSEN / KENT H. RICHARDS (eds.), *Old Testament Interpretation: Past, Present, and Future. Essays in honor of Gene M. Tucker*, Nashville 1995, p. 191.

2 There are some fragments in Mishnah which discuss the status of Qohelet. For example, in mEd 5:3 R. Shimon claims that Qohelet does not make the hands impure (this is according to the school of Shammai). The school of Hillel, nevertheless, says: "It does render unclean the hands." The ambiguous phrase "renders unclean the hands" indicates a book which is considered to be divinely inspired and, thus, "holy". The origin of this phrase is found in

not rejected by the rabbis because its opening and closing verses contain accepted religious teaching. At its beginning words of the Torah (1:3) and at its end are words of the Torah (12:13) are to be found. Thus, according to the rabbis, at the beginning Qohelet argues that man does not gain anything by all his toil or “worldly labour” except by the toil of “meditating the Torah day and night” (Ps 1:2). And at the end of the book, he calls to fear God and observe His commandments.<sup>3</sup>

In spite of the fact that Qohelet was discussed in Tannaitic times the early rabbis did not write extensive commentaries (*Midrashim*) on Qohelet and other wisdom books of the Bible and showed little interest in the wisdom of biblical sages. Tannaitic use of Qohelet is predominantly epigrammatic.<sup>4</sup> The first complete exegetical work on Qohelet (*Midrash Qohelet Rabbah*) was written in the later Amoraic period only. Early rabbinic suggestions that the book of Qohelet begins and ends with words of Torah make clear what the motivation of these exegetical works was. While

---

bShab 14a. According to Talmudic tradition, the priestly *terumah* (the part of the harvest granted to the Temple) was originally stored near the scrolls of the Torah in the Temple. Since both were considered to be holy, they were allowed to be placed together. However, it was discovered that mice were eating the *terumah*, and along with it were damaging the Torah scrolls. It was therefore decreed that the Torah scrolls imparted impurity, so that they no longer be stored near the *terumah*. From this particular incident the general notion was developed that all scripture “renders unclean the hands”. Consequently, according to rabbinic logic, if the book of Qohelet was stored in the Temple near the priestly *terumah* – it also renders unclean the hands and, therefore, is divinely inspired. For the discussion about the phrase, see further SID Z. LEIMAN, *The Canonization of Hebrew Scripture: The Talmudic and Midrashic Evidence*, Hamden 1976, p. 115.

- 3 The discussion about Qohelet is also found in mYad 3:5, tYad 2:13, and bShab 30b.
- 4 Anonymous sections of Tannaitic literature used proverbs or apothegms from Qohelet and applied them to a particular situation. Hillel’s proverbs in tBer 2:24, e. g., resolve into Qoh 3:4–5. Another type of use is the epitomization of a biblical figure or rabbi’s behaviour in a certain situation by the verse drawn from Qohelet. Most of Tannaitic interpretations of Qohelet were attributed to R. Yishmael who seems to have a special relationship with Qohelet. For R. Yishmael Qohelet was fully integrated into the exegetical canon. Fragmentary comments on Qohelet are found also in SifBem *Tzizit* § 155), SifDev § 1, tMeg 3:15. For more extensive information on early rabbinic interpretations of Qohelet, see MARC HIRSHMAN, Qohelet’s Reception and Interpretation in Early Rabbinic Literature, in: JAMES L. KUGEL (ed.), *Studies in Ancient Midrash*, Cambridge, MA 2001, pp. 87–99.

commenting Qohelet's message, the rabbis normally used the concept of Torah as the basis and frequently overlooked Qohelet's contradictions and pessimism in order to link this book to the Torah.

At the time when the rabbis began their discussion about Qohelet, the Christian Church received and accepted the book as part of the Jewish Holy Scripture. Early Christian exegetes<sup>5</sup> did not reject the book either, but tried to re-interpret it in the light of the Gospel. Most Church Fathers followed the so called monastic reading<sup>6</sup> of Qohelet, and saw in the person of Ecclesiastes the symbol of Christ. They also argued that the book speaks about the indictment of mundane affairs and leads the soul to God.

The study of rabbinic and patristic commentaries on Qohelet reveals that both exegetical traditions faced the challenge of explaining obscure, contradictory and freethinking passages of the book. In order to explain theologically problematic verses of the book and to overcome Qohelet's pessimistic mood the rabbis tried to interpret Qohelet's message on the basis of the ethical teaching of the Torah while the Church Fathers, on the other hand, explained and spiritualized the text in the light of the Gospel. Following this method of interpretation, rabbinic and patristic exegetes frequently re-wrote or re-interpreted Qohelet's text and made the book acceptable for their respective religious teaching and tradition.

The aim of this article is to analyze the aforementioned approach to Qohelet on the basis of rabbinic and patristic interpretations of several problematic verses of Qohelet. Arguing that *all is vanity* (1:2; 12:8) Qohelet casts doubt on the value of human life, toil, and wisdom. The author of the book appears to be sceptical about justice in this world and the notion of immorality, reward and punishment after death. The unfairness of death and futility of life motivate Qohelet to conclude that there is

---

5 There are no direct quotations of Qohelet in the New Testament. Paul's suggestion that *τῇ γὰρ ματαιότητι ἡ κτίσις ὑπετάγη* ("the creation was subjected to futility") in Rom 8:20 is only one possible exception. The Apostolic Fathers also did not pay great exegetical attention to Ecclesiastes. It is only from the third century that Christian exegetes began to quote Ecclesiastes or write separate commentaries on it. Hippolytos of Rome and Origen composed earliest commentaries on Qohelet; unfortunately, these works were either lost or preserved only fragmentally.

6 The lesser known commentary of THEODORE OF MOPSUESTIA (ca. 350–428) to a considerable degree is based on a literal interpretation (see WERNER STROTHMANN [ed.], *Das syrische Fragment des Ecclesiastes-Kommentars von Theodor von Mopsuestia. Syrischer Text mit vollständigem Wörterverzeichnis*, Wiesbaden 1988 [= Göttinger Orientforschungen, Series 1: Syriaca; vol. 28]). Theodore likewise questioned the divine inspiration of Qohelet.

no advantage of the wise and righteous over the fool and wicked (for example, verses 2:14-16; 9:2) and no difference between men and beasts (3:18) because they all die. There is no wonder that Qohelet's aforementioned statements provoked disagreement among rabbinic and patristic scholars who wanted to harmonize and re-read the text of the book in accordance with religious teaching of Judaism and Christianity respectively. The following article, thus, shall analyse the dogmatically disputable themes expressed in verses 2:14-16, 9:2 and 3:18 of the book of Qohelet.

## 2. Survey of sources<sup>7</sup>

### 2.1. *Midrash Qohelet Rabbah and Targum Qohelet*

Midrash Qohelet Rabbah [hereafter *QohR*] is reckoned among Midrashic compilations denoted as Midrash Rabbah.<sup>8</sup> Studies on *QohR* suggest that

---

7 The following abbreviations are used in the article:

EccT = DIDYMUS DER BLINDE, *Kommentar zum Ecclesiastes* (Tura-Papyrus): Teil I,1: Kap. 1,1-2,14, ed. GERHARD BINDER / LEO LIESENBORGH, Bonn 1979 [= Papyrologische Texte und Abhandlungen, vol. 25]; Teil II: Kap. 3-4,12, ed. MICHAEL GRONEWALD, Bonn 1977 [= Papyrologische Texte und Abhandlungen, vol. 22]; Teil III: Kap. 5-6, ed. JOHANNES KRAMER / LUDWIG KOENEN, Bonn 1970 [= Papyrologische Texte und Abhandlungen, vol. 13]; Teil IV: Kap. 7-8,8, ed. JOHANNES KRAMER / BÄRBEL KREBBER, Bonn 1972 [= Papyrologische Texte und Abhandlungen, vol. 16]; Teil V: Kap. 9,8-10,20, ed. MICHAEL GRONEWALD, Bonn 1979 [= Papyrologische Texte und Abhandlungen, vol. 24]; Teil VI: Kap. 11-12, ed. GERHARD BINDER / LEO LIESENBORGH, Bonn 1969 [= Papyrologische Texte und Abhandlungen, vol. 9].

GNE = GREGORY OF NYSSA, *In Ecclesiasten homiliae*, ed. PAULUS ALEXANDER, Leiden 1962 (= *Gregorii Nysseni Opera*, vol. 5).

GTPE = GREGORIOS THAUMATURGOS, *Metaphrasis in Ecclesiasten Salomonis*, in: *Migne Patrologia Graeca* vol. 10, Paris 1857, pp. 988-1017.

HCE = S. EUSEBII HIERONYMI STRIDONENSIS PRESBYTERI, *Commentarius in Ecclesiasten*, in: *Migne Patrologia Latina*, vol. 23, Paris 1883.

QohR = MIDRASH QOHELET RABBAH, Institute for Computers in Jewish Life, and Davka Corporation, 1995, *The CD ROM Judaic classics library*, Chicago, IL: Institute for Computers in Jewish Life.

PJCCE = PSEUDO-JOHN CHRYSOSTOMOS: *Pseudochrysostomi Commentarius in eundem Ecclesiasten*, ed. ALEXANDER LEANZA, Turnhout 1978 (= *Corpus Christianorum Series Graeca*, vol. 4).

TQoh = *The Targum of Qohelet. Translation with Critical Introduction, Apparatus and Notes*, by PETER S. KNOBEL, in: *The Aramaic Bible*, vol. 15, Collegeville, MN 1991.

8 For more information on *QohR*, see LAZAR GRÜNHUT, *Kritische Untersuchung des Midrash Kohenet Rabba*, Berlin 1982; JOHANNES WATCHEN, *Midrasch-Analyse*.

the present version of this Midrash was formed from the 5<sup>th</sup> through the 7<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>9</sup> However, in spite of the fact that the complete version of QohR does not predate the seventh century, its literary traditions are much more ancient.<sup>10</sup> The text of the Midrash was formed as a result of deliberate work of the author or redactor who had at his disposal numerous literary sources. Having borrowed earlier traditions of the Amoraim,<sup>11</sup> the redactor revised them and placed them into a new context. Palestinian Aggadic tradition is the basic source of QohR; on the other hand, there is no doubt that the redactor was also acquainted with the Babylonian tradition.<sup>12</sup> While forming the structure of the Midrash the editor tried to bring division of the text to the conformity with tradition of public reading. The redactor also added prologue, the so-called *petihah*, compiled from the prologues of the sources that were at his disposal. The commentary on Qoh 12: 1–7, for example, is compiled from the prologue of WayR 18 and the *petihah* of EkhaR 23. The redactor's own commentaries and brief interpretations (*derashot*) were also added to QohR.<sup>13</sup> QohR is a consecutive Aggadic exegetical Midrash. It is

---

*Strukturen im Midrasch Qohelet Rabba*, Hildesheim / New York 1978; MENACHEM HIRSHMAN, *Midrash Qohelet Rabbah: Chapters 1-4*, JTS Dissertation, New York 1983 (in Hebrew); REUVEN KIPERWASSER, *Midrashim on Kohelet: Studies in Their Redaction and Formation*, PhD Dissertation, Ramat Gan 2005 (in Hebrew).

- 9 MARC HIRSHMAN, The Greek Fathers and the Aggada on Ecclesiastes. Formats of Exegesis in Late Antiquity, in: *Hebrew Union College Annual* 59 (1988), pp. 137-165, esp. p. 137; ANDREAS VONACH, Der Ton macht die Musik. Vorgaben und Normen der Exegese bei Hieronymus und in der rabbinischen Tradition, in: *Biblische Notizen* 97 (1999), pp. 37-44, esp. p. 37.
- 10 WACHTEN, *Midrasch-Analyze* (n. 8 above), p. 10.
- 11 According to Reuven Kiperwasswer, earlier Amoraic texts included Early Midrash on Qohelet. This text was seriously changed before it got the form that is known today (REUVEN KIPERWASSER, Structure and Form in Kohelet Rabbah as Evidence of Its Redaction, in: *Journal of Jewish Studies* 57,2 (2007), pp. 283-302, esp. p. 284).
- 12 KIPERWASSER, Structure (n. 11 above), p. 284; GÜNTER STEMBERGER, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, Edinburgh 1991, p. 345; *Midrash Rabbah*, vol. 8: *Ecclesiastes*, trans. ABRAHAM COHEN, London 1957 [1983], p. vii; AUGUST WÜNSCHE, *Der Midrasch Kohelet zum ersten Male ins Deutsche übertragen*, Leipzig 1880 [repr. Hildesheim 1967], p. xiv; HIRSHMAN, Greek Fathers and Aggada (n. 9 above), p. 137.
- 13 KIPERWASSER, Structure (n. 11 above), p. 284. Marc Hirshman demonstrated that editors most likely felt free to reduce, add, combine, and transfer the material (MARC HIRSHMAN, Aggadic Midrash, in: SHMUEL SAFRAI and ZEEV SAFRAI ET AL. [eds.], *The Literature of the Sages. Second Part: Midrash, and Targum, Liturgy, Poetry, Mysticism, Contacts, Inscription, Ancient Science and Languages of Rabbinic Literature*, Assen / Philadelphia 2006, pp. 107-132, esp. p. 126).

not a commentary in the literal sense of the word, but rather a compilation of different rabbinic opinions and explanations. The aim of the Midrash is usually not only to explain the sense of the biblical text, but to adapt the text to the contemporary situation and views. QohR sometimes does not explain the words of Qohelet, but uses the text as a means for the exposition of issues that were topical at that time.<sup>14</sup>

Like other Aggadic Midrashim, QohR also includes creative interpretation by using a variety of genres. Thus, one can find in the Midrash tales of the sages and their students, parables (*meshalim*), legends, maxims, poetry, prayers, hyperboles, jokes, discussions about medical, astrological, geographical, biological subjects, folk tales, incantations, words of consolations, messianic hopes, historical documents, and philosophic-theological deliberations.

Among other important Jewish sources of QohR, *Targum Qohelet* (TQoh) should be mentioned that likewise represents the normative rabbinic interpretation of the Book of Qohelet. The great similarity between QohR and TQoh suggests that the two drew on similar sources and were redacted about the same time.<sup>15</sup>

## 2.2. Patristic Sources

Gregory Thaumaturgos (“the wonder-worker”) lived from 213-270 AD, in Neocaesarea, modern Niksar in northern Turkey. Gregory met and became a disciple of Origen at his school in Caesarea Maritima, and most likely finished the paraphrase of Ecclesiastes sometime after returning to Neocaesarea where he became bishop. His Paraphrase of Ecclesiastes is considered the earliest extant Christian version of Ecclesiastes and represents a remarkable piece of re-writing the Septuagint translation.<sup>16</sup>

The commentary on Ecclesiastes of Didymus of Alexandria<sup>17</sup> is one of the five Tura commentaries found in 1941 in a cave not far from Cairo.

---

14 VONACH, Der Ton macht die Musik (n. 9 above), pp. 37-38; SVEND HOLM-NIELSEN, The Book of Ecclesiastes and the Interpretation of It in the Jewish and Christian Theology, in: *Annual of Swedish Theological Institute* 10 (1976), pp- 38-95, esp. p. 79; WÜNSCHE, *Midrasch Kokelet* (n. 12 above), p. xiv.

15 For more details on the connection between TQoh and QohR, see, *Targum of Qohelet* (n. 7 above), pp. 11-15.

16 See also JOHN JARICK, *Gregory Thaumaturgos' Paraphrase of Ecclesiastes*, Melbourne 1990 (= Society of Biblical Literature Septuagint and Cognate Studies Series; vol. 29), pp. 4-6.

17 Only a few studies have been dedicated to Didymus of Alexandria and his work so far: JOHANNES LEIPOLD, *Didymus der Blind von Alexandria*, Leipzig

The discovery of the collection known as “Tura papyri” largely enriched our knowledge of Didymus’ Bible exegesis, theology and also of early Christian educational practices and institutions.<sup>18</sup> In his “school lectures” Didymus focussed on mainly two interpretative issues: the clarification of difficulties that the reader might encounter in the text and the disclosure of the internal meaning of the text. According to Didymus, the aim of the Book of Qohelet is to direct men to the right way to comprehend “heavens.”

The manuscript containing the commentary on Ecclesiastes, which was allegedly composed by John Chrysostom, was discovered in the library of the monastery of St. John the Theologian in Patmos in 1890.<sup>19</sup> The authorship of Chrysostom, however, was questioned mainly because of lack of authentic historical references to the existence of such a work by Chrysostom himself. Irrespective of the disputed authorship, the Greek text of the commentary by and large follows a literal or historical approach to the book that at the same time attests an Antiochene origin of the commentary. While interpreting Ecclesiastes, Chrysostom understands that some people have genuine difficulties with this book and therefore tries to salvage its reputation. Chrysostom argues that the reader has not condemn the sentiments of the book, even if he finds some of them not convincing, but on the contrary take into account the fact that the book “is elevated, highly moral and cultivated, brimming with sound values for what concerns our life.”<sup>20</sup>

The eight homilies on Ecclesiastes of Gregory of Nyssa<sup>21</sup> were most likely composed around 380 AD, shortly before the Council of Constantinople and during the prevalence of heresy in eastern Empire. The evi-

---

1905 [= *Texte und Untersuchungen*, vol. 14,3]; GUSTAVE BARDY, *Didyme l'Aveugle*, Paris 1910 [= *Études de théologie historique*; vol. 1]). Practically all we know about Didymus’ life can already be found in LENAIN DE TILLE-MONT, *Memories pour servir à l'histoire ecclésiastique des six premiers siècles*, vol. X, Brussels, 1730, pp. 135-152).

18 For details about the features of the composition, structure and style of Didymus’ commentary, see DIDYMUS DER BLINDE, *Kommentar zum Ecclesiastes* (Lage 22 und 23 des Tura Papyrus), ed. LEO LIESENBORGH, Köln 1965, pp. 11-16; and DIDYMUS DER BLINDE, *Kommentar zum Ecclesiastes* (Tura Papyrus), ed. GERHARD BINDER and LEO LIESENBORGH, Teil 1.1. Bonn, 1978, pp. x-xii.

19 Manuscript *Patmiacus 161*, which dates back to the 10<sup>th</sup> century, for the first time was examined and copied by Marcel Richard in 1959, and later edited by Alessandro Leanza.

20 Quoted from Chrysostom’s preface to the commentary.

21 For information about the studies on Gregory of Nyssa, see MARGARETE ALTBURGER / FRIEDHELM MANN, *Bibliographie zu Gregory von Nyssa: Editionen – Übersetzungen – Literatur*, Leiden [u. a.] 1988.

dence from the text makes it clear that homilies were addressed to an ecclesial congregation.<sup>22</sup> The homilies represent Gregory's reflections and interpretation only of the first three chapters of the book of Qohelet. Gregory interprets the text according to its spiritual meaning and not the earthly things of which the text speaks. He also suggests that what is written in Ecclesiastes need not have happened literally. Gregory was not really interested in writing classical commentary. He was addressing a congregation in order to acquaint them with the main aim of the book of Qohelet – to distract the human soul from earthly things and to lead it to God.

A highly important and significant work in the history of the development of biblical exegesis is Jerome's commentary on Ecclesiastes – first of all because it is the earliest Latin commentary based on the original Hebrew text. Being aware of the veracity of the Hebrew text, Jerome used all the manuscripts that were available to him. In his commentary, however, Jerome likewise used his own translation as well as the Septuagint and second-century Greek translations, i. e. the translations of Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotion. The commentary dates back to about 389 AD.<sup>23</sup> According to Jerome, one must first understand the text literally – and only then move on to its spiritual interpretation. Like earlier exegetes, Jerome also asserted that Ecclesiastes taught to despise worldly life. The commentary reflects interpretations of Jerome's contemporaries and contains quotes from earlier exegetes. Sometimes Jerome mentions their names (Origen, Appolinarius, Gregory Thaumaturgus, St. Victorinus of Pettau, Lactantius); sometimes he does not reveal the identity of his fellow-commentators by saying "as another one says" or "as another one thinks".<sup>24</sup>

---

22 STUART GEORGE HALL, Introduction. Adjustment to the text of Gregory, in: *Gregory of Nyssa. Homilies on Ecclesiastes, An English Version with Supporting Studies, Proceeding of Seventh International Colloquium on Gregory of Nyssa*, ed. STUART GEORGE HALL, Berlin 1993, p. 1.

23 Some scholars suggest that it was composed later, in the early fifth century (VONACH, *Der Ton macht die Musik* [n. 9 above], p. 41).

24 Jerome mentioned that in addition to the Christian commentator, he was also taught by his Jewish teacher who introduced him into Jewish exegesis; cf. GEORG GRÜTZMACHER, *Hieronymus. Eine Biographische Studie zur alten Kirchengeschichte. Sein Leben und Schriften von 385–400*, 3 Bde, Leipzig / Berlin 1901–1908 [repr. Aaalen 1969 (= Studien zur Geschichte der Theologie und der Kirche; vols. 6,3; 10,1; 10,2), vol. II, p. 54; HOLM-NIELSEN, *The Book of Ecclesiastes and the Interpretation of It in Jewish and Christian Theology* (n. 14 above), p. 72; MARC HIRSHMAN, *A Rivalry of Genius: Jewish and Christian Biblical Interpretation in Late Antiquity*, New York, 1996, p. 105].

### 3. Rabbinic and patristic interpretations of Qoh 2:14-16

#### 3.1 *Qoh 2:14-16*

14 חַכְמָם עִינֵּיו בַּרְאֵשׁוֹ וְהַכְסִיל בְּחַשֵּׁךְ הַוְלֵן וְיַדְעֵתִי גַם-אַנְיִ שְׁמַקְרָה אַחֲרָה יִקְרָה אֶת-כָּלָם : 15 וְאָמַרְתִּי אַנְיִ בְּלֵבִי כְּמַקְרָה הַכְסִיל גַם-אַנְיִ יִקְרָנוּ וְלֹפֶה חַכְמָתִי אַנְיִ אָז יִתְרַ וְדִבְרָתִי בְּלֵבִי שְׁגַם-זֶה הַבָּל : 16 כִּי- אֵין זָכְרוֹן לְחַכְמָם עַמ-הַכְסִיל לְעוֹלָם בְּשֶׁכְרָה הַיָּמִים הַבָּאִים הַכָּל נִשְׁבָּח וְאֵין יִמּוֹת הַחַכְמָם עַמ-הַכְסִיל :

Though convinced that wisdom has advantage ( יתרון ) over folly, Qohelet, nevertheless, concludes that both the wise and the fool have a similar fate ( מקרה ), i. e. death.<sup>25</sup> The word מקרה (“fate”) as a synonym of “unavoidability of death” appears only in Qohelet.<sup>26</sup> Qohelet does not see in wisdom a great gain because the unfairness of death overtakes both the wise and the fool and there will be no remembrance of the wise man. Therefore, even the pursuit of wisdom like all other toil is vanity because the advantage of wisdom ends with the end of human life. Saying that Qohelet holds a view that contradicts conventional wisdom which assures that the wise man enjoys an enduring legacy.<sup>27</sup>

#### 3.2. Rabbinic interpretation

##### 3.2.1. *Midrash Qohelet Rabbah*

Obviously, the rabbis could not challenge the fact that both the wise and fool are mortal. However, in their commentaries on this passage the sages

25 Robert Gordis suggested that in verses 13-14a Qohelet quoted someone else's view and then introduced an emphatic “but I know” in 14b, which contains his own view (ROBERT GORDIS, *Koheleth – the Man and His World: A Study on Ecclesiastes*, New York 1968, pp. 221-222).

26 Those scholars, who suggest that Qohelet was influenced by Hellenism, think that the term מקרה was borrowed from the Greek notion of “fate.” In their view, the concept of “fate” or “chance” was unusual for the Old Testament worldview and occurs in Qohelet only. Other scholars (like e.g. Choon-Leong Seow) deny the presence of Hellenistic influence and argue that Qohelet's concept of fate has a Semitic background. Moreover, in the Septuagint the word is translated with συνάντημα “accident, meeting”, not τύχη “chance”, “fate” (see MARTIN HENGEL, *Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in Their Encounter in Palestine During the Early Hellenistic Period*, Philadelphia, 1981, p. 119; CHOON-LEONG SEOW, *The Anchor Bible. Ecclesiastes. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, New York, 1997, p. 135).

27 See TEMPER LONGMAN, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, Grand Rapids, 1998, p. 99. In the Bible the tragedy of death is smoothed by the idea that one lives on through one's good name (Dtn 25:5-6; Prov 10:7; Sir 38:9-11), Qohelet, however, expresses doubts about this traditional thought.

did not accept Qohelet's pessimistic conclusion and tried to prove that in spite of mortality the wise and righteous man has advantage over the fool and sinner and, therefore, will be remembered by the generations after his death. QohR proves this rabbinic view by the symbolic explanation of Qohelet's words *The wise man's eyes are in his head, but the fool walks in darkness* (2:14). According to the Midrashic interpretation, "the wise man has his eyes in his head because while he is still at the beginning of an enterprise, he knows where it will turn to."<sup>28</sup> A wise man has the end of business in his thought before he began it. The Midrash shows that the word **שָׁבֵן** can also mean "the beginning" and, therefore, it explains the sense of the text. The rabbis also specify that human wisdom is not only the study and knowledge of the Torah but it is applied to practical side of the life as well. By offering such interpretation Midrash in contrast to Qohelet's view argues great differences between the wise and the foolish.

In order to continue and develop the argumentation, QohR resorts to the method of typology and, on the example of some biblical characters, tries to prove the advantage of the wise over the fool. The Midrash does not agree with Qohelet, but argues that only wicked people are forgotten. The rabbis associate the wise man with Abraham, while the fool is represented in the type of Nimrod.<sup>29</sup> QohR shows that both Abraham and Nimrod were kings and both died. Therefore the rabbis decided to ask, if Abraham faced the same fate of death why he must jeopardize his life for sanctification of the name of the Holy One, blessed be He. However, while looking at Abraham's righteousness and wisdom the rabbis conclude that the Patriarch and wicked Nimrod do not have the same "fate." Abraham is remembered by the Children of Israel because when adversity befalls Israel they will cry: *Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Thy servants* (Ex.32:13). At the same time, the nations do not remember Nimrod and his deeds.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, in contrast to Qohelet, the Midrash argues that in spite of human mortality wisdom does not end in the same way ignorance does. The wise and pious man lives in the memory of others forever, while the fool and the sinner do not.

The following rabbinic argumentation is based on the types of Moses / Balaam, and David / Nebuchadnezzar. Both Moses and Balaam were called prophets. However, it was Moses who gave his life to the Torah and would live in memory of Israel, while the wicked Balaam fell into oblivion.

---

28 QohR 2:14.

29 The tradition of BerR 38:13 attest that Nimrod tried to compel Abraham to idolatry.

30 Cf. QohR 2:14.

David built the Temple<sup>31</sup> and his reign lasted for forty years, while the wicked Nebuchadnezzar destroyed it and also reigned forty years. Solomon explains the difference between these two. Solomon said: *Remember the good deeds of David Thy servant* (2 Chr 6:42), while Evil-Merodach (2 Kings 25:27) did not say *Remember the good deeds of Nebuchadnezzar Thy servant*.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, Qohelet's words are applicable only with respect to the fool and wicked person. It is also possible that by offering biblical allusions in the three abovementioned interpretations, the Midrash wishes to place Qohelet in the historical context of the Bible and thus again confirm the unity of the Holy Scripture.

To illustrate the difference between wisdom and ignorance, QohR uses examples taken from everyday life: The wise is one who purchases wheat for three years, while the fool purchases wheat for one year only. The wise man asks himself, why he pawned the furniture of his room to provide food for himself. The Midrash offers a clear and practical answer: "a year of drought may come and the fool shall eat food at great cost, while the wise shall eat it at cheap price."<sup>33</sup> Therefore, the wisdom is connected with practical approach to life and ability to reasonably keep the house.

Concluding the discussion of the unavoidable fate of death, the Midrash applies Qohelet's text to the explanation of vital contemporary situation from rabbinic reality. QohR speaks about the study of the Torah among the rabbis. It opposes a disciple who is diligent in his study with the one who neglects his study. "Each is alike called "rabbi," each is alike a "Sage." However, if there is no remembrance of wise and fool – why the former devoted himself to the study of the Torah?"<sup>34</sup> QohR puts the answer into the mouth of rabbi Hiyya ben Nehemiah: "If a disciple thinks there is no necessity to quote a teaching in the name of his master, his knowledge of Torah will in the future be forgotten."<sup>35</sup> Therefore, the name of every rabbi can live after his death because his disciples remember and quote his teaching.

### 3.2.2. *Targum Qohelet (TQoh)*

The Aramaic translation of this passage in TQoh differs from the biblical text giving each verse a new meaning. In the commentary on Qoh 2:14,

---

31 A. Cohen supposes that the erection of the Temple is attributed to David because he planned it (*Midrash Rabbah. Ecclesiastes*, trans. COHEN [n. 12 above], p. 65, n. 1).

32 Cf. QohR 2:14.

33 QohR 2:14.

34 QohR 2:14.

35 Ibid.

TQoh partly coincides with the Midrash and adds that the wise man must also pray for the world: “*The sage sees at the beginning what will be in the end, and he prays and annuls the evil decrees from the world*, but the fool walks in darkness. And I also know that if the sage does not pray and annul the evil decrees from the world when punishment comes upon the world, one fate will befall all of them”.<sup>36</sup>

Therefore, wisdom surely goes together with piety and virtue; otherwise, there is no advantage from it. TQoh also resorts to historical reality: “*And I said to myself, like the fate of King Saul who went astray in his rebellion and did not keep the commandment which had been commanded concerning Amalek and the kingdom was taken from him* also such will happen to me. Why am I, therefore, wiser than he? And I told myself that also this is vanity *and there is only the decree of the Memra of the Lord*”.<sup>37</sup>

TQoh refers here to the events described in 1 Sam 15. Saul was commanded to kill all the Amalekites. He, however, did not obey God and as a consequence lost his kingdom. Here, TQoh draws a parallel between Saul and Solomon. The Targumic reading concludes that, in contrast to Saul, Solomon was wiser because he realized that observing God’s commandments is all man can, and has to, do. Therefore, TQoh again asserts that wisdom coexists only with virtue and obedience to the will of God.

### 3.3. Patristic interpretation<sup>38</sup>

#### 3.3.1. Gregory Thaumaturgos

While interpreting this fragment Gregory specifies the definition of the wise and the fool. The wise (*σοφός*) is one who chooses goodness (*ἀρετὴν αἱρέω*) whereas the fool (*ἄφρων*) becomes entangled in wickedness.<sup>39</sup> Gregory follows Qohelet’s logic and links wisdom with righteousness, and foolishness with sin and evil. Moreover, in Gregory’s opinion, the eyes of the wise man mean an ability to see everything clearly (*τρανῶς ἔκαστα βλέπω*), even including that what is above (*ἄνω*), while the fool resembles a blind man who wanders about on a moonless night.<sup>40</sup>

---

36 TQoh 2:14 (the English translation is quoted after *The Targum of Qohelet* [n. 7 above]).

37 TQoh 2:15.

38 The interpretations of the passage Qoh 2:14-16 are found in the commentaries on Qohelet of all the Church Fathers mentioned above, except for the commentary of John Chrysostom.

39 GTPE 2:14.

40 John Jarick notes that Gregory may be implying that the foolish man looks only at what is under the sun (*ὑπὸ τὸν ἥλιον*), while the wise person also looks

Similar to biblical text, Gregory's paraphrase is also represented in the form of monologue of the author about his life and experience. However, Gregory divides Qohelet's experience into two stages, i.e. before and after Ecclesiastes reached the wisdom and knowledge. Thus, in the case of the paraphrase of the verses 2:14-16, Gregory asserts that there was a time when Solomon was not a wise as he later became and thought that the same reward (*έπιχειρα*) which the fool receives was received by him as well.

Then Gregory completely paraphrases the text in contradiction to Qohelet's judgment.<sup>41</sup> Thus, according to Gregory, "a wise person and a foolish person have nothing in common (*κοινὸν οὐδέν* in contrast to LXX's *μετά*), neither in terms of human remembrance nor in terms of divine recompense."<sup>42</sup> Gregory also does not agree with Qohelet that everything will be forgotten and understands *τὰ πάντα* with regard to the human works only.

### 3.3.2. *Didymus*

Didymus' school lectures contain an interpretation of the verse 2:14 only. The exegete affirms that wisdom has no connection with folly and, therefore, the wise man has advantage over the fool. Didymus' understanding of wisdom here is based on Paul's concept of the inward man (*ὁ ἔσω ἄνθρωπος*): *The wise man who has eyes in his head is inward man* (Rom. 7:22).<sup>43</sup> In Didymus' view, it is easier to explain the folly and the nature of a foolish man, who walks in darkness, in the context of John 3:19f (*and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil*).<sup>44</sup> Therefore, according to Didymus, these New Testament words prove that wisdom is a complete opposite to folly like light is opposite to darkness. The Church Father offers an allusion to Christ who is *the head of every man* (1 Cor 11:3).<sup>45</sup> Thus, by suggesting this reading of Qohelet's words, Didymus makes his listen-

---

ăvω. One can also draw a parallel with Proverbs 17:24 *Wisdom is in the sight of him who has understanding, But the eyes of a fool are on the ends of the earth* (JARICK, *Gregory Thaumaturgos' Paraphrase of Ecclesiastes* [n. 16 above], p. 41).

41 Jarick asserts that in his paraphrasing of the Biblical text Gregory did not consciously contradict Qohelet. Gregory simply looked for an interpretation of Qohelet's words which did not contradict the rest of the Scripture. Solomon, for example, can not express an opposite view to what he had written in "his" proverbs (Prov 10:27ff), see JARICK, *Gregory Thaumaturgos' Paraphrase of Ecclesiastes* (n. 16 above), p. 44.

42 GTPE 2:16.

43 EccT 48:21-22.

44 EccT 47:29-48:3.

45 EccT 48:23-26.

ers understand that wisdom without faith and obedience to Christ is empty. In spite of the absence of the interpretation of Qohelet's verses that follow after 2:14, one can suppose that Didymus also wanted to make a distinction between the fate of the wise and the fool.

### 3.3.3. *Gregory of Nyssa*

Gregory interprets the fragment under discussion (Qoh 2:14-16) in the context of the larger passage (2:14-26) which he understands as a debate between a fool and a wise man. The author presents his arguments from both sides as if he were himself the speaker in each case. However, Qohelet's own position belongs to the wise man. The homilies present the verses 2:14f as an objection of the fool man to the virtuous life. Since every life, both virtuous and sinful, ends with death, there is no difference between the righteous and the wicked. Gregory makes it clear that the fool's position is an erroneous conclusion and focuses on the advantage of the wise over the fool. Thus, Gregory suggests that Qohelet's expression "*The wise man's eyes are in his head, but the fool walks in darkness*" refers to the highest and lower parts of the soul.<sup>46</sup> "As in the bodily conformation the part which projects from the rest is called a head, so in the soul the leading and foremost part is presumed to act as a head."<sup>47</sup> One who has his eyes in this rational part of the soul is able to see above. The fool man, on the contrary, follows sensitive and appetitive faculties of his soul and becomes a body-loving and fleshlike thing (358:17). Therefore, the wise man has his eyes in the head of his soul, while the eyes of the fool are transferred to his heels. He is only able to see things which are located below (357:16-17) through the heels of the soul. As a result, he sees nothing as if he were in complete darkness.

In addition, Gregory also offers Christological interpretation of Qohelet. While quoting 1 Cor 11:3 he affirms that Christ is the head of everyone. The "one who is in light can not see darkness; therefore, the one who has his eye in Christ cannot fix it on anything futile" (357:25-26).

---

46 Gregory's views of the soul were Platonic; he tried to express them through the Biblical language. Thus, Gregory compares the division of the soul into the rational, appetitive and spirited faculties with the lintel supported by the two door posts of the Israelite's homes in Egypt. The soul should be always under the control of the rational faculty, on the other case the result is chaos and destruction. For more details see, RONALD E. HEINE, Exegesis and Theology in Gregory of Nyssa's Fifth Homily on Ecclesiastes, in: STUART G HALL (ed.), *Gregory of Nyssa, Homilies on Ecclesiastes. An English Version with Supporting Studies*, Berlin 2012, pp. 197-222, esp. pp. 214-217.

47 GNE 357:9-11.

Thus, the verse 2:16 in Gregory's interpretation is a response of wise man to the fool's arguments. When speaking about the common fate of death for the wise and the fool Gregory bases his interpretation on Septuagint's reading (έγώ τότε περισσὸν ἔλαλησα ἐν καρδίᾳ μου, διότι ἀφρων ἐκ περισσεύματος λαλεῖ) that adds several words to the Hebrew text and to some extent changes the meaning of Qohelet's words. Gregory argues that Qohelet indeed "condemns his objection as superfluous and illogical, and calls the argument foolish, because it is not from the treasuries of wisdom" (362:22-365:1-2). Gregory concludes that citing the words without sense is futile activity (365:4).

When speaking about the memory of the wise and the fool, Gregory, as well as other Church Fathers, argue that the memory of the wise lives forever and lasts as long as eternity, while remembrance of the fool disappears with him. By drawing a parallel between Qohelet and Psalm 9:6 (*Their memory has perished*) the exegete suggests that the life of the wise endures through the memory, while oblivion embraces the fool.<sup>48</sup>

### 3.3.4. Jerome

Jerome presents the interpretation of this passage in the form of a monologue. Qohelet asks himself a rhetorical question concerning the similarity between the mortality of the wise and that of the fool. His answer suggests that in spite of the inevitable death, the fates of the wise and the fool in the afterlife are completely different. In Jerome's opinion, Qohelet is "the messenger of the Gospel" and therefore the words of his book have mostly christological meaning. In his interpretation of the verse 2:14 Jerome (like Didymus and Gregory of Nyssa) sees in Qohelet's text an allusion to Christ as the head of each man: "One who will become perfect will have Christ as his head and will turn his eyes to Christ, i.e. to heavenly and not to earthly."<sup>49</sup>

When speaking about the common fate of the death Jerome, as well as previous patristic interpretation, agrees with Septuagint's reading. This means that when speaking about similar fate of wise and fool, Qohelet recognizes that his previous opinion is unreasonable. Qohelet understood that he was mistaken and his view was vain because "the end of wise and fool will not be similar: the first will receive reward and the other will receive punishment."<sup>50</sup>

---

48 GNE 365:13-366:2.

49 HCE 1083ab.

50 HCE 1083c.

#### 4. Rabbinic and patristic interpretations of Qoh 3:18-21

##### 4.1. *Qoh 3:18-21*

18 אָמַרְתִּי אָנָּי בְּלֹבִי עַל-דְּבָרַת בְּנֵי הָאָדָם לְבָרָם הָאֱלֹהִים וְלִרְאֹות שְׁהָם-בָּהָמָה הַפָּה לָהֶם : 19 כִּי- מִקְרָה בְּנֵי-הָאָדָם וּמִקְרָה הַבָּהָמָה וּמִקְרָה אֶחָד לָהֶם כִּמְוֹת זֶה בֶן מוֹת זֶה וּרוֹם אֶחָד לְכָל וּמוֹתָר הָאָדָם מִן-הַבָּהָמָה אֵין כִּי הַכָּל הַכָּל : 20 הַכָּל הַזָּל אֶל-מִקּוּם אֶחָד הַכָּל הַזָּה מִן-הַעֲפָר וּהַכָּל שֶׁב אֶל-הַעֲפָר : 21 מַיִּזְעָד רֹוח בְּנֵי הָאָדָם הַעֲלָה הִיא לְמַעַלָּה וּרוֹם הַבָּהָמָה הַיְּרָאָת הִיא לְמַטָּה לְאָרֶץ :

In this passage Qohelet (further) develops the idea of unfairness of death (expressed in the term **מִקְרָה**) and, this time, his conclusion is more critical and contradictory. In his opinion, both man and beast have the same fate (death), therefore, they are similar sharing the same breath. Qohelet argues that God tests (לברם)<sup>51</sup> the children of man and shows them that they are part of the animal world. At this point, Qohelet contradicts Ps 8:5f that “man is a little lower than angels (heavenly beings)”, but at the same time he follows Ps 49:13 that “man is like the beasts that perish”. In the verses 3:19-20 Qohelet mentions parameters of similarity of human and beasts: they have one “fate – death” and they share the same “breath of life”. Qohelet bases his consideration on the creation story in Gen 2:7 (cf. Ps 104:29-30; Job 34:14-15) according to which God formed man from the dust of the earth and breathes the breath of life into him. However, Qohelet’s comparison of man with beast contradicts to Gen 1:26 and Ps 8:6-8 that human beings are given power over the animal world. Concluding his thought Qohelet casts doubts on the possibility of afterlife (v. 21). It is difficult to determine Qohelet’s conception of afterlife because he does not give any

51 The verb **לברם** is normally translated as “to separate” or “to select” (in LXX διακρίνει); Vg and Targum interpret it as “to test”. In other passages in the Old Testament (Neh 5:18, Ez 20:38; Dan 11:35) *brr* means “to separate, choose, select, purify”. However, the precise meaning of divine purpose expressed in this verb remain unclear and ambiguous. If *brr* means “separate”, then Qohelet may be referring to the distinction between humans and beasts, that he will deny in the following verses. The separation could be ironic, since there is no distinction. The context indicates that God does not need to implement such a test or selection, but rather that his intention is to help humanity see that it share with the rest of creation a common fate, death. Therefore “to test” can mean here the testing by death, since both humans and animals die. The death is the key factor in the divine plan. See: GRAHAM S. OGDEN, *Qohelet. Readings: A new Biblical Commentary*, Sheffeld 1987, p. 60; LONG-MAN, *The Book of Ecclesiastes* (n. 27 above), pp. 128-129; ROLAND E. MURPHY, *Ecclesiastes*, Dallas 1992 (= Word biblical commentary; vol. 23A), pp. 36-37.

clarification of “upwards” and “downwards”. He is familiar with the idea of *Sheol* (9:10), and his conclusion drawn from these verses are in contradiction with 12:7 where Qohelet argues that human *רוּחַ* (spirit) returns to God.<sup>52</sup>

#### 4.2. Rabbinic interpretation

##### 4.2.1 Midrash Qohelet Rabbah (QohR)

QohR offers symbolic interpretation of this passage and at the same time changes the primary meaning of the biblical text. The Midrash does not agree with Qohelet that all men are beasts and, therefore, compares only wicked men with animals. According to rabbinic view, Qohelet speaks about the manner in which the wicked conduct their lives in this world: “They revile and blaspheme in this world. However, in the same way that a beast is condemned to death and does not enter the life of the World to Come, so are the wicked condemned to the death like a beast and do not enter the World to Come.”<sup>53</sup> Thus, here the Midrash, in contrast to Qohelet, confirms that only righteous, who does not sin, receives life in the hereafter and immortality.<sup>54</sup>

In the next interpretation the comparison with the beast has a positive connotation. First, the *sons of men* refer to the righteous; the manner in which they conduct themselves in this world is privation, fasting, and sufferings. The righteous should recognize and demonstrate to the peoples of the world how Israel is drawn after God like a beast which follows its owner, as it is said *You are My flock, the flock of My pasture; you are men, and I am your God, says the Lord God* (Ez 34:31). Seeing Israel as the beast, sheep of God, the Midrash negates disparagement of humanity expressed by Qohelet.

Continuing the optimistic reading of Qohelet’s words, the Midrash tries to see some similarity between humans and animals because both are creatures of God. In order to demonstrate this similarity, QohR quotes God’s decrees in Lev 12:3 and Lev 22:27: “Just as human males are to be circumcised on the eighth day, so too also animals are offered only after eight days of life.”<sup>55</sup> This interpretation does not disparage humans, but demonstrates that humans are also a part of God’s creation that live in accordance to His commandments.

---

52 Qohelet obviously tries to reject a contemporary view of distinction between humans and animal. This may have been a popular expression of Platonizing belief in the immortality of the soul known to Qohelet.

53 QohR 3:18f.

54 There is a parallel idea in BerR 8:11 – “God creates man with something of the nature of nature of angels and animals. If he sins he will die like beasts. If he does not sin he will live like angels”.

55 QohR 3:18f.

However, at the end of the interpretation, the Midrash comes back to the idea of the difference between a man and a beast. God ordained burial, coffin and shrouds for man, but did not do it for animals. Therefore, in contrast to Qohelet, the Midrash argues that humans are not similar to beasts, and their deaths are different. Man's superiority over the animals consists in the manner of disposing the body after death. When speaking about Qohelet's doubts concerning afterlife, the Midrash again symbolically refers to the different fate of the righteous and the wicked comparing the latter with the beast. Thus QohR argues that the souls of the righteous are placed in the heavenly treasury, while the souls of the wicked are rejected and scattered about on earth.<sup>56</sup> Thus, QohR completely rejects Qohelet's generalization and pessimistic comparison of the all humans with the beasts. By offering such interpretation, the rabbis apparently wanted to demonstrate that the man could become like the beast when he follows the evil and sin.

#### 4.2.2 *Targum Qohelet (TQoh)*

The reading of the Targum is similar to the abovementioned Midrashic interpretations: “For the fate of guilty people and the fate of the unclean beast is the same for all of them. And as an unclean beast dies, so the one dies who does not turn in repentance before his death. And the breath of life of both of them is judged alike in all respects. And as to the superiority of a guilty man over the unclean beast, there is no distinction between the one and the other except the burial place”.<sup>57</sup> Similarly to QohR and BerR, TQoh also claims that the wicked man is like a beast, because his sins do not allow him to enter the afterworld. However, in contrast to the beasts, even a guilty man is buried after the death.

### 4.3. Patristic interpretation

#### 4.3.1. *Gregory Thaumaturgos*

While paraphrasing Qohelet's words, Gregory argues that the real difference between man and beast is the gift of speaking (the articulation of the voice, ὁ ἔναρθρος τῆς φωνῆς).<sup>58</sup> This paraphrase was apparently influenced by the literal translation of the Septuagint rendering the Hebrew **עַל-דְּבָרֹת** into Greek **περὶ λαλιᾶς**. Gregory's interpretation in fact does not change the meaning of Qohelet's statement. Gregory agrees that man and other living beings (ζῷα in contrast to LXX's κτήνη “animals”) have a common fate, i. e. death, because they share the same breath of life (πνεῦμα). Moreover, they both were created from the same earth (dust of the earth) and they will

---

56 QohR 3:21.

57 TQoh 3:18f.

58 GTPE 3:18.

return to the same earth.<sup>59</sup> By mentioning earth (*γῆ*) instead of LXX's *χοῦς* (dust), Gregory probably alludes to the Septuagint's translation of Gen 3:19 (*you are earth (*γῆ*) and to earth you shall return*). However, by paraphrasing the verse 3:21 Gregory makes a distinction between human beings and animals. According to him it is not certain whether the *soul* or *spirit* (*ψυχή*) of man goes upward and whether the *spirit* of the speechless others (*ἄλογα*), the *spirit* of the beast goes down into the earth. Gregory's interpretation does not say that the human beings after death will go to the heavens, and the animals will not. Understanding that the afterlife is unknown, the exegete, however, suggests that human beings have an advantage over the animals, because there are souls in them, while the dumb creatures possess only the breath of life.

#### 4.3.2. John Chrysostom

John Chrysostom's interpretation is largely similar to that of the rabbis. In Qohelet's comparison of human beings with animals John Chrysostom sees an allusion to certain types of people. These people find fault with God, claim that He is unjust and does not exercise providence.<sup>60</sup> In the exegete's opinion such people do not differ from animals. Therefore, John Chrysostom explains Qohelet's words concerning the common fate literally: both human beings and animals have one body, one formation and one common death.<sup>61</sup> The commentator understands Qohelet's doubt about the hereafter in the context of the concept of resurrection. Thus, Chrysostom ascribes Qohelet's view to the abovementioned type of people who reject the idea of resurrection, too. However, according to his reading of Qohelet, the author of the book personally was not in that position.

#### 4.3.3. Didymus

Qohelet's comparison of the children of man with animals motivates Didymus to start a discussion about the similarity of human nature with angels and animals. The animals are mortal and unreasoning beings (*ζῷα θνητὰ ἄλογα*; cf. 2 Ptr 2,12), while the angels are immortal and reasonable (*ζῷα λογικά*). Thus, both the nature of angels and the nature of animals are united in a man.<sup>62</sup> It is interesting that Didymus' thought has a parallel in the abovementioned phrase in BerR 8:11: God created "man of the upper and of the lower elements", so that "he will partake of the character of the celestial beings and of the nature of the terrestrial ones".

---

59 GTPE 3:19f.

60 PJCCE 3:18.

61 PJCCE 3:19.

62 Cf. EccT 99:1-4.

Didymus further demonstrates his listeners / readers the differences between human beings and animals. Like Gregory Thaumaturgos, Didymus first explains that in contrast to human beings “animals have no articulated voice to describe some thoughts and things.”<sup>63</sup> Then he states that the human soul can become perfect and similar to God as opposed to the “soul” of the unreasoning beings.<sup>64</sup> Here Didymus was most probably influenced by Plato.<sup>65</sup> In Didymus’ opinion, by sharing similar fate that happens to the children of man and animals alike, Qohelet means only the death of body and does not speak about reason.<sup>66</sup> Didymus deviates from the literal meaning of Qohelet’s text and affirms that man, similarly to angels, can go to heaven and stay there or, on the contrary, do down and be condemned. This, however, does not happen to animals:<sup>67</sup> “When a man dies, his soul separates from the body and continues his existence. The death of animals, however, destroys the soul together with the flesh”.<sup>68</sup> Thus, offering this interpretation Didymus casts away Qohelet’s doubts about the afterlife of human soul and further notices that Qohelet speaks only about the breath ( $\sigmaωματικώτερον πνεῦμα$ ) that is common to men and animals. There is no allusion here to the soul, mind and / or spirit.<sup>69</sup> With regard to the physical condition, man does not have advantage over animals because both men and animals see, hear, feel, taste, and smell.<sup>70</sup> However, the similar fate of death happening to human beings and beasts alike as mentioned by Qohelet does not mean that death destroys a man and turns him into nothing.

#### 4.3.4. Jerome

Similarly to the aforementioned patristic commentators, Jerome too reinterprets Qohelet’s text and demonstrates the difference between human beings and animals. Jerome begins with a literal interpretation and speaks about man’s capacity of speech and the silence of the animals.<sup>71</sup> However, frailty of the flesh and mortality make equal both man and beast. Then Jerome specifies that while discussing the similarity of death of man and animal, Qohelet does not mention the soul. The author of the book

---

63 EccT 98:14-16.

64 EccT 99:7.

65 See, PLATO, *Theaitetos*, 1768.

66 Cf. EccT 99:15.

67 Cf. EccT 99:26-28.

68 EccT 100:20-23.

69 Cf. EccT 100:26-28.

70 Cf. EccT 102:8-9.

71 HCE 1095b.

speaks only about the flesh that is created from the earth and will go back to the earth.<sup>72</sup> Qohelet does not suggest that there is no difference between man and beast regarding the nature of the soul. On the contrary, Qohelet as a man of Church, educated by heavenly teaching, proclaimed that *the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of animal goes down to the earth*.<sup>73</sup>

As well as other commentators, here Jerome also explains the biblical text in the light of Christian teaching and underlines Ecclesiastes' image as the type of Christ. Thus, in Jerome's opinion, Qohelet said that after death both the people and animals went in the same place because before coming of Christ all beings had been sent to hell.<sup>74</sup> Jerome concludes his interpretation by anagogical reading. He demonstrates that all the prophets said that in Jerusalem of Heaven all men and beast will be saved, and the Promised Land is full of herds of animals.<sup>75</sup> Therefore, in the plan of salvation both people and animals are likewise included.

## 5. Rabbinic and patristic interpretations of Qoh 9:2

### 5.1 *Qoh 9:2*

הַכֹּל פָּאֵשׁ רַלְכָל מִקְרָה אֶחָד לְאָצִיק וְלַרְשָׁע לְטוֹב וְלַחֲזָר וְלַזְבָּח וְלַאֲשָׁר אַיִּנְגָּנִי זְבָח  
כְּטוֹב כְּחַטָּא הַגְּשָׁבָע כְּאֵשָׁר שְׁבֹועָה יְרָא:

Qohelet once again takes up the issue of “fate” (מִקְרָה) of death, *happening to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil*, and making equal them both, the righteous and the wicked. Qohelet's conception of righteousness is fully based on a religious background. The righteous and good man is one who is clean, who sacrifices, does not sin and keeps his promises on a high level. The wicked is one who does not observe the laws of the ritual and *shuns an oath*. However in the face of death both the righteous and wicked are similar. Qohelet ponders the unfairness of the death from the perspective of retribution. The way to death and hell is understood in the Old Testament as the fate of sinners and fools (cf. Prov 2:18; 5:5; 7:27), but Qohelet considers the death a common destiny of wise and fools, good and wicked, human beings and beasts alike, and doubts any reward in the world to come.

### 5.2 Rabbinic interpretation

---

72 Cf. HCE 1095b.

73 Cf. HCE 1095d.

74 Cf. HCE 1095c.

75 Cf. HCE 1096a.

### 5.2.1 *Midrash Qohelet Rabbah (QohR)*

In contrast to previous interpretations, the Midrash does not juxtapose Qohelet's opinion and does not explain why the righteous suffers the same fate as the wicked. QohR simply mentions some biblical types of righteous and wicked people who met the same fate. This Midrashic reading to some extent contradicts the opinion of rabbinic sages that the righteous receives reward from God while the wicked is punished by Him. However, when speaking about reward and punishment, the rabbis mean that they will happen only in the world to come. Therefore, QohR does not see in Qohelet's verse a reference to the similar fate of the righteous and the wicked in the world hereafter, but describes the possibility that the same end happens to both in this human world.

QohR associates the righteous with Noah who came out of the ark and a lion attacked him so that he limped. The wicked, in rabbis' opinion, is Pharaoh who came to sit upon Solomon's throne,<sup>76</sup> but did not understand its mechanism, and a lion attacked him and injured him so that he limped. Both Noah and Pharaoh died with a limp; therefore the same happens to the righteous and the wicked.<sup>77</sup> The Midrash also mentions biblical types corresponding to Qohelet's religious definition of good and wicked. Thus, the good is associated with Moses, who was goodly child (Ex. 2:2) because he was circumcised. The clean, mentioned by Qohelet, according to the rabbis' opinion alludes to Aaron because he was concerned with the purity of Israel. The unclean refers to the spies who delivered an evil report about the land. However, the same fate happens to the spies and Moses and Aaron: both did not enter the Land. By offering this interpretation QohR does not take into account the biblical fact (Num. 20) that Moses and Aaron were not allowed to enter the Land because they rebelled against the word of God at the waters of Meribah. Therefore, QohR does not interpret Qohelet's words as a reference to the fate of death, but implies that in spite of religious chastity and virtues the same unsuccessful outcome can happen to the righteous and the sinner alike.

### 5.2.2 *Targum Qohelet (TQoh)*

---

<sup>76</sup> This interpretation is based on 1 Kings 3:1 “Now Solomon made a treaty with Pharaoh king of Egypt, and married Pharaoh's daughter”. The Midrash (WayR 20:1), adds that this Pharaoh was Necho.

<sup>77</sup> Cf. QohR 9:2.

TQoh makes the following statement: “All depends upon providence and from Heaven is decreed what will happen. The same fate belongs to the innocent and the guilty, to him whose ways are upright and to him who makes himself pure and to him who makes himself impure and does not offer a sacrifice of holy things alike are the good and the sinner, alike are the man who swears falsely and the man who fears an oath”.<sup>78</sup>

TQoh agrees with Qohelet that there is the same fate of the righteous and the wicked. However, it is clear that by the fate the Targum means not only the death but the whole human existence including its end and afterlife. The very centre of the interpretation of the Targum is the idea of providence (*mazal*) introduced already in the preceding verse 9:1: *Everything is decreed by providence*. In the Targum it is God who determines *mazal* that is a reward given to the righteous. However, *mazal* is used also to describe an inescapable fate. Man cannot change his fate. The Targum usually uses this term to discuss the suffering of the righteous and the wellbeing of the wicked.<sup>79</sup>

### 5.3. Patristic interpretation

#### 5.3.1. Gregory Thaumaturgos

In contrast to Qohelet, who argues that there is one fate for both the righteous and the wicked, Gregory Thaumaturgos specifies in his paraphrase that “there seems to be one end.”<sup>80</sup> Gregory renders Qohelet’s מִרְאָה (fate) into τέλος (end) and doubts that the ends (deaths) of different people may be similar. For Gregory, the view that all people come to the one end is low or false opinion (κατάγγοσις).<sup>81</sup> According to Gregory’s interpretation, Qohelet himself does not share this false opinion, but on the contrary condemns those “who assert that the person who is dead is completely gone” (9:3).

#### 5.3.2. John Chrysostom

---

78 TQoh 9:2.

79 Etan Levine suggests that “the mutually contradictory posture of the Targum toward *mazal* is a faithful representation of the situation obtaining with the Pharisaic-Rabbinic tradition as a whole... The *mazal* elements in the Targum testify that Pharisaic-Rabbinic tradition did not eradicate the grip of astrology on the popular mind” (ETAN LEVINE, *The Aramaic Version of Qohelet*, New York 1978, pp. 75-76).

80 GTPE 9:2.

81 In his interpretation of the verse 9:3 Gregory touches upon the theme of common fate and sees in Qohelet’s words “the hearts of the sons of men are full of evil” an allusion to the false opinion (cf. GTPE 9:3).

According to the interpretation of John Chrysostom, Qohelet's view expressed in verse 9:2 differs from the biblical text and has a rather moralistic and pedagogic character. While speaking about the same fate of death happening to the righteous and the wicked alike, Chrysostom's Qohelet does not demonstrate the unfairness of death, but opposes those who have this false and pessimistic opinion.<sup>82</sup> Qohelet realizes that "death is bad, wretched, heavy punishment and severe retribution".<sup>83</sup> All people are liable to death, no matter if one is righteous and the other wicked. However, the Qohelet's main message is that the wise should "not take pride in virtue because he will die". And the wicked should "not persist in vice", because he also is mortal. In this way Qohelet "recommends for his readers moderation" arguing that Qohelet, on the contrary, is saying how good life is and how bad death is. Therefore, the God-fearing will live. Thus, Chrysostom turns Qohelet's emphasis on the inevitability of death of both the righteous and the wicked into a quest for eternal life in God.

### 5.3.3. Jerome

Similarly to John Chrysostom's interpretation, Jerome also offers different views on the same issue. Thus, "in the opinion of the sage of this world (*sapientibus saeculi*) this fact of the same death is neither good nor bad but average because the fate of the end overtakes all people."<sup>84</sup> On the other hand, unsophisticated people think that there is no Divine justice and they know neither the love of God, nor His anger. However, Jerome explains that according to the spiritual meaning of the text all definitions of the righteous and his antipodes mentioned by Qohelet in this verse refer to the spiritual virtue and degradation.<sup>85</sup> Therefore, Jerome interprets the phrase *one who sacrifices* as a broken and contrite spirit and heart (cf. Ps 51:19). Generally speaking, Jerome's reading of this verse finds support in his interpretation of Qoh 9:4-6 where the Church Father maintains that it is in this life that "everyone can become a righteous while after death there will be no possibility to do good things".<sup>86</sup> This is the reason why Jerome's Qohelet gives his readers the moral advice not to grieve over the same inevitable death, but to perfect him-/herself in virtue.

---

82 Cf. PJCE 9:2.

83 Ibid.

84 HCE 1135c.

85 Cf. HCE 1135cd.

86 HCE 1136c.

## 6. Conclusion

Using rabbinic and patristic interpretations of several verses from the book of Qohelet as an example, this article demonstrates how Jewish and Christian exegetes explained dogmatically disputable subjects by resorting to rewriting (reinterpreting) Qohelet's text. Both rabbinic and patristic authors modified, amplified, and "revised" the text of the book of Qohelet, thus making it more relevant or acceptable to their listeners or readers. The sources examined here come from different contexts and reflect distinct exegetical approaches. The apparent differences between the rabbinic and patristic interpretations of Qohelet should be explained first of all by the fact that each tradition based its exegetical methodology on its religious and ideological background. However, in spite of the obvious dissimilarity of rabbinic and patristic texts, there are notable common tendencies in their (re-)reading of Qohelet.

The examination of the rabbinic and patristic interpretations of Qoh 2:14-16, 3:18-21, and 9:2 allows to trace the following common exegetical approaches and conclusions between the two schools of Biblical exegesis. It is evident that in contrast to Qohelet, both rabbinic and patristic exegetes emphasized the distinction and difference between the wise / righteous / human beings and the fools / wicked / beasts and their fate. These differentiation and opposition are carried out both in rabbinic and patristic sources by way of clarification or negation of Qohelet's generalizations, doubts and pessimistic statements. The fragments of the interpretations mentioned above show that the rabbis mostly re-interpret Qohelet's text in the light of the ethical teaching of the Torah, while the Church Fathers re-write and spiritualize the text in the light of the Gospel.

In response to Qohelet's conclusion that the wise man has no remembrance after his death, the rabbis used examples from the holy history and stated that the wise and righteous man (like the patriarchs and prophets) will live after his death in the memory of others, while the fool and sinner will not. According to the Church Fathers, the end of the wise and the end of the fool is likewise not the same because the former will receive Divine reward, while the latter will suffer Divine punishment.

Both rabbinic and patristic sources discover in Qohelet's comparison of human beings with beasts an allusion to certain types of people. The rabbis symbolically compare the wicked man with the beast, while Gregory Thaumaturgos and John Chrysostom maintain that Qohelet in his comparison alludes to the fool and the one who doubts. In their opinion, only the sceptic, one who holds an erroneous opinion, is a fool and, therefore, similar to a beast.

In the eyes of both the rabbis and the Church Fathers the complete equalization of human beings and beasts is wrong, and the assertion about the sameness of their deaths is decadent and contains an earthly view. Therefore, in order to harmonize Qohelet's words, both the Jewish and Christian exegetes decided to explain the text by looking at it from its spiritual perspective. Thus, the rabbis made clear that only the wicked, who are similar to the beast, are condemned to death and will not enter the World to Come. In the Church Fathers' opinion, human beings and beasts are similar with respect to their body and their breath of life. The gift of speech, however, and the soul raise the human beings over the animals.

In addition to similarities, there are noticeable principle differences between the rabbinic and Christian approaches and interpretations of Qohelet's text. As has been mentioned, the main differences between these two traditions of Biblical exegesis consist first of all in their respective distinct religious and ideological perspectives. Having analysed selected passages from Qohelet's book, we can conclude that patristic commentators, in contrast to the rabbis, paid more attention to the image of the author of the book. The Church Fathers insisted that when speaking about the similar fate of the wise / righteous / human beings and the fool / wicked / animals, Qohelet recognized his earlier opinion to be unreasonable; as a consequence, Qohelet did not share this false opinion, but resorted to the distinction between the two categories. Therefore, according to the patristic interpretation, Qohelet's message has a spiritual and moral character and purpose. The rabbis, on the other hand, read Qohelet in the context of other books of the TaNaKh and practically did not pay attention to the personal experience of the author of the book. In the case of Qoh 9:2, rabbinic sources did not draw a distinction between the righteous and the wicked. They were inclined to understand Qohelet's words as a reference not only to the death, but generally to the similar fate that happens to both the righteous and the wicked. Conversely, the Church Fathers were more interested in the theme of death and retribution, reward and punishment, and, therefore, emphasized meaning and role of virtue in human fate in the afterlife.

Thus, the examination of the rabbinic and patristic interpretations of the selected verses demonstrates how both Jewish and Christian exegetes made the book of Qohelet acceptable to their respective religious traditions and dispelled the doubts about its canonicity. In order to achieve this, both the rabbis and the Church Fathers resorted to harmonization and re-writing of Qohelet.