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

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

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

* This research was carried out thanks to the funding of the Russian Science Foundation (project №15-18-00062-П; Saint-Petersburg State University).
The author of the Book of Ecclesiastes¹, contrasting in its final part the joy of young years with the sad years of old age and portraying the bitterness of the latter in a series of depressing metaphors (Eccl. 11:7–12:5a), completes his work with some allegories (Eccl. 12:5b–7), revealing of the meaning and logic of which causes great difficulties, as well as the textual interpretation of this passage itself.² In our translation the text of Eccl. 12:5b–7 runs as follows:

5b. The almond tree blossomed⁵;
the locust (tree? — I. T.) became loaded;
and the caper bush fell (scil., lost its foliage. — I. T.)⁶ —
then man⁥ goes to his eternal home.
And (hired) mourners will go about the street-bazaar
6. until the silver cord breaks;
and the golden bowl will crack,
the jar will be broken at/over the spring,
and the vessel will split at/over the well.
7. And dust will return to the earth as it was,
and the spirit will return to God who gave it.

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

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

³ Masoretic vocalization wĕyānē’ṣ in accordance with Qere: wĕyānēṣ, assuming nṣṣ, “to blossom”; this reading is supported by the Septuagint, Syro-Hexaplar version, Peshitta, and Vulgate.

⁴ On this interpretation see below.

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

⁶ The term hā-‘āḏām can be interpreted in this passage as “the human”, “humanity”, as well. Cf.: Ecc. 1:4a.

⁷ On this interpretation see: n. 26.

⁸ See, e. g.: Moldenke 1954, 35; Zohary 1982, 66.
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Almond blossoms only until the middle of March. Its fruits (used in antiquity for food, for making oils, in the production of cosmetics, perfumes, in medicine, in embalming, etc.) mature for a long time, until September. (Cf., e.g., The Proverbs of Ahikar 2:7 (Syr. A): "My son, be not in a hurry, like the almond-tree whose blossom is the first to appear, but whose fruit is the last to be eaten...") Therefore, even if one admits the unlikely interpretation "the almond tree blossoms (will) fall", etc., this can’t at all be an allegory of the proximity of a person’s demise — rather, as an indication of an important stage in the process of his maturation on the way to manhood.

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

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

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9 Cf. the play of words šāqēḏ and šōqēḏ, "vigilant", in Jer. 1:11–12.
10 See, e.g.: Seow 1997, 379.
11 See, e.g.: Gen. 43:11.
12 Cf. Num. 17:23[8]: "...Moses entered into the Tabernacle of Testimony, and behold, Aaron’s rod waxed bloomed <...>: buds came out, flowers blossomed, and the fruits of almond (šēqēḏîm) ripened".
14 See further below.
15 On the origination of man cf.: Eccl. 11:5a.
mating, the male suspends the spermatophore (consisting of a main part, a "vial" containing spermatozoa, and an additional — designated as spermatophilax, which is in fact an adhesive nutrient) to the end of the female abdomen. The spermatophore suspended to the abdomen of a female — with the spermatophilax weighting it — makes it difficult for the female to move and prevents repeated mating. Egg laying usually occurs in the second half of the summer.

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

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

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

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

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17 Seow 1997, 362.
18 OEL 1989, VIII, 1093f.
19 See the citations in: Lampe 1961, 65.
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b. Šabb. 152a it is said that ḥāḡāḇ refers to one’s ʽgbwt, a reference to the male sexual organ (cf.: šîr ʽăḡāḇîm, "love-song", in Ezek. 33:32; ‘ăḡāḇāṯāh, "her lust", in Ezek. 23:11; the verb ʽgb meaning "to have (sexual) desire"). And this is an interpretation at the allegorical level accepted by Rashi and Ibn Ezra. It seems that this allegory could have arisen because of the smell of the carob tree blossoms (for specific pungent odor comes from them, reminiscent of the smell of human sperm) and especially of the shape of its fruits: the legums of the evergreen tree Ceratonia siliqua, commonly known as the carob tree or simply locust tree — having a length of about 10–20 cm and a width up to 3–4 cm — in size, shape and even texture often resemble the male genital organ in a state of erection.

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

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

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

20 Levy 1912, 135; Seow 1997, 362, 379.
21 See, e. g.: Battle, Tous 1997. The designation Ceratonia siliqua derives from the Greek kerātōn, "fruit of the carob" (from kéras, "horn"), and Latin siliqua, "pod". The unit "carat", used for weighing precious metal and stones, also comes from kerātōn, as alluding to an ancient practice of weighing gold and gemstones against the seeds of the carob tree, having approximately the same weight of about 0.2 grams.

In late Roman times, the pure gold coin known as the solidus weighed 24 carat seeds, and, as a result, the carat also designates a measure of purity for gold: 24-carat gold means pure gold, etc.
22 Cf., e. g.: Lk. 15:16.
23 The verb form tāpēr, as pointed in Codex Leningradensis, appears to be the Hiph’il of prr "to break, frustrate, make ineffectual, bring to naught", or the like. The Septuagint, Symmachus, Syro-Hexaplar and Coptic versions take the verb to indicate that the fruit is scattered or dispersed, i. e. the caper bush fruits have split open and their seeds are scattered.

On the other hand, C. L. Seow suggests that "perhaps we should take the root prr to mean 'to fall off, drop off'. One may compare Ugaritic prr ‘to break, break from’ (KTU 1.15.III.30; 1.19.III.14, 28), which is related to Arabic farra, a verb that in the causative stem
tinuously from April–May to October, the fruit ripening is stretched from June to October. Throughout this period, it is possible to collect blossom buds (shaped like berries and used as appetite stimulants, also considered as aphrodisiacs) or fruits, as they mature. Roots are collected in late autumn. The leaves of the caper bush fall in December, when the season of intense rains begins. So, the allegory of the caper, falling to winter, clearly correlates with the metaphorical description of old age and the approach of death in \textit{Eccl.} 12:1b–2:

\begin{quote}
<...> the bad days come  
and the years approach when you will say,  
"I find no pleasure in them";
the sun darkens (for you), (even) the light,  
and the moon and the stars,  
and the clouds return after the rain <...>.
\end{quote}

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

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

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

- And the golden bowl will crack,  
- the jar will be broken at/over the spring,  
- and the vessel\textsuperscript{25} will split at/over\textsuperscript{26} the well (12:6αβ–b).

\footnotesize{may mean ‘to fall off, to shed’. If this interpretation is correct, the Hiph’il of the root in Hebrew may also mean ‘to shed, to cause to fall off’. The point, then, is that the caper bush is defoliated...” \cite{Seow1997, 363}.}

\textsuperscript{25} See, \textit{e. g.}: Danin 2010, 179–185.

\textsuperscript{26} The noun \textit{glgl} here seems to refer not to a waterwheel (a pulley), but to a vessel of some sort. This is suggested already by the parallelism of \textit{glgl} in \textit{Eccl.} 12:6β with \textit{kad},}
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But the context suggests that an allusion to the human spirit implicitly present in these allegories as well, which is symbolized by olive oil and water — not directly called, but contextually implied — returning to their source when their temporary receptacles are broken. Thus, in the second and third allegorical images, there are references to the spring and the well, scil., veritable symbols of life, and in the light of Eccl. 12:7b — "and the spirit will return to God who gave it" — perhaps symbols of eternal life in the Book of Ecclesiastes.27 In Jer. 21:3 and 17:13, the Lord Himself is referred to as the "Fountain (mĕqôr) of living water" (cf. also the image of a "well of living water" in Gen. 26:19). Thus, the ceramic vessel, which symbolizes the body, "returns to the earth as it was" (Eccl. 12:7a), and its contents — the "living water", implying the spirit of man — to its Fountain.

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

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

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

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

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

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

29 Cf., e. g.: Seow 1997, 10.
Zech. 4:4–6 and 10b, may symbolize here the Spirit (רֵעָה) of God (cf.: Zech. 4:6c), so that the priestly and lay Judean leaders turn out to be the anointed (Zech. 4:4) of the Spirit30, present, according to Zech., chap. 3–4, in the heavenly court.

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

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

It can be assumed that in Eccl. 12:5cα–β and 12:7a–b a chiastic parallelism is present: the phrase "then man goes to his eternal home"31 correlates with the statement "and the spirit will return to God who gave it", and the words "(hired) mourners will go about the street-bazaar" — with the statement "and dust will return to the earth as it was".

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

Who knows if the human spirit (רֵעָה) ascends upward or if the animal spirit goes downward to the earth?33

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

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

Everything that appears ("arises". — I. T.)36 is transient37.38

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30 Cf., e.g.: Isa. 61:1–2.
31 In everyday speech the phrase "eternal home" usually means a tomb or a grave, but in the context of Eccl. 12:5b–7 this notion takes on special transcendent connotations.
32 Cf., e.g.: Seow 1997, 367f., 382.
33 Cf.: Eccl. 8:7.
34 See, e.g.: Eccl. 3:19–20, 21b, 6:4–6, 9:10b.
36 Scil. "under the sun"; lit: "all that comes". Cf.: Eccl. 8:8; Job 7:7, 16.
That is, everything that has a beginning, that was created by God, sooner or later dies, disappears. But, according to the Biblical tradition, God puts His Spirit in man\(^{36}\), and therefore the spirit of man is a particle of the eternal Spirit of God — beginningless and infinite; thereby the human spirit itself is eternal. Returning to its Source, the spirit of man arrives at its "Eternal Home".

**References**


**BW 2015 — BibleWorks 10.** Software for Biblical Exegesis and Research. Norfolk, VA.


\(^{36}\) Lit. "vapor".

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

Everything that arises is subject to destruction.


RES — *Repertoire d’épigraphie sémitique*: Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres [cited by number].


